

The news is not true.
Rethinking the role of news in democracy
from Lippmann's theory of public opinion

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Article received on September 3, 2018 and approved for publication on September 24, 2018
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Abstract

The purpose of this text is to demonstrate the validity of Lippmann's thinking when dealing with some of the most critical issues of the current media information system. The aim is to show how, despite having been written almost 100 years ago², his ideas on the formation of public opinion allow us to understand where the relationship between democracy and the media - today social networks - is woven so that it is assumed, once and for all, that the nature of these relationships is not based on rationality, but on the perceptive conductivity of emotions, which a more realistic theory like Lippmann's inaugurates on communication.

Keywords: Public opinion; Democracy; Half; News; Lippmann.

1. Introduction

In the media and democracy equation, from the considerations of Lamuedra (2012), there is a starting point that has been accepted as the foundation of a relationship that is presumed necessary, and that is based on the idea that the democracy requires a free and impartial media dedicated to the production of news information whose main feature is objectivity, impartiality and truthfulness, and that, from this, citizens, presumably informed, build their own arguments from where they start his different attitudes, positions and opinions on the vast range of public affairs.

With Lippmann's idea that "the news is not true" (2003, p. 289), the objective information budget is the basis for rationally informed decisions made by citizens regarding to public affairs, is likely to be criticized, as well as the New Yorker says: "The news cannot become the

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2 The text *The Public Opinion* of Lippmann was published for the first time in 1922.

engine of democracy because they are limited in being the source of total information on all public affairs” (Lippmann, 2003, p. 291). To demonstrate this position, it will be necessary, in the first place, to point out the main perspectives that presuppose an almost causal relationship between information and democracy, so that it can be shown how that same theory is transposed to the field of communication theories that also have, as a principle, an integrating perspective of the media with respect to the ideals of democracy.

Second, we will review the concept of news that Lippmann proposes to understand its *nature*, so that its role in the management of democracy can be understood via public opinion construction, with the warning necessary that, for the same *nature*, its contribution does not go through the provision of information, but by the conduct of judgments and perceptions on which public opinion is held.

Third, delving into the central ideas of Lippmann’s work, we will see how what this management allows is the way in which news makes representations about the environment based on a conceptualization of the key ideas that detail this quality. We refer to the categories proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1995) of pseudo-environment and stereotypes, which are the concepts from which Lippmann conceives this management of opinions that mediate the news

Once clarified that it is on the representation and not on the information that operates the news as a generator of opinion, we will enter into the question of whether what can be discussed from Lippmann’s theory on the news is its correspondence with a pattern of elaboration that refers to the distinction between well or poorly prepared news according to the already canonical criteria of impartiality and objectivity, based on the ideas of González-Gorosarri (2017), or if, when distinguishing them from “the truths”, what is of interest is not their process of manufacturing, but the way in which the communicative system conceives them to make consensus or to deactivate existing ones. From here, we will conclude that what Lippmann’s theory reveals is that the relationship between communication, information and democracy, far from being external to power through processes of control or information regarding its exercise, occurs in a way intrinsic to the maintenance of the same political power, via the emotional conduction of opinions.

2. The equation: information-democracy

The equation that relates information to democracy is based on the idea of Miralles (2002) that citizens base their opinions on public affairs on information they receive from the media. From this, in different modes of reception and from different informational models, citizens have a knowledge of the public from which they can base their opinions and positions on events that are of collective interest.

This part of the equation has its best development in the theory of the emergence of the public sphere that Habermas (cited in Thompson, 1996) attributed to the reading of newspapers in bourgeois taverns where there was an egalitarian discussion among bourgeois citizens about the actions of the rulers who, in one way or another, affected both the public life in

which all participated, as well as their own class interests. This scene suggests the image of a conglomerate of citizens interested in the collective causes that, illuminated by the information of the newspapers, find out what is happening with the government of the city and the nation, from which, they unleash everything a dialogue and discussions that empower an entire social class as political subjects with the capacity to exercise a power based on control and claim to those who hold the power to govern.

This situation is for the most representative theorists of political liberalism, a moment of rational practice whereby citizens in equal conditions elaborate equally rational judgments that become deliberative exercises that end up constituting a public opinion that is configured as: the voice of reason that expresses and defends the natural order and tells the power where it should be and how it should act” (Monzón, 1996, p. 61).

This was indeed the case, because the judgments that the citizens elaborated were presumed to be rational judgments based on truthful information about the subjects of common interest. The deliberative man was supposed to be the one who, based on reason, used it as the source of his political action, so that the result of his opinion reflected nothing more than the operating reason through the political action of the citizens, very in the style of what Plato expected from the rational dialogue of the Athenians in the agora to constitute the Polis, as pointed out by Hernández & Torres, (2015).

Likewise, it was expected that the information, provided by the press and later by the media, would be consistent with the lawsuits that it provoked, which is why it should be done truthfully, impartially, objectively and free of interests (cf. Bonilla, 2002). For this, the democratic societies that assumed this idea of the free press, made great efforts to seek an independent journalism influences, outside the power, which, from its place, could perform its work of control and surveillance to the government, as the phrase classic it was: the main function of the press is “to be the watchdogs of democracy” (Bonilla, 2002, p. 87).

This is what reflects the functionality that the theories of mass communication gave to the role played by the media in democratic societies (Wolf, 1994; Mattelart, 1997; Igartua & Humanes, 2004; Maigret, 2005), function which was to be the main source of information about the environment. They were seen as “the new agora” (Sartori, 1998), a virtual space for the visibility of collective problems and the discussion of common issues that would constitute citizenship. The central thing in this is to observe that this view on the role of the media in democracy always assumed that the process was based on the rational attitude of citizens who were informed of what happened from the news they received from the means of communication, hence the principles of objectivity and truthfulness in information were defended.

For Lamuedra (2012) this was the center of journalistic deontology. The information acquires the character of public good and its qualities of impartiality, truthfulness and objectivity would constitute the center of the ethical reflection on what to do journalistic, as well as the main value preserved from the existing reading pact between the citizen and the information companies (Cf. Rincon, 2006, p. 123; Martini, 2004, p. 105). To truthful information, rational judgments about events must always correspond; the opinions were formed as a logical

response to the objective knowledge of the environment, from this, the political action was conducted in an effective way, the information-democracy equation was solved.

3. The nature of the news in Lippmann's theory

This continuity between democracy and information is guaranteed by a free press and a journalistic exercise based on the objective method of news production, according to González-Gorosarri (2017). For the trust given to the objective production of news is that a reading contract is generated between the public and the media, which is based on the belief that what the news says is what has happened. In this way, if you want to be aware of what is happening around you, it is enough for a citizen to go to the media to have sufficient knowledge of what is happening. This indicates that the news is held as an objective representation of reality or the environment, from which it is possible to rely on to know what is happening. It is precisely what Lippmann criticizes the news that these cannot be taken as a factual or reliable representation of reality in any case. For Lippmann the news has three issues that make it "[...] limited to be the source of information for all public events" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 291). These have to do with its construction, its production logic, and its forms of reception.

Lippmann (2003) states that not all events become news, in the first place, because it is impossible for the human being to be aware of everything that happens, whether it is related to their interests, and much less, of what is not. You would initially be interested to know, so "[...] no newspaper is aware of everything" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 275). The newspapers, and by extension all the news media, do not report all the events but only those that: "[...] take form that can be reported as news" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 276). According to the examples that the same thinker shows, this "communicate as news" operates as a filter selector that journalists have and that allows them to distinguish news events from those that are not, within a broad set of daily events. That filter, of course and as will be seen later, acts as a stereotype of reality that allows you to configure a part of what happened as news. That is why Lippmann maintains that: "The news is not a mirror of social conditions, but the communication of some aspect that imposes itself" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 277). This imposition can be understood as the elements that give materiality to the news, so that this becomes evident in the eyes of the journalist, since they coincide with their stereotypes about reality, as will be explained later.

What is evidenced by this perspective, the way in which events become news, is that they cannot account for the process that led to the event becoming notorious, that is, news. In this sense, the news is always partial to the social development of more dense aspects of which, the news published is only its most communicable face. Consequently, the possibility and the need to produce news is directly related to the systems for recording events (see Lippmann, 2003, p. 278), hence the concern for the data in the construction of the News. The data belongs to some registry and, as such, helps to decipher the notorious character of an event. But one runs the risk of assuming that the fact, and the social fact of which the news is its manifestation, is reduced to the data, more knowing, as Lippmann (2003) correctly says, that the data is always produced by someone different to the journalist and, for this reason,

a suspicion of pre-established incumbency and interest is kept over them, a situation that evidences the interference of press agents or publicists in charge of constructing the information that journalists later report as news.

At this point, the relationship between the news and the event as a reflection of reality, which can serve as a source of information, is presented as far away. To the above, Lippmann adds an argument that is further increasing this distance. In the example of how newspapers usually inform about strikes, this approach can be better understood in this regard, says the author:

We therefore have the circumstances of the conflict develop in all their complexity; the obvious facts that make them manifest occur; then, the stereotyped statements are published in which the signs are collected and, finally, the readers endow the facts with a particular meaning that they have previously extracted from the experience that directly affects them (2003, p. 282).

The first three sentences describe what is the process of making the news by the journalist and this distance that has been caused when what is published goes through the sieve of notorious selection and registration by third parties. Now, this which is already quite distant from the social problem is more distanced by the logic of communication that applies journalism to social issues, in this regard describes Lippmann:

However, given that all the immediate realities are outside the direct experience of both the informants and the public of most newspapers, they usually have to wait for some indication in the form of a patent fact. When they finally perceive it, either in the form of abandonment of work as a measure of demand or in the form of action, police, their stereotypes about strikes and disorders come into play. The conflict will thus lose its original flavor, since it only comes to be known in the abstract and this abstraction only comes to life through the action of the direct experiences of the reader and the journalist (2003, p. 281).

This distance that is evident in the abstraction exercised by the news about the conflict that supposedly aims to inform, is finally configured by the action of stereotypes that both the journalist and the reader put into play for the communication of events. These stereotypes exercise the function of pairing an aspect of social facts, with something that is familiar within the spectrum of what is known by the journalist to communicate it to the reader; but for that same function, what happens is that the very knowledge of social conflict is diluted. In this way, the news as described by Lippmann, which apparently seeks to bring distant issues to the public, ends up distancing them from them.

What also deduces from this process of making the news, is that this intermediation of the journalist between the fact and his information does not have as reference the search for correspondences that increase the knowledge of public affairs, but the adaptation to the universe of knowledge of the reader. And if the reader is devoid of interest in the matter, it will be the journalist who will orient the event so that it coincides with the interests of the reader. For the example of strikes, the emphasis in the news will not be on the social, labor

or salary conflict that the event produces, but on the interruptions and alterations that the strike causes in the public space or in the mobility of other citizens (Lippmann, 2003, p. 283).

Well, Lippmann could leave the question there, and remain alone in the complaint about the misinformation, sensationalism or sensationalism that this logic of news production causes, on the contrary, it is good to say that this journalistic practice obeys the way it is configured journalism and the operation of the information industry (see Lippmann, 2003, pp. 282-283). The author argues that the difficulties lie in: "The economy of effort that only allows registering the stereotyped phase of each situation" (2003, p. 283), that is, it is becoming increasingly more difficult for the media to count on mechanisms to register all aspects of a social fact, so they are forced to publish only what they know will be understood and accepted by the public and that comes from records belonging to and provided by third parties. The other aspect is the ability of the journalist to perceive "what he has not learned to see" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 283), which means this predominance of the stereotype when selecting and framing an event as news, and that, among other things, has institutionalized some journalistic practices that save time and effort for the journalist to record events, but who sacrifice the understanding of the facts, such as the issue of the reproduction of the official communiqué as evidence of what happened, without the journalist himself corroborating it empirically. This has also led, according to Lippmann, to the difficulty of publishing "an unconventional point of view" that some more applied journalists can find of events. And a third difficulty is in the financial pressure that implies that the public is not interested in the news that is published or that this is offensive to them, which as it was said before, leads to focus the information of the events regarding the taste and customs of the public, and not regarding the reality of social facts.

This standardization procedure (Lippmann, 2003, p. 284) of news production implies the use of stereotyped forms of enunciation of events that save time for the media and allow the information industry to overcome the pressure of competition for the production of news, but who sacrifice informed knowledge of public affairs, as Lippmann says in the following sentence:

Newspapers, as they finally reach readers, are the result of a series of decisions about what should be printed, what order the news should follow, how much space should they occupy and what aspects should they emphasize in each case. There are no objective criteria that can be applied. All are conventionalisms (2003, p. 285).

All these conventions are not, however, discretionary against the decisions of editors or journalists, but are the result of the need for the media to adapt to their audiences and their readers. This has generated that the news should call the attention of the public so that they fold to them, and for this, says Lippmann, the formula lies in the conflictivity of the same, so that it awakens emotions in the readers and they can see identified with what is at stake. And in that the author is emphatic, because he concludes that the power of the news is in the creation of opinions, in making readers take sides by unleashing passions in the face of events, which will ensure a future concern of readers who will demand the details of the conflict so that it deepens, even when the social facts show that conflict has been overcome.

With this it is demonstrated that in the Lippmannian theory about the news, these, more than a source of information about public affairs, constitute products oriented to the generation of partisan opinions about a version of events that is given by the satisfaction of expectation of the public and the need for the informative economy of the media, making that what should bring the public closer to the knowledge of a social reality such as the news, really operate a distancing from the social, interposing a *frame* about what happened from which the public shuffles their opinions and their judgments.

4. Stereotypes and pseudo-environments in the formation of news

What explains the remoteness mechanism that the news provokes in Lippmann's description of the place and the role played by the media in democracy is the category of stereotype. From this, Lippmann will explain how the news leads opinion and, consequently, also the idea of stereotype will serve to explain the nature of public opinion, of which news is its fuel; question that has served to him so that its definition of the same one is seen generally like pessimistic, whereas it is not the reason the one that defines it, but the confluence of limited judgments on the social facts provoked by the management of the emotions (cfr. Lippmann, 2003, p. 116).

Lippmann (2003, p. 83) understands stereotypes different learned and inherited forms of perception that are responsible for reducing the breadth "of the outside world" to family issues that are relatively easy to understand, so that the process of apprehension is thinned. That outside world in which you live. Lippmann uses the term of cultural stereotypes to refer to that set of forms and practices of perception that engender this way of looking. The thinker (2003, p. 101) highlights the perceptual character of the stereotype that functions as a set of impressions about things and that differs from ideology because it does not point to how things should ideally be, but to how we perceive them from a natural way

This naturalization is achieved through the action of culture and tradition that is responsible for incorporating them into our modes of perception, to the point where Lippmann states that they resemble a "biological factor" (2003, p. 105) to refer to that they are already part of the way in which we look at all the things that surround us; he emphasizes, are rooted in the definition of himself and what is seen, that anything that threatens them is understood as "an affront to our self-love" (2003, p. 95). They precede reason, are present in perception before information passes through "the sieve of intelligence" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 95), which makes them be united to them in an emotional way.

Lippmann is emphatic in defending them. Without them, exhaustion would appear in the relationship with the environment, since it is impossible to know everything that surrounds it (2003, p. 87). He conceives them as a system of defense of society in the face of the overwhelming number of questions that know that make up virtually being in the social world. By that, in its positive definition can be seen as: "a coherent and orderly image of the world to which

our tastes consoles and hopes have adapted (...) they are like the mold where we fit and feel good" (2003, p. 93).

So, while they are limited, they are necessary. The limitation that it generates with respect to everything that can be known is the foundation of its social utility, since it makes seeing the environment not exhausting; simplify and familiarize the world according to an established and inherited mold, without which, locating socially would be impossible. They are before the rational processes, because they are related more as emotional models of perception, so they may seem imperceptible, but in this they are effective. For these reasons, they are at the base of social opinions; they are the foundation of public opinion.

This is explained because Lippmann maintains that the facts are neutral with respect to our particular visions. They are the stereotypes that, acting, prefigure these as correct or incorrect, false or true. No fact is true, but after it is seen from a stereotype (2003, p. 103). On them depend the moral codes from which events are viewed and judged, so for Lippmann this action of judging the facts, which is done from stereotypes, will always be incomplete, and as it is not possible to separate from stereotypes to see the world, the judgment that is detached from them, will also be perennially limited, that is, they constitute a form of representation.

The representational nature of stereotypes is evidenced in some of its products as the images, allegories and symbols that we make of the knowable environment. The function of images and allegories is to synthesize or summarize the environment to a limited set of impressions and sensations that corresponds to the set of previous experiences, so that pseudo environments are created, that is, environments that are more suited to a proper way of seeing things, that things as they are, and that has the ability to drive the ways of acting in it. This is why Lippmann suggests this *fictions*: "When we say fictions we do not want to tell lies, but representations of the environment that are more or less the work of individuals" (Lippmann, 2003, p. 33) and who are responsible for the behavior towards and in the environment.

Undoubtedly, Lippmann assumes, with this, that the news are representations of the environment, and without equivocation, can be considered fictions in the sense of being, not lies, but the result of the application of stereotypes in reducing the overwhelming volume of issues to know about the public environment that makes up the set of social facts; The following quote from the thinker can give proof of this: "The model of stereotypes on which our codes rest determines to a great extent what groups of facts we perceive and under which light" (2003, p. 116). In this we read the double action of the stereotypes that affect the production of non-objective news, but figurative reality.

This action is double because it operates first in the journalist, who based on their own stereotypes sees a set of events that make up a social fact, only a few that become news. Then, in the second instance of action, these events chosen as news are perceived by the public as familiar, understandable, close, important, thanks to which they have been codified by journalists and the media according to the repertoire of stereotypes that keep the readers. The result is that the news, which claims to be the starting point to learn about the environment, ends up being the result of an imaginative adaptation of the environment, through which it is perceived as close when in reality it becomes more distant. This puts the journalist in a place

of intermediary not between the social reality and the news, but between the news and the expectations of the public; the journalist has more debt with the demand of his audiences, than with the demands of social reality.

The last issue that ends up configuring the representative and non-informational nature of the news is that it must precisely adapt to the expectations of the public, in the sense of Lippmann (2003, pp. 146-147), must imagine reality, as to be able to produce an image of the events that serve to be located in it. This means that all the resources must be deployed so that the public feels involved in the news. For this, the fictions to which they are accustomed are mobilized, so that what is communicated can be appropriate to their stereotypes and the audience feels involved; the narrative resources for it go in a line that unites conflictivity and passions effectively.

5. Conclusions. The news, public opinion and power, rethinking their relationships

Attempts have been made to demonstrate that the relationship established by Lippmann between democracy and information does not go through the rational causality that the dissemination of news imprints in the equation *information-deliberation*, but by the perceptual conduction of opinions. In the process *representation-position* that most accurately characterizes public opinion. With this we want to pick up the central issue of Lippmann's work on public opinion, and that he himself states when he states: The core of the argument is that democracy in its original conception never dealt in depth with the problem that derives from the fact that the mental images of individuals do not automatically correspond to the outside world (2003, p. 43).

Of course it is known that Lippmann wrote at least 20 years before the Frankfurt school, by other means, came to a similar approach when he denounced the strategy of ideological alienation that was hidden behind the industrial production of culture in the capitalism. There, the German school would place the ideology between reason and knowledge of public affair- even the most urgent: that of production relations and the death of the spirit (see Maigret, 2005). Instead, Lippmann, as explained, interposes a more mundane issue so to speak: stereotypes as perceptual schemes. That is why the problem is no longer that society is the victim of an ideologically dominant power, but that there is a conscious participation with the power that operates through the management of opinions. He understood that the nature of democracy coincided with the nature of man himself, who is more likely to move from his affections than from his reasoning. In an ironic tone Lippmann suggests following this line of argument:

We will come to the conclusion that they ignored them, just as the first democrats did, because like them, only that, in a more complex civilization, they assume that in the heart of man there exists, by virtue of not he knows what mysterious procedure, an innate knowledge of the world that is beyond his reach (2003, p. 43).

The error seems to be in supposing that the man goes to the public aware of natural way of everything and that only moves him to act his innate inclination to the reason. If so, a truly reasonable debate that would have occurred in some democratic setting would have prevented any war, any intervention, any coercive exercise, and any discrimination. Lippmann brings a bit of reality to the question, introducing first, the limited capacity that human beings have to be aware of everything that surrounds them, and how they need images to process the complexity of their environments, before which, the exercises of fictional representation are more useful than refined their reasoning may be. When it comes to collective political life, the orientation in it can be more effective from a perceptual process that coordinates the emotions and gives rise to public opinion, understood not as a scenario that houses the rational discussion of informed citizens, but as the constant positioning of particular interests based on the management of the fictional representation of the environment.

This reconfigures the place of the media in democracy. A reconfiguration that is only theoretical, since it is assumed with Lippmann that it happens this way in the *reality*. It is healthy for the journalistic and communicative exercise to relocate it in its relationship with power. In the information-democracy equation, journalism and the media occupied a place outside power (a fourth power, different from the first three) in charge of monitoring and supervising the actions of the three other powers. To do this, it generates information about its actions, so that public opinion can deliberate and judge them. Being informed is a condition of participation and exercise of citizen power, which is the strength of this action. But the problem is that, as already demonstrated, since Lippmann, it is impossible to be really aware, therefore, it is impossible to deliberate and judge based on complete information, because we can only have stereotyped images of the environment.

The idea of democratic participation is the most naturalized pseudo-environment that exists. But this is enough to make the multiple mechanisms that make representative democracy possible: it is the image of the public officials, the image of their management, the image of a government, the image of their popularity, the image of the candidates, the image of the opposition, the image of everything that political marketing, public relations and political communication have as their object (see Gerstlé, 2005). In these boundaries, the media, those who circulate and those who produce these stereotyped images that Lippmann already described, can never be outside the exercise of power, cannot be a fourth power, are in all the constitutive terms of a single power, intrinsic and necessary for the exercise of all power (Cf. Lamuedra, 2012, p. 184). Their work as diffusers of images is vital for representative democracy, but not because they serve as spaces for debate, but as agitators of the debate and suppliers of the representations where that debate takes place; as Lippmann demonstrated, this no longer passes through the grain of reason, it is rather a complexly structured exercise in the management and conduct of opinions, which are not based on anything other than our limited sensations and perceptions of the environment.

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