

THE “DEWEY-LIPPMANN” DEBATE AND THE ROLE OF DEMOCRATIC COMMUNICATION IN THE TRUMP AGE

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This paper examines the “Dewey-Lippmann debate” and its enduring significance for contemporary democracy, which currently suffers from deep political polarization within a fractured media landscape. The examination begins with communication theorist James Carey’s original characterization of Lippmann as a positivist seeking a world of objective, accurate information in contrast to Dewey, who identifies the contingent, constructed nature of knowledge achieved through processes of communication. This analysis re-examines Lippmann’s and Dewey’s positions in light of subsequent arguments that challenge Carey’s conclusions. It will be argued that, while Carey’s critics are correct that Lippmann held a more nuanced position on democracy than Carey acknowledges, they also largely misunderstand his Dewey-inspired arguments about the meaning making functions of communication. By highlighting the role of the habits of communication in Dewey’s democratic analysis, this paper points toward suggestions for bolstering participatory democracy while simultaneously fostering a less polarized culture.



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In the 1980s, communications theorist James Carey offered an analysis of modern democracy that he characterized as the “Dewey-Lippmann debate” in order to frame two divergent conceptions of democracy.¹ In his analysis, Carey depicts Walter Lippmann’s democratic vision as one dominated by experts who utilize scientific objectivity to prescribe policy for the masses. According to Carey, Lippmann offers a positivistic view of knowledge, in which he regards communication as a form of transmission geared toward accurately transferring information. In contrast, Dewey’s view of democracy was a more contingent vision formed through citizen participation in discussion and inquiry. Carey argues that Dewey locates another role for communication beyond mere transmission – it is also a way for participants to construct meaning through the process itself. Carey identifies this as a “ritual view of communication,” which is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs.”² In Carey’s reading of Dewey, the purpose of news and journalism is not to accurately depict reality, as with Lippmann, but to offer narratives that activate inquiry among affected groups, or “publics.”

Carey’s analysis of the “Dewey-Lippmann debate” has been appropriated by scholars arguing for a stronger participatory democracy against the elitist conceptions attributed to Lippmann.³

¹ James Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

² *Ibid.*, 18.

³ See Richard J. Bernstein, “Creative Democracy – The Task Still Before Us,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2000): 36-49; Carl Bybee, “Can Democracy Survive in the Post-Factual Age?: A Return to the Lippmann-Dewey Debate about the Politics of News,” *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 28, no. 1 (1999): 28-66; Tony DeCesare, “The Lippmann-Dewey ‘debate’ Revisited: The Problem of Knowledge and the Role of Experts in Modern Democratic Theory,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 106-116; Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995); and John Durham Peters, “Democracy and American Mass Communication Theory: Dewey, Lippmann, Lazarsfeld,” *Communication* 11 (1989): 199-220.

However, more recently others have challenged the legitimacy of Carey's analysis and, subsequently, the practicality of the Deweyan democratic model. Communications theorist Michael Schudson delivers the sharpest criticism, arguing that Carey misrepresents Lippmann's position on the role of experts, who were "not to replace the public, but rather experts were to provide an alternative source of knowledge and policy to the parties and pressure groups."⁴ Schudson criticizes Carey's Dewey-inspired articulation of a culture of direct communication and political participation, stating that although Lippmann removed the public from direct decision-making, this is the "step representative democracies around the world have taken and managed."⁵ Schudson contends that Lippmann's democratic model is both reasonable and viable given the complex requirements of modern society.

Other scholars directly critique facets of Dewey's democratic conception. Sociologist Mark Whipple asserts that Dewey "largely failed to reconcile his democratic ideal with the empirical constraint of large-scale organizations."⁶ Such criticisms have been echoed in education research. Westhoff argues that Dewey failed to explain how direct communities could expand and link up to form the "Great Community."⁷ Schutz posits that Deweyan democracy is viable only in local contexts and is impractical as a larger social model.⁸ Similarly, Stanley believes Dewey's response to Lippmann was "both obscure and inconclusive" and that Dewey "never adequately addressed the practical problems that Lippmann raised regarding the

⁴ Michael Schudson, "The 'Lippmann-Dewey Debate' and the Invention of Walter Lippmann as an Anti-Democrat 1986-1996," *International Journal of Communication* 2 (2008): 1040.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1033.

⁶ Mark Whipple, "The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today: Communication Distortions, Reflective Agency, and Participatory Democracy," *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 2 (2005): 156.

⁷ Laura M. Westhoff, "The Popularization of Knowledge: John Dewey on Experts and American Democracy," *History of Education Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1995): 27-47.

⁸ Aaron Schutz, "John Dewey and a 'Paradox of Size': Democratic Faith at the Limits of Experience," *American Journal of Education* 109 (2001): 287-319.

core assumptions of liberal democracy.”⁹ While Stanley credits Dewey’s focus on developing critical capacities in education, he judges Dewey’s larger social analysis to be inadequate. Overall, the above accounts are at least partially sympathetic to Dewey’s position, yet they agree that Dewey’s model was never adequately articulated nor reconciled with the size, scope, and complexity of modern society.

Recent political developments, including the U.S. Presidential victory of Donald Trump, along with concerns about “fake news” and political polarization, arguably give reason to reconsider the prevailing conception of democracy. Schudson is correct that representative democracies have removed citizens from daily decision-making in ways that are largely consistent with Lippmann’s position. However, concerns about a several decades-long decline in real wages, growing inequality and social unrest in both the United States and abroad call into question Schudson’s implicit assumption that American democracy is thriving under the current model.

This paper argues that the criticisms surrounding Dewey’s conception of democracy can be addressed by returning to Carey’s original framing of the “Dewey-Lippmann debate.” Though some of the critiques leveled against Carey are valid, his focus on the role of communication helps to illuminate Dewey’s vision of the “Great Community” that has been subject of criticism. Carey, unlike his critics, understood from Dewey that the strength of a democracy depended not only on its formal institutions, but also on the everyday behavior of its citizens. Under-conceptualizing the importance of routine interactions has arguably proven to be a key factor in the degradation of contemporary democracy.

While Dewey did not offer a straightforward prescription for the problems of democracy, it will be argued that this was a deliberate and justifiable move. Dewey instead offered avenues of

⁹ William B. Stanley, “Education for Social Reconstruction in Critical Context,” in *Social Reconstruction: People, Politics, Perspectives*, ed. Karen L. Riley (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006), 89-110.

inquiry to be pursued experimentally,¹⁰ which has been interpreted by some critics as being vague and unfocused. By attending to Deweyan habits, particularly the habits of communication, the role of local publics in the formation of the “Great Community” can be illuminated, while also identifying potential implications for both contemporary political movements and the institution of schooling. Contrary to arguments that Dewey’s model of participatory democracy is impractical, this paper will argue that Dewey offers a practical way forward as the project of neoliberal democracy, which posits market logic as the only valid template upon which to model social life, continues to be challenged by the citizens of the United States and other countries.

The examination will begin with a contextualization of the historical period for the debate, after which Lippmann and Dewey’s respective visions for democracy will be considered. This will be followed by a response to Dewey’s critics that will also suggest directions for addressing the aforementioned contemporary social challenges.

Social Order, Technocracy, and Progressivism

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a time of rapid change and massive upheaval in the United States. The country was rapidly industrializing and urban centers were exploding with population growth, while new inventions from electricity to the automobile were facilitating changes in the dynamics of business, social interaction, and daily living. These new inventions connected to earlier developments, including the telegraph and the continued expansion and commercial integration of railroads. This made conditions ripe for the growth of massive corporations that could harness efficiency through larger economies of scale. Under these conditions, the parochial political systems of local communities were increasingly inadequate both for regulating interstate commerce and for dealing with massive social changes.

¹⁰ See Cleo Cherryholmes, *Reading Pragmatism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999).

Robert Wiebe, in his book *The Search for Order*, argues that the above factors led to the Progressive movement and ultimately to an expanded federal government. Wiebe identifies the “bureaucratic approach”¹¹ as a central feature of progressivism, whose proponents were middle class reformers looking to unify society by creating a stronger central government through an increased use of the “scientific method.” According to Wiebe, progressives advocated the scientific method as a national substitute for the nineteenth century character-oriented common knowledge of the community:

The ideas that filtered through and eventually took the form were bureaucratic ones, peculiarly suited to the fluidity and impersonality of an urban-industrial world. They pictured a society of ceaselessly interacting members and concentrated upon adjustments within it. Although they included rules and principles of human behavior, these necessarily had an indeterminate quality because perpetual interaction was itself indeterminate... Thus the rules, resembling orientations much more than laws, stressed techniques of constant watchfulness and mechanisms of continuous management.¹²

This progressive rationale of a national society based on bureaucratic efficiency, according to Wiebe, provided the thrust for piecemeal political reforms that were implemented slowly over the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Other research problematizes Wiebe’s monolithic characterization of progressivism, but identifies many of the same cultural dynamics at work during this era. In *Rebirth of a Nation*, Jackson Lears describes this era as a time when notions of rebirth and regeneration animated the social spirit and intellectual thought of reformers, political leaders, and media correspondents.¹³ Within

¹¹ Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Strauss & Giroux, 1967), 145.

¹² *Ibid.*, 145.

¹³ Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of the Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

this time of great upheaval, Lears pinpoints competing, though often intersecting, trends within progressive thought. These trends can be broadly categorized as a managerial version of progressivism, which was embodied in concepts such as Taylor's notion of scientific management. This form of progressivism largely aligns with Weibe's analysis. The second trend of progressivism had a more populist orientation, which worked to "empower ordinary citizens and curb plutocratic rule by promoting antitrust legislation, railroad regulation, public ownership of utilities, popular election of U.S. Senators, and other measures designed to invigorate democratic citizenship."¹⁴ These two strands of progressivism are difficult to separate, as they coalesced at various points.

However one characterizes progressive thought in the early twentieth century, World War I (WWI) emerges as a pivotal event for both Dewey and Lippmann. Wiebe pinpoints WWI as a turning point for arguments advocating people-centered democracy. The war demonstrated the growing power of the national government to assert power over the people by using mass media to craft allegiance to the war agenda. The citizenry's ostensible gullibility in the face of war propaganda, along with steadily decreasing voter turnout in national elections – from around 80% in the 1890s to under 50% in the early 1920s – signified a widely perceived crisis of democracy.¹⁵ The democratic writings of both Lippmann and Dewey emerged out of this sociopolitical milieu. In the post-WWI American landscape, the themes tackled within what is now characterized as the "Dewey-Lippmann debate" were commonplace in national discussions of the challenges facing modern democracy in the 1920s.

Lippmann on Democracy

In his later writings, Lippmann expresses a concern with the potential consequences of majority rule that is reminiscent of Tocqueville:

¹⁴ Ibid., 199.

¹⁵ Weibe, *The Search for Order 1977-1920*.

Those who believed in democracy have always assumed that the majority should rule. They have assumed that, even if the majority is not wise, it is on the road to wisdom, and that with sufficient education the people would learn how to rule. But in Tennessee the people used their power to prevent their own children from learning, not merely the doctrine of evolution, but the spirit and method by which learning is possible. They had used their right to rule in order to weaken the agency which they had set up in order that they might learn how to rule. They had founded popular government on the faith in popular education, and then they had used the prerogatives of democracy to destroy the hopes of democracy.¹⁶

Lippmann references the matters surrounding the Scopes Trial of 1925, in which John Scopes was put on trial for teaching evolution in the public school system in violation of Tennessee state law. This example is instructive, as it indicates the end-road of Lippmann's increasingly negative stance toward the decision-making ability of average citizens that first emerged in the 1920s. Lippmann's later writings expressed increasing disappointment with the ability of average citizens to comprehend the complex dimensions of social issues and take effective action. This example also demonstrates how Lippmann's earlier experiences shaped his view of democracy. Lippmann observed the decision-making process of everyday citizens and it was, in his estimation, unbalanced, unpredictable, and dangerous to the stability of liberal democracy. He was also cognizant of the steady growth of government bureaucracy over the preceding decades that had made government more complex. This only reaffirmed his hesitancy about more direct forms of democracy.

Evidence of Lippmann's more pessimistic turn toward the possibilities of majority rule became clear in the early 1920s with the

¹⁶ Walter Lippmann, "Should the Majority Rule?" in *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, eds. Clinton Rossiter and James Lare (New York: Random House, 1963), 7.

publication of *Public Opinion*. To understand why this was the case one must examine Lippmann's experiences surrounding the First World War. As an editor of the *New Republic* magazine during the lead-up to World War I (WWI), Lippmann and other progressives at the magazine were firm supporters of America's entry into the war. They believed it was America's opportunity to take a new leadership role in the world by spreading the democratic way of life. Progressive support for the war was grounded in hope for facilitating social progress through the spread of democracy.¹⁷ Progressives envisioned the 19th century celebration of rugged individualism being cast aside in favor of a new social understanding of the individual as part of the community. Advocates hoped that once this understanding was accepted by the culture, the government and economy would be reformed to reflect a more direct form of democracy and Americans' interest in acts of governance at both the local and national levels would be revitalized. This faith allowed many progressives to downplay concerns about the centralization of power articulated by more pessimistic theorists of the era such as Max Weber.¹⁸

The realities of WWI shook the faith of many progressives, including Lippmann. In 1917, he left the *New Republic* to become a spokesperson for the War Department and also worked for the State Department. From the inside, Lippmann was able to see how the U.S. government used propaganda to promote and maintain support for the war. In the *New Republic* after the war, Lippmann stated:

The deliberate manufacture of opinion both for export and for home consumption has reached the proportion of a major industrial operation... When the story is told, it will cover a range of subjects from legal censorship to reptile press, from willful fabrication to the purchase of writers, from outright subsidy to the award of ribbons... The art of befuddlement

¹⁷ David Noble, "The New Republic and the Idea of Progress, 1914-1920," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38, no. 3 (1951).

¹⁸ See Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).

engages able men and draws large appropriations.¹⁹

Lippmann was disturbed at how easily the public was manipulated and how those in power had perfected the “art of befuddlement.” This experience frames his conclusions about the possibilities of democracy throughout the rest of his career. His primary concern becomes finding a way to control a government that was becoming “a self-perpetuating oligarchy and an uncontrollable bureaucracy which governs by courting, cajoling, corrupting, and coercing the sovereign but incompetent people.”²⁰ From this analysis, the ideas outlined in *Public Opinion* and *The Phantom Public* can be understood as practical ways to maintain some measure of pluralism within a system that was quickly becoming dominated by elites, as Lippmann recognized the growing influence of special interests on public opinion.

By the 1920s, Lippmann openly rejected his former faith in democracy, claiming it “prevented democracy from arriving at a clear idea of its own limits and attainable ends,”²¹ In his view, the world had simply become too complicated for any one group to be responsible for it. In a complex world mediated by mass communication, the deep understandings forged by direct engagement were no longer functional for the average citizen. Instead, much of their social and political knowledge was formed through what Lippmann called ‘stereotypes’: “In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture.”²² In Lippmann’s estimation, these stereotypes created an insurmountable

¹⁹ Lippmann cited in Heinz Eulau “Wilsonian Idealist: Walter Lippmann Goes to War,” *The Antioch Review* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1954): 101.

²⁰ Walter Lippmann, “How Can the People Rule?” in *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*, eds. Clinton Rossiter and James Lare (New York: Random House, 1963), 19.

²¹ Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 138.

²² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Blacksburg, VA: Wilder, Publications, 2010), 48.

barrier for most citizens, who were generally more concerned with leisure and recreation as opposed to social and political affairs. With his conception of stereotypes, Lippmann implicitly acknowledged that citizens acquired knowledge through an act of construction, which at least partially defies Carey's characterization that he advocated a "spectator theory of knowledge."²³ However, Lippmann believed that the average citizen had neither the capacity nor the interest to overcome the stereotypes promoted by mass media.

Lippmann's solution, however, was not to turn over decision-making to any particular group of experts. Rather, he envisioned a balance of power based upon decisions made by a plurality of groups. Primary explication of a particular issue would be in the hands of the expert group in most direct contact with the situation. Lippmann referred to these expert groups as "insiders." These insiders, rather than dealing with abstractions, would be in direct contact with matters, affording them a detailed and nuanced understanding. This move addressed the problem of having decisions guided by stereotypes. Lippmann states, "only the insider can make decisions, not because he is inherently a better man, but because he is so placed that he can understand and can act."²⁴ Lippmann advocated a central role for contextual decision-making, defying many characterizations of his position while reflecting the influence of pragmatism on his thinking. This influence allowed him to distance his position from traditional elitist conceptions:

Aristocratic theorists..like the democratic theorists..miss the essence of the matter, which is, that competence exists only in relation to function; that men are not good, but good for something; the men cannot be educated, but only educated for something.²⁵

Lippmann devised a conception of government run by various insider groups, each dealing with matters in which they were most

²³ Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, 82.

²⁴ Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*, 140.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

competent. In this way, no one group attained a controlling share of power. These groups would be responsible for distilling issues for public consumption, helping the public to stay informed and to participate in matters such as voting. Through exchanges of information and public debate between insider groups, the public would stay informed while insider groups negotiated priorities among social concerns, leaving deeper analysis and solutions to the insiders closest to the matter. These groups would offer consultation and advice on policy matters to political bodies such as Congress.

The role of the public would be to judge “whether the actors in the controversy are following a settled rule of behavior or their arbitrary desires.”²⁶ This is consistent with Carey’s characterization of Lippmann promoting a passive citizenry. It was the job of Lippmann’s public to detect partisan opinions that would taint solid policy decisions and to offer their support or opposition to policies, thereby influencing the direction of insider decisions and actions. The role of education would be to increase the number of citizens able to join the ranks of expert insiders, while teaching the requisite skills necessary to make judgments about insider positions to all citizens.

In this model, one of the most important functions for the public would be to intervene in times of crisis when expert insider decisions had failed. Lippmann explained:

In this theory, public opinion does not make the law. But by canceling lawless power it may establish the condition under which law can be made. It does not reason, investigate, invent, persuade, bargain, or settle. But, by holding the aggressive party in check, it may liberate intelligence. Public opinion in its highest ideal will defend those who are prepared to act on their reason against the interrupting force of those who merely assert their will.²⁷

In this formulation, the chief duty of the public would be to interject

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

during times of crisis to hold excessive power interests in check; ensuring that balance would be maintained within the decision-making process of expert insiders.

In summary, Lippmann's democratic solution composed of various groups of experts in context demonstrated that he understood that knowledge was both constructed and contextual. Nevertheless, he remained pessimistic about the possibility of a more participatory democracy. His concern about mass media's ability to manufacture consent suggests that Carey's characterization of Lippmann's view of communication is correct – Lippmann envisioned communication primarily, if not singularly, as a form of information transfer. Though Lippmann's analysis is formidable, his solution called for a citizenry that would overtly act only during moments of crisis. This demonstrates that he did not fully conceptualize the consequences of his insights about knowledge construction, as will be elaborated upon in the next section. This inconsistency in Lippmann's thinking explains, though does not entirely justify, Carey's assertion that Lippmann does not hold a constructed theory of knowledge. Ultimately, Lippmann under-conceptualized how average citizens could acquire the competencies necessary to function effectively as citizens through participatory communication. This would be left for Dewey to articulate in his response to Lippmann.

John Dewey and Habits of Communication

Dewey was also profoundly affected by the events of the First World War. Like Lippmann, Dewey was optimistic about the possibilities of spreading democracy throughout the world, leading him to offer modest support for America's entry into WWI. He later came to regret this decision.²⁸ During the war, Dewey became disillusioned by the conduct of the American government at home, which used mass media to manufacture support while cracking down on public

²⁸ See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

dissent.²⁹ When the League of Nations failed to become a reality, Dewey began to reexamine his position. Yet unlike Lippmann, Dewey retained faith in the possibility of a more direct form of participatory democracy.

Dewey respected Lippmann's analyses, calling *Public Opinion* "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned."³⁰ Dewey recognized that Lippmann's concerns were very close to his own. He also understood, in contrast to Carey's assertion, that Lippmann was not arguing for a political system narrowly controlled by a small group of elites. In his review of *The Phantom Public*, Dewey stated:

In effect Mr. Lippmann's argument is a powerful plea, from a new angle of approach, for decentralization in governmental affairs; a plea for recognition that actual government, whether or not we like it, must be carried on by non-political agencies, by organs we do not conventionally regard as having to do with government.³¹

Dewey argued that Lippmann's proposals would offer improvements to the existing state of affairs, but believed a more robust solution was possible that entailed a more vigorous dissemination of decision-making.

Dewey (1927/1946) articulated this vision in his book *Public and Its Problems*. Here, Dewey identified many challenges to the formation of a stronger democratic culture, including the complexity

²⁹ See John Dewey, "Conscription of Thought" in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 10:278-280; and John Dewey, "In Explanation of Our Lapse" in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 10:292-295.

³⁰ John Dewey, "Public Opinion" in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), MW 13:337.

³¹ John Dewey, "Practical Democracy" in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), LW 2:217.

of public issues, public apathy, increasing distractions that turned people away from civic matters, and ever-increasing mobility of populations that was uprooting local communities. However, where Lippmann declared these issues insurmountable due to modern conditions, Dewey believed the power of participatory communication could address issues of apathy, capacity, and capability among citizens.

Dewey's understanding of communication allowed him to offer a more dynamic conception of the public than Lippmann. Lippmann's conceptualization anticipated a public constructed by contemporary mass media: A static conglomeration of all citizens from which polling derives "public opinion" as a recognized social construct. This identifies the public as a unitary mass, while pinpointing communication as the transmission of information. In this conception, opinions are understood as pre-constructed, fixed, and the possession of isolated minds. Such conceptions are rooted in classic liberal theory, which identifies individuals as isolated and rational decision makers out to maximize individual preferences. Lippmann's inability to see past the limits of this liberal conception ultimately constrained his analysis of democracy and its potential under different social circumstances.

By contrast, Dewey asserted that publics form only because of shared communication: "events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Want and impulses are then attached to common meanings."³² Through social communication, participants are able to construct meaning and increase their understanding of the indirect consequences of social and political action. In Dewey's vision, the public was not singular, but rather consisted of overlapping groups that formed in response to particular issues or problems. These publics were understood to be active and contextual, with the meaning of a public found in "what it can do, where it can go, how better it can operate."³³ Unlike

³² John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press Books, 1946).

³³ Paul Stob, "Kenneth Burke, John Dewey, and the Pursuit of the Public," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 38, no. 3 (2005): 237.

Lippmann's conception, which posited an isolated psychological and cognitive notion of construction, Dewey's conception of the public demonstrated a more profound understanding of the social construction of knowledge and its democratic implications. In Dewey's formulation, opinions could not be understood in isolation from the communicative processes that produced them, as "every act of communication requires an individual to give form to what had previously been formless, and in doing so changes the attitude of that person toward his or her own experiences as they relate to the experiences of others."³⁴ To Dewey, it is social experience, or in Deweyan terms the *transactional* experience, through collective communicative action where the public and, thus, public opinion is formed within particular contexts. Such formations transcend the conception of individual, isolated minds posited by classic liberal theory and hold profound implications for the possibilities of participatory democracy.³⁵

In Dewey's conception, the public was in eclipse due in no small part to civic apathy, along with what was a growing predilection for distraction and amusement. These were concerns for Dewey as well as Lippmann, though Dewey located the problem not within psychological constructs, but rather within culturally constructed habits, particularly the prevailing habits of communication. Dewey asserted:

Knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned. Faculties of effectual observation, reflection and desire are habits acquired under the influence of the culture and institutions of society, not ready-made inherent property.³⁶

³⁴ Nathan Crick, *Democracy and Rhetoric: John Dewey on the Arts of Becoming* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2010), 67.

³⁵ See John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999); and John Dewey *Liberalism and Social Action* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000).

³⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 158.

In Dewey's conception of habit, he provided an embodied understanding of behavior where "every act affects a modification of attitude and set which directs future behavior."³⁷ For Dewey, habits were not a matter of passive socialization, but rather resulted from active engagement on the part of participants within environments in order to thrive within them. From Dewey's perspective, the widening prevalence of disengagement in public affairs was an active response to removing decision-making from localities and concentrating power in centralized bodies. These developments were fostering a more bewildered public, because local connections to forming civic knowledge were being severed, while the power to enrich understandings through shared communication was not understood or substantively employed.

For Dewey, democracy consisted of more than merely formal, institutional mechanisms, it was also a "personal way of individual life" that was expressed not only in civic affairs, but "in all the relations of life."³⁸ Dewey urged an inversion of prevailing thinking on democracy as static and unchanging, stating "instead of thinking of our dispositions and habits as accommodated to certain institutions we have to learn to think of the latter as expressions, projections, and extensions of habitually dominant personal attitudes."³⁹ Understanding this perspective explains why Dewey thought that the emerging mass culture of the era encouraged problematic habits that worked against shared communication while promoting passivity in civic affairs. As long as communication was viewed and practiced as a unidirectional transfer of information, rather than a shared process where meaning was constructed through participation, the public would remain "shadowy and formless, seeking spasmodically for itself, but seizing and holding its shadow rather than its substance."⁴⁰

Dewey contended that the insiders of Lippmann's analysis,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

³⁸ John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), LW 225.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

⁴⁰ Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 142.

particularly scientists, philosophers, and academics, best exemplified human intelligence in action. This was not because they possessed superior intelligence, but because they had acquired specialized habits through exclusive training. These habits included carefully examining issues, openly sharing and building knowledge through exchanges with peers, testing conclusions and modifying their understandings based on results. These intelligent habits of inquiry and communication represented a refined version of what Dewey argued should be imparted to all citizens as constitutive habits of a re-emergent public sphere.

Where Lippmann would divide power among specialized groups and improve education to bring more people into their ranks, Dewey suggested extending these intelligent habits to the entire population. People in local communities did not require the same specialized knowledge as scientists, Dewey argued, but they needed to understand how scientists acquired knowledge. They also needed to participate directly in informal inquiry processes through public discussion and deliberation. As Carey explains, "inquiry..is not something other than conversation and discussion but a more systematic version of it."⁴¹ While Dewey explicitly distinguished inquiry from mere conversation, Carey is correct to recognize the two concepts along one continuum. With the assistance of formal education and experience, Dewey argued, the intelligent habits of inquiry for everyday citizens could become more systematic, although perhaps never as rigorous as expert methods. Through their own application of social communication, localities could put public issues through their own process of inquiry.

Experts also played a role in Dewey's formulation. The job of experts would be to distill facts for the public to evaluate.⁴² Where Lippmann's experts would inform central decision makers, Dewey's experts would instead inform the citizenry. Through modern communication, experts could provide continual information to local communities where issues could be discussed and debated in order to inform government action. As broader issues involved more local

⁴¹ Carey, *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, 82.

⁴² Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 202.

communities, these groups could use modern technology to facilitate cross communication and mutual inquiry, where “different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups,”⁴³ exchanging information and building shared understandings toward the aim of broader political action. This, in essence, is a brief outline of Dewey’s vision of the “Great Community.”

Dewey further explained why a democratic citizenry must be continuously involved in public affairs:

Opinions and beliefs concerning the public presuppose effective and organized inquiry. Unless there are methods for detecting the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequence, what passes for public opinion will be “opinion” only in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is... Opinion casually formed and formed under the direction of those who have something at stake in having a lie believed can be *public* in name only.⁴⁴

Where Lippmann positioned citizens as spectators to a decision-making process performed by experts and politicians, Dewey contended that the formation of public opinion was dependent upon participatory communication by citizens themselves, as such opinions were not the possession of isolated minds. Rather, the process of inquiry in the public would be achieved primarily through conversation and deliberation where people exchanged knowledge and ideas and built shared understandings through the communicative process. Dewey posited that for people to understand public issues, they must be active participants in the formation of potential solutions, as well as participants in the judgments of their effectiveness in operation. Anything less would be subject to manipulation by special interests, as citizens would not have developed the habits of inquiry necessary to fulfill their

⁴³ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 177.

functions when called upon. Dewey further explained, “emotional habituations and intellectual habitudes on the part of the mass of men create the conditions of which the exploiters of sentiment and opinion only take advantage.”⁴⁵ In Dewey’s evaluation, the best way to guard against the accumulation of power and public manipulation was to activate full and free communication among the citizenry, which would continuously foster intelligent habits of inquiry. He rejected Lippmann’s notion of citizens that become active only during crises, as communicative inquiry requires an ongoing process that was central to the habit-forming functions of the public. To call upon citizens only occasionally was, in Dewey’s evaluation, a guarantee that citizens would not have the necessary habits of communication to respond adequately when needed.

Lippmann’s recommendation of calling upon citizens only in crisis is evidence that he did not fully embrace a pragmatist view of mind as transactional and active, but rather at least partially held a Cartesian view of minds as isolated, in which opinions were conceptualized as pre-constructed and ready-made for implementation. Dewey’s conception of mind and public opinion, by contrast, is largely consistent with contemporary deliberative democratic research, which asserts that “preferences are not fixed in advance; they can be informed with balanced briefing materials and expert knowledge and transformed through deliberations.”⁴⁶ This understanding demonstrates Dewey’s bi-level conception of agency,⁴⁷ in which habitual action precedes reflective thought. For complex understanding to emerge, Dewey asserted that citizens must engage in democratic communication, from which reflective activity emerges secondarily as disruptions occur and participants are compelled to adjust their habits. Habitual activity and subsequent reflection hold potential to broaden and complicate the opinions and

⁴⁵ Ibid., 169.

⁴⁶ Noelle McAfee, “Three Models of Democratic Deliberation,” in *Democratizing Deliberation*, eds. Derek W. M. Barker, Noelle McAfee, and David W. McIvor (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2012), 24.

⁴⁷ Whipple, “The Dewey-Lippmann Debate Today: Communication Distortions, Reflective Agency, and Participatory Democracy,” *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 2 (2005).

beliefs of participants as they develop more flexible habits through continuous situational adjustments within the communication process. This explains Dewey's focus on participatory action by citizens as a pre-condition for a re-emergent public, a point he summed up succinctly by stating, "the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy."⁴⁸

Because of his emphasis on communicative engagement, Dewey also concluded that a distant government could never adequately serve localities as well as the judgment of local people, stating "tools of social inquiry will be clumsy as long as they are forged in places and under conditions remote from contemporary events."⁴⁹ Dewey echoed Lippmann's assertions regarding contextual analysis but carried this reasoning to a more philosophically consistent and politically radical conclusion by arguing that citizens themselves should be directly involved in decision-making in local contexts. Where Lippmann used an analysis informed by pragmatism to adjust the prevailing state of liberal democracy, Dewey pushed for the possibility of profound transformation by arguing for a new level of participation in government by everyday citizens that was fully consistent with the pragmatist conception of knowledge and mind.

Discussion

Responding to Dewey's Critics

Dewey has been criticized for lacking specific details as to how his democratic vision could be enacted. It is true that Dewey never provided a specific recipe for democracy. While critics are correct that Dewey did not provide a specific blueprint for large-scale implementation of the "Great Community," their expectation of specificity misunderstands Dewey's arguments about the experimental and contextual nature of democratic communication.

⁴⁸ Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 146.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 181.

Dewey anticipated such critiques in *Public and Its Problems*:

The prime condition of a democratically organized public is a kind of knowledge and insight which does not yet exist. In its absence, it would be the height of absurdity to try to tell what it would be like if it existed.⁵⁰

For Dewey, the particulars of his democratic vision must be enacted through experimental inquiry within particular contexts. To argue for narrow specifics is to misunderstand Dewey's experimentalism in application to social and political affairs, and to demand from Dewey static conceptions of knowledge and mind that his experimentalism challenges.

Nevertheless, much of what Dewey argued at the end of *Public and Its Problems* helps to clarify his vision of democracy as the "Great Community." Against the above criticisms, Dewey offers a guiding principle of free and full communication among the citizenry and participation in civic affairs. Dewey envisioned communication as the key way citizens make meaning, and as a way to forge the communicative habits necessary for democratic participation. Consequently, he provided a place to start in forging his democratic vision – local communities and direct face-to-face interaction. Dewey posited a "rooted cosmopolitanism"⁵¹ that recognizes the democratic habit-forming functions of local communities and direct communication, which serve as preconditions for the emergence of the Great Community. By highlighting shared communication in local contexts, the roadblocks inhibiting free and full communication and participation could begin to be addressed.

In the past generation, research on democracy has supported many of Dewey's assertions while challenging the conclusions of many of his critics. Dewey's critics assert his model of democracy is impractical for large-scale society, but recent research suggests many of the problems of modern democracy can be attributed to the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 166.

⁵¹ Bernstein, "Creative Democracy – the Task Still Before us," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 21, no. 3 (2000): 221.

assumption that politics must be centered at ever-greater levels of government. Democracy scholar Harry Boyte argues that the relocation of politics in the state, increasingly evident throughout the twentieth century, “reversed 2,000 years of history about the meaning of politics.”⁵² This relocation of politics in the state is now understood as the norm, with Dewey’s arguments about democracy as a way of life now identified as radical and unrealistic. It was this positivistic turn toward expert political knowledge embedded in state institutions, according to Boyte, that began to marginalize civil society. Boyte states “expert claims to unique authority based precisely on outsider ways of knowing eroded the civil fabric of society.”⁵³ While neither Lippmann nor Dewey would be pleased with the current state of American democracy, only Dewey fully conceptualized the danger of encroaching expert knowledge superseding that of everyday citizens.

Recent scholarship on deliberative democracy reinforces some of Dewey’s conceptual points while addressing his critics. In their research on democratic deliberation, Fagotto & Fung find four benefits of deliberative processes: 1) They strengthened the fabric of local communities by helping to build trust and encourage positive social interactions; 2) They improved public judgment by helping participants better understand issues, including opposing viewpoints; 3) They improved communication and accountability between citizens and local officials; 4) They addressed insufficient governmental resources by allowing localities to tap a broader range of resources from within communities.⁵⁴ These benefits support Dewey’s conception of communication as a meaning-making process. By becoming participants in shared communication processes, citizens improve their knowledge about issues and become better judges of policy, all while better understanding differing

⁵² Harry C. Boyte, *Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2009), 8-9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung, “Sustaining Public Engagement: Embedded Deliberation in Local Communities,” in *Democratizing Deliberation*, eds. Derek W. M. Barker, Noelle McAfee, and David W. McIvor (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2012), 139-145.

opinions and being able to better hold politicians accountable. Research within social education on deliberative processes have also found that working through issues discursively improves understandings for both students and citizens, while increasing recognition and sympathy for other perspectives.⁵⁵ All of this suggests that criticisms about the impracticality of direct political participation on a large-scale miss the mark. Although town hall forums are not practical on a national scale for every issue, participation in deliberative forums at the local level foster more knowledgeable and engaged citizens – even on matters of national scope. Dewey’s emphasis on transactionally constructed knowledge through communication and experimentation becomes crucial, because research suggests that direct participation on every issue is not necessary. According to the above evidence, periodic participation in deliberative forums, if normalized as a form of citizen participation, would vastly improve both culture and politics and begin to address many of the concerns of modern democracy. From a Deweyan perspective, the habit-forming functions of periodic participation would make citizens better prepared to engage critically with mass media, while preparing participants to play more vocal and active political roles at times when greater participation becomes more crucial, such as during elections or times of crisis.

Participatory Democracy in the Trump Age

With the election of Trump, it would be easy to conclude that Lippmann was correct in his base assertion that the average citizen

⁵⁵ See Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013); Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom: The Democratic Power of Discussion* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Paula McAvoy and Diana Hess, “Classroom Deliberation in an Era of Political Polarization,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 43, no. 1 (2013): 14-47; Walter Parker, “Public Discourses in Schools: Purposes, Problems, Possibilities,” *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 8 (2006): 11-18; and Walter Parker, “Listening to Strangers: Classroom Discussion in Democratic Education,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2815-2832.

does not have the capability to participate in governance. But this would ignore all of the conditions under which such votes were cast, while downplaying the real possibilities that currently exist for improving the intelligence and efficacy of average citizens.

Ostensibly, Dewey's desire for full and free communication among and between the citizenry has been achieved by the Internet, but understanding Dewey's arguments for the potential of participatory democracy require a deeper look at this conclusion. Within Dewey's call for greater social and political participation was also a plea for a change in habits among citizens. The result, from Dewey's perspective, could be thick communities of citizens who could harness electronic communication to exchange ideas and concerns with other groups, thereby fostering permeability and flexibility within overlapping associations.

In contemporary society, by contrast, the Internet is used to create personalized media experiences for customers. Informal associations are now centered largely on leisure and recreation rather than shared social concerns. If Dewey could survey the contemporary media terrain, he would likely be dismayed that 21st century media technologies have been forged under the habits of atomized, competitive individualism; the same cultural attitudes that Dewey worked to challenge during the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁶ While these ideas have been continuously present within the culture since Dewey's time, they have only grown more prevalent with the rise of neoliberalism and its continued bolstering by a Right-wing media network that depicts any kind of collective action or public good as antithetical to American ideals. In a country that embraces the myth of meritocratic achievement and the dog-eat-dog competitive ethos of neoliberalism, even as social mobility has floundered and real wages have declined, it should come as no surprise that new media technologies have accelerated political polarization. The stereotypes of mass media that initially concerned Lippmann have also been greatly amplified by the echo chambers of social media and partisan news sources. To stem this tide, avenues for cultivating different habits must be forged that cut into the

⁵⁶ See Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*; and Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*.

escapist behaviors and polarized attitudes currently prevailing within the culture that cut across partisan lines.

Dewey's arguments can point the way forward toward a more robust democratic society. One avenue begins with his conception of publics, which arise due to shared concerns. While Internet media environments have bolstered political polarization, they also make it easier for affected publics to organize for political and social action. The early days of the Trump administration have been met with massive protests from American citizens. Resistance and civil disobedience can be readily incorporated into Dewey's framing of publics when the state is not adequately responding to citizens' concerns⁵⁷ and these forms of action may prove to be necessary throughout the Trump years.

While such movements may be needed at present, they could also serve to further divide the culture if attempts are not ultimately made to engage the opinions of diverse others. In Dewey's democratic theory, involvement in social and political movements can further the deliberative quest among participants, as the collective action against injustice should lead to searches for more fruitful policy alternatives. However, it is imperative for contemporary progressives to take a full accounting of what has led to the current democratic malaise if polarization trends are to be reversed. Leftists will need to not only recognize the role that the political Right has played in emphasizing cultural differences in order to drive a wedge between liberal and white working-class voters, they must also highlight the role that the Democratic Party has played and continues to play in eroding faith in liberal ideas among working-class whites. It is worth noting that many of the most damaging legislative initiatives of the past generation, including NAFTA and the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, were passed by the Clinton administration. These realities, along with Obama's more recent support for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, allowed Donald Trump to position himself as the people's champion in a way that was convincing to many.

⁵⁷ Melvin Rogers, "Dewey and his Vision for Democracy," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 1 (2010): 69-91.

Although Trump's deft use of Right-wing media will give him some measure of cover, the bankrupt nature of his policies will become increasingly apparent to ordinary citizens over time. This presents both immense danger and extraordinary opportunity. Trump's attacks on the vulnerable could help expose his ineptitude and moral failings if opposition is firm and consistent. If resistance wanes, this could easily lead to even greater repression by an administration that recently publicly asserted that the power of the executive branch supersedes that of other branches, which is clearly not consistent with the U.S. Constitution.

For now, the usually passive American population has been stirred into action, and this could be used to foster a long-term shift toward a less apathetic, deliberative culture. In the immediate short-term action of resistance lie the seeds of a slower, more thoughtful search for better alternatives. In that search, new habits can be cultivated that lead us toward a more democratically active society if the desire for easy solutions or viewing mainstream liberal politicians as saviors can be resisted. The arduous journey of fighting Trump's "shock-and-awe" executive orders and policy measures for the next few years will make quick solutions unlikely, which may help to forge more deliberate habits among protestors and dissenters. A deliberative culture would also require everyday citizens to begin to engage in difficult discussions with the people in their proximity. It will also be necessary for teachers, professors, and other members of the public to become more overtly politically engaged, something that may be encouraged by the continued attack on the public sector which is likely to become more pronounced during the Trump presidency. If the culture is to become more permanently politically active, the first step must be changing cultural habits toward more regular, substantive social interaction, and such changes must necessarily begin in our public places and institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Carey's critics are at least partially correct in defending

Lippmann from some of Carey's more definitive assertions. Specifically, Lippmann does not hold an entirely objective view of knowledge as Carey asserts. Rather, he understands that citizens construct knowledge out of the information they encounter. Lippmann's primary concern is that political issues had become divorced from direct experience, leading individuals to construct understandings through stereotypes as opposed to forming their own knowledge through direct experience.

However, in contrast to his critics, Carey correctly perceives that Dewey holds a more profound understanding of how communication can address the challenges of modern democracy. Dewey's transactional conception of knowledge leads him to understand that participation in processes of shared communication can begin to address Lippmann's concerns of stereotypes by helping citizens forge connections between direct experiences and the larger world; facilitating both meaning making and affirmative action regarding social and political issues.

Recent political and social developments have arguably signaled the final failures of representative democracy under neoliberal capitalism. Dewey's vision for a more participatory form of democratic living may point the way toward a more hopeful future. Though the picture of that future is not clear, it will necessarily involve greater participation from citizens, which begins with fostering a deliberative culture at a time when so many have begun to question the prevailing state of affairs.

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