

# DEWEY AND RENEWING DEMOCRACY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

LANCE E. MASON  
Indiana University Kokomo



Lance E. Mason is an Associate Professor of Education and Senior Mosaic Faculty Fellow at Indiana University Kokomo. His research examines the intersections of media, technology, and democracy in education and has appeared in journals such as *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, *Education & Culture: The Journal of the John Dewey Society*, *Social Education*, and the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*. He is currently co-editor of the journal *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*.



*Volume 4 · Number 1 · 2020 · Pages 110-117*

**T**hroughout the summer of 2020, the Trump administration offered little useful guidance about the COVID-19 pandemic even as identified cases were mounting and small businesses were suffering. As stores began to require masks, many people throughout the country resisted and called to boycott businesses with mandatory mask requirements.

The baffling resistance to wearing masks recalls arguments about the role of citizens in democratic decision-making. It would be easy to conclude that many people do not have the intelligence for responsible self-governance. Such thinking has a long history in American politics beginning with the reaction to the populist movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and continuing through to the present day (Frank, 2020).

### **Social Intelligence**

One influential proponent was Walter Lippman (2010). Writing during the initial rise of electronic mass media in the radio, he coined the term “stereotype” to identify media representations that made it more difficult for citizens to make substantive meaning of social affairs. Today, Americans spend most of their leisure time immersed in mass media (Dolliver, 2020), which has also become more partisan in recent years (Mason et al, 2019; Taibbi, 2019).

Lippmann (1933, 2010) argued for a society of disseminated decision-making in which people would only directly engage with matters within their area of expertise. Today’s calls for citizens to heed the advice of medical experts during the COVID-19 pandemic echo this vision, and suggest that people are not capable of democratic decision-making beyond their immediate spheres of understanding.

Dewey’s ideas open up space for a different perspective. For Dewey (1922), actions are dependent upon habits, which are formed by environmental engagement. They allow most actions to be

performed without conscious awareness, saving attention for novel occurrences. As experiences become routine, reactions get incorporated into habits. Formal education, for Dewey, is not merely (or even primarily) about the learning of information. Rather, it is about learning more robust, productive habits (Mason, 2016).

As in Dewey's (2000) time, contemporary declarations of citizen stupidity rest on a problematic assumption that "intelligence is a ready-made possession of individuals" (p. 57). While individuals are born with disparate (and indeterminate) potential, Dewey (2000) asserts that "the greatest educational power, the greatest force in shaping the dispositions and attitudes of individuals, is the social medium in which they live" (p. 91). Rather than decrying citizens for their lack of knowledge, we should examine the social conditions that have produced these results.

Dewey (1999) recognized the danger of allowing "pecuniary interests" to dominate social and political ideas in his era. The situation is more dire today, as the last 40 years society has been hijacked by a business-centric ethos that has wreaked havoc on individuals by moving jobs overseas and funneling wealth toward the richest individuals, while compelling institutions to conform to neoliberal governance models (Brown, 2015, 2019; Giroux, 2014; Harvey, 2005).

### **Problematic Media**

The intersections of the neoliberal ethos with the institutions of media and education are of particular interest. No Child Left Behind and subsequent legislation have focused education primarily on job preparation to the detriment of citizenship goals (Ravitch, 2013). Workforce preparedness schooling generally focuses on the decontextualized acquisition of content knowledge, and emphasizes habits only to the extent that they contribute to this narrow, singular

purpose (Giroux, 2014).

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century mass media has fostered an exodus away from the direct social life of local communities and toward Lippman's stereotypes and the distractions of consumer culture (Lears, 1983; Putnam, 2000; Trentmann, 2006). While media had previously presented structural problems for democracy (see Herman & Chomsky, 1988), in the neoliberal era media has facilitated citizens' mistrust of government and institutions. Reputable media organizations cheered the passage of NAFTA and other trade deals, deregulation initiatives, and gutting of social welfare policies that had devastating consequences to working people in the form of lost jobs and a diminished social safety net.

During this time, media companies consolidated into a handful of giant conglomerates. After the abandonment of the public interest doctrine in the 1980s, these corporations began treating news divisions as another profit-making enterprise (Taibbi, 2019), resulting in today's hyper-partisanship media landscape. The betrayal of the working class and the hyper-partisan focus of the news are both necessary parts of understanding why citizens are now responding to every public event, like wearing masks, as a partisan issue. This is because many have lost faith in their institutions and leaders and have retreated into familiar information silos.

### **Education for Deliberation**

The erosion of the middle class and the divisiveness within the culture in conjunction with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic run the risk of sending the United States into an inexorable decline. To prevent this, the institutions of education and media should be leveraged to foster more productive social habits. Educators have an opportunity to compel a shift of educational priorities away from test preparation and toward social affairs. Schools are an ideal place to

foster the habits of democracy which Dewey (1939) argues demonstrate “faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with commonsense to the free play of facts and ideas” (p. 227). While an educational pivot would require altering content toward social matters, the more profound change would be fostering habits of deliberation among students.

The forthcoming political shakeout from COVID also presents the possibility of creating a healthier media ecosystem. The public, who own radio and television airwaves, should demand the return of legislation that compels media to operate in the public interest, which could foster less partisan political habits among the citizenry. At the same time, new media sources should be encouraged and media literacy should become a central educational concern. Students should be encouraged to become critical and conscientious media users. However, schools should also teach the limits of media engagement. Lippmann’s stereotypes can ultimately only be defeated through direct, contextual engagement, and citizens must understand this moving forward if we are to create through deliberate effort the kind of thriving democratic culture envisioned by Dewey.

### References

- Brown, W. (2015). *Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brown, W. (2019). *In the ruins of neoliberalism: The rise of antidemocratic politics in the west*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1922). *Human nature and conduct*. New York: Henry Holt & Company.
- Dewey, J. (1976). Creative democracy – the task before us. In J. Boydston (ed.). *John Dewey: the later works, 1925-1953, 14*, pp. 224-230.
- Dewey, J. (1999). *Individualism old and new*. (First ed. 1930) Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Dewey, J. (2000). *Liberalism and social action*. (First ed. 1932) Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Dolliver, M. (2020). *Time spent with media*. EMarketer.  
<https://www.emarketer.com/content/us-time-spent-with-media-2020>
- Frank, T. (2020). *The people, no: A brief history of anti-populism*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). *Neoliberalism's war on higher education*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Herman, E. S. & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent: The political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lears, T. J. J. (1983). From salvation to self-realization: Advertising and the therapeutic roots of the consumer culture, 1880-1930. In R. W. Fox & T. J. J. Lears (Eds.), *The culture of consumption: Critical essays in American history 1880-1980* (pp. 1-38). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Lippmann, Walter. (1993). *The phantom public*. (First ed. 1925) New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- Lippmann, W. (2010). *Public opinion*. (First ed. 1922) Blacksburg, VA: Wilder Publications.
- Mason, L. E. (2016). Cultivating civic habits: A Deweyan analysis of the National Council for the Social Studies position statement on guidelines for social studies teaching and learning. *Education & Culture: The Journal of the John Dewey Society*, 32(1), 87-110.
- Mason, L. E., Krutka, D. G. & Stoddard, J. (2018). Media literacy, democracy, and the challenge of fake news. *Journal of Media Literacy Education: Special Issue for Media Literacy, Fake News, and Democracy* 10(2), 1-10.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Ravitch, D. (2013). *Reign of error: The hoax of the privatization movement and the danger to America's public schools*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Taibbi, M. (2019). *Hate, Inc: Why today's media makes us despise one another*. OR Books.

Trentmann, F. (2006). Knowing consumers – histories, identities, practices: An introduction. In F. Trentmann (Ed.), *The making of the consumer: Knowledge, power and identity in the modern world* (pp. 1-30). New York: Berg.