

# On freedom, journalism and democracy: talking with Lippmann

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## Abstract

In the early twentieth century a figure emerges in the governmental sphere of North America that reconfigures the way in which propaganda is done as a political strategy, ensuring that the important thing in power relations is not the symbols, but the meaning of them in the strategy. This visionary of political and strategic communication is Walter Lippman (1889-1974), an American journalist and philosopher who informally advised four US presidents in the management of their international relations, especially during the First World War and the Vietnam War. This article is about one of the premises of Lippman, who did not equate news with truth and established substantial differences between the two concepts, warning that not all information disclosed is true and that the news approach starts from the subjectivity of the author, which implies consequences for democracy, freedom and the media.

**Keywords:** Public opinion; Journalism; Freedom; Media; True.

“The mission of the news is to point out events, while the mission of the truths is to reveal hidden facts”. This phrase from Lippmann (2003) refers to the missionary difference between news and truth, questioning the role of journalism versus its role in strengthening democracy. The author assures, in his masterpiece *Public opinion*, written in 1922, that there is no possibility that journalism solves the problems of democracy through the account of concrete, episodic facts and limited to a precise event. This position is very interesting when there is a critical look at the role of the media in maintaining a democracy, since its purpose of ensuring that institutions fulfill their duty, is limited to the coverage of the most relevant facts of the acts of government, and sporadically, in the Colombian case, to the disclosure of acts of corruption in high government spheres. However, when the complaints manage to overcome the obstacles planted by business, political and government interests, they suffer the inclemency of the delaying acts of justice that end up favoring those who from their irre-

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gular actions, in positions of popular representation, destroy any I show confidence in the democratic organisms of the State.

“[...] The press cannot solve this problem,” says Lippmann (2003, p. 18), and complements ensuring that neither the media are in a position to cover all the news with the desired depth and rigor, as citizens do not have sufficient time and criteria to “[...] digest such overwhelming volumes of information” (2003, p. 18).

María Lamuedra, a Spanish academic consulted for this article, quotes James Carey (2000, p. 57) in what that author has called - the democratic demands that the press must meet - so that “[...] its role as guardian and adversary of established power be effective” (2012, pp. 185-186). Carey says that the citizen assumes that journalism is his representative, and the relationship between the two must be based on trust and responsibility. He also says that the public must assume that journalism is not an accomplice of governments, nor of economic groups. The last demand is the most compromising and considers that the citizen must believe that the media are capable of representing the world, offering a vision of it, reasonable, true and without any bias.

These premises raise a press committed more to people than to the government, with clear clarity in what is their social function, capable of responsibly assuming an impartial and critical position between power, politics, information and the public; an ideal position for an undesirable reality, in which democratic institutions are permanently questioned for the loss of their values, and in which journalism does not come out well, since their citizen oversight actions do not achieve the task since before the look of society, it seems that he was not interested either, because the high degree of permeability of the press to the economic, political and social interests of its owners is not a secret.

In this same sense, Lamuedra considers that “[...] the underlying problem is that our current system assumes that in democracy each social actor defends its selfish interests” (2012, p. 199). In that scenario, each medium guarantees its survival and then, only afterwards, seeks the fulfillment of its role in society. The public claims social responsibility<sup>2</sup> to the press, in relation to its role as an opinion guide, generating criteria in the consumption of informative content and catalyzing the social phenomena that deserve to be known in a timely manner by the public. Rodríguez and Algarra, state that: “For man to remain free, he must live by reason, instead of passively accepting what he sees, hears and feels” (2008, p. 164). The strengthening of the reflective capacity of man is also the

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2 The theory of social responsibility is the result of the reflections of the Commission for press freedom or the Hutchins Commission, created in early 1944 at the initiative of Henry Luce, founder of Time Magazine and Robert Hutchins, rector of the University of Chicago. This theory raises five functions, which in the opinion of the Commission, society demands from the press. These are: “1) Offer a true, comprehensive and intelligible narrative of the events of each day in a context that gives them meaning. 2) Be an area for exchanging comments and criticism. 3) Offer a representative image of the groups that constitute society. 4) Present and clarify the goals and values of society. 5) Offer complete access to the understanding of what is happening” (Commission Hutchins, 2008, pp. 161-162).

responsibility of the media, from which the public understands the truth versions<sup>3</sup> of the facts of general interest must be known. The media have a duty to inform transparently, as much as the company has the right to be informed without hesitation.

Historically there has been a tradition in democratic countries to call the press the fourth estate; a statement that draws attention to the existence of a socio-political entity capable of equating with traditional powers (executive, judicial and legislative) with a characteristic that surpasses it before public opinion, the trust that it generates among citizens for having as a function the monitoring the performance of the other powers to publicize the good, the bad and the ugly of those institutions. This exaltation of journalism to a position of power is intended to validate, from the primary constituent, the role of oversight of an entity with a voice before the State with influence on citizenship, so that the balance of powers is guaranteed, compliance with rights and, consequently, democracy is maintained. A symbolic exercise of citizenship that also forces the press to be and not only seem, in response to the social and ancestral confidence that the messenger has had, to whom he carries the information without other interest than to satisfy the need to make know something that happens.

Democracies have been sustained through free, responsible, vigilant and incorruptible means; that is how society conceives them. It is an ideal of journalism. Lippmann (2003) ensures that it is expected that the press, considered as an institution, remains on the same level as the school, the church or wherever the selfless professions are. This statement is related to the public's expectation of receiving information for free, but also reliable, secure and impeccable. Lippmann (2003) insists that if the institutions do not work properly, unscrupulous journalists will have the opportunity to fish in troubled waters, while journalists with conscience will be obliged to run the risk of uncertainty. Not only corresponds to journalism to denounce in public what is not right, it also has the possibility of making early and private alerts, so that the actions of the State are corrected without the need to generate unnecessary alterations in citizenship. The popular proverb says that power is for power, and just as journalism has the power to denounce, it also has the alternative to prevent through the use of its faculties, which allow it access to restricted government instances for ordinary people.

Lippmann argues that: “[...] if, for whatever reasons, journalists do not disseminate reliable information, then democracy becomes a drill: the opinions of citizens and the decisions of governments will be based on prejudice and error” (cited in Rodríguez, 2012, p. 158). The press assumes its social prominence to the extent that it fulfills the mission of orienting public opinion, with elements that contextualize the information, allow to know different points of view and establish parameters for decision-making. Citizens and rulers have in journalism a

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3 Personally, I am convinced that there is no true truth in the news, the facts reported by the press are fictions of a reality of which the journalist was not a direct witness, and what he conveys to his audience is a representation of the events that occurred, which builds through versions collected with witnesses, actors and authorities of any kind, related to the facts. Those citizen stories given to the press are what I call, real versions.

tool that catalyzes fundamental issues, it is only hoped that salt will not be corrupted<sup>4</sup> and the historical support of democracy will collapse.

This concern has a bearing on facts in which the media have allowed manipulation by governments, politicians, businessmen and their own interests. The Spanish columnist Antonio Caño warns in his column *Journalism: Democracy requires facts*, published in the newspaper *El País*, that:

The press has made many mistakes; that is undoubted. Although the press has been an essential component of the liberal democracies since its birth, it is also true that, especially in recent decades, journalism has sometimes lived on a successful pedestal, has excessively separated from the society it was directed, and has used in a somewhat arrogant way the enormous power it has enjoyed (Caño, 2017, Opinion Column).

Try to influence democratic decisions with the publication of biased electoral polls, the journalistic siege of public officials who do not share the ideological line of the medium, or the confrontation of the courts of justice for the application of sanctions to the violation of fundamental rights such as the freedoms to privacy, the good name or the free development of personality, have been recurring themes in media such as Colombians, almost all, owned by large economic conglomerates, who take advantage of their excessive power to publicize private discussions for their own benefit.

The Colombian Omar Rincón (2017), professor and television critic, in his opinion column *Journalism as an operator of democracy*, published in the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, puts his finger on the sore and goes further in questioning the media, ensuring: "What is unnerving is that journalists have so comfortably renounced their role in society to become pets of the owners of the media and the political interests of their masters". The academic criticizes the position of some media in which the interest in economic profitability prevails, over the public utility of his activity. It also draws attention to the danger of falling into the trap of believing part of the power, and entering to play in the political and economic scenario, a place forbidden for journalists in their role as public seers.

Today the media have become part of the signaling of some social sectors, which they believe have lost their way in fulfilling their civic function, they are unionized not to place themselves on the side of truth and justice, to be permissive and co-honest with illegitimate actions that undermine democratic stability. The Argentine political scientist Natalio Botana (2016) when referring to the expectation that citizens have in journalism, ensures in his opinion column *Journalism, support of democracy*, published in the newspaper *La Nación* from Argentina, that: "The challenge today consists of accumulating legitimacy in the institutions to have a better policy, better justice, better legislation, better economy and, as a result, a more egalitarian and inclusive society". He adds: "The media cannot be servants of the prince

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4 This popular phrase is understood in the context of the concern that something incorruptible will end up damaged or corrupt. Salt is considered an element that is not damaged, and it would be the last straw to happen, and in the mention made in this paper, it is understood that society would never expect journalism to fall out of favor with the threats of corruption that always they surround him.

on duty and neither confidants excluded from their interests. Neither obsequence before power nor self-interest as the only north of conduct". The strength of Botana's words lies in the call for media attention on their role in the democratic strengthening of nations, in which institutions, as pillars of the system, cannot be outside the eye of the press, which tends to maintain legitimacy and, consequently, socio-political stability.

In an article by the Spanish professor Rodrigo Fidel Rodríguez (2014, p. 11), a fragment of the work of Lluís Bassets (2013), the last one to turn off the light, in which he is responsible for the crisis of democracy, both to the press as to democracy itself. Bassets writes:

A weakly participatory and low-quality democracy corresponds to a weak press structure that is soon reduced in titles and concentrated in communication groups, so that the erosion of media prestige causes fear for the future of journalism as of democracy itself (2013, p. 73).

Mutual responsibility arises from codependence: without democracy there are no means and without means there would be no democracy. This premise, repeated as a scenario has been possible and calls attention to the citizens on the importance of ensuring that this binomial maintains balance. As the theory of weights and balances of Montesquieu (2011) works, it is essential that independent press, should be guaranteed the separation of powers works, as much or as equal as the existence of a free, respected and outside particular interests.

Recently in Colombia, where there is a presidential campaign with strong tensions between the right, center and left parties, a trill of the right-wing ex-president Álvaro Uribe published on March 18 of this year (Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, 2018), in which he warns a renowned journalist and recent television concessionaire with the current government, about what will happen if his party wins the elections and opened a great controversy about press freedom and censorship. The politician's message says: "Daniel Coronel, politician and contractor of Santos, is panicked and rightly so; a government of Iván Duque will handle television concessions with transparency". The message caused a stir in the country with pronouncements from all sectors of society, starting with the same journalist. Daniel Coronel pronounced himself saying: "At this moment @AlvaroUribeVel begins to announce revenge against the media that have brought up the corruption and power abuse acts of his government (Chuzadas, AIS, free zone, notaries, parapolitics, etc.)".

The crossing of tweets was framed in a chapter that raises the reflection on freedom of the press, absence of guarantees for freedom of expression, and a threat against the democratic stability of the country. This case serves as an example to elucidate the permanent risks faced by the balance between journalism and the State when democracies show fissures.

By way of closure, it can be noted that the *Ley Mordaza* (Gag Law) in Ecuador (2013) and the *Ley contra el odio, por la convivencia pacífica y la tolerancia* en Venezuela (2017), (Law against hate, for peaceful coexistence and tolerance in Venezuela), are two of the regulatory acts of the journalistic trade in Latin America that have attracted the attention of democratic institutions and communication unions. Governments that are threatened by the unaligned

position of the media, have as a tool the limitation of freedoms through the judicialization of journalistic actions that are not in line with their policies, making the norm, an enemy of free expression and consequently, in a source of censorship of journalists and media, who become monitored by the State, in an act of clear violation of the fundamental right to inform and be informed.

Lippmann (2003) says that at best, the press plays the role of guardian and servant of the institutions; and on the contrary, in the worst case, it becomes a tool by which some exploit the lack of social organization to achieve their purposes.

The media are the first enemies of dictatorships, they are silent when democracy falters, they are the first victims of the absence of democratic institutions. When the media begin to be attacked by governments, it shows that there is something that wants to hide in the eyes of society, it is there that citizens must assume the defense of journalism as a champion of freedom, democracy and truth. But society must also be vigilant of the actions of the media, which, being in the hands of humans, also fall into the temptations of power and their abuse.

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