



## Public Opinion

Walter Lippmann (1889 - 1974)

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The 21st century has so far witnessed an exponential growth in both the volume and the complexity of communication. The growth of social media and the concomitant decline in the influence of mainstream media has given rise to concerns about information “echo chambers”, rigidly entrenched partisanship, and disagreement on and even dismissal of fundamental facts. Given these concerns, and at a loss to understand, there is no better time to revisit Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*. Published in 1922, and since considered both “the founding book of modern journalism” and “the founding book in American media studies”, it is an acute and astute analysis of the irrational and self-serving perceptions that drive individual behavior and impede social progress. The core truth is that reality is too

big, too fast, and too complex to understand and interpret accurately, so we each develop a shorthand of mental images that he terms stereotypes to create a “pseudo-environment” to understand and eventually act in the real world. Sadly, most people devote little time to acquiring information about public affairs and even so have little intellectual engagement generally. Add to this the danger that those who are in the know will create a fictitious pseudo-environment favorable to their private ends. Lippmann suggests we accept the fact that the power of propaganda and the expertise needed to understand public affairs renders traditional ideas of democracy untenable. To combat that, he challenged journalism to engage in the “manufacture of consent”, to parse issues and events as accurately and objectively as possible to help society cope and make more effective political decisions. The message resonates today as much as ever, perhaps even more so.

**Walter Lippmann** (September 23, 1889 – December 14, 1974) was an American reporter, columnist, author and commentator who many regard as the most influential journalist of the 20th century. His contributions are many – he coined the term “stereotype” in its modern psychological meaning, was among the first to understand and name the “Cold War” following World War II, co-founded *The New Republic*, and authored a syndicated column “Today and Tomorrow” for many years. His best known book was *Public Opinion* (1922), the first major treatise in the emerging field of media studies. Born and raised in New York to an affluent German Jewish family that made annual trips to Europe, he graduated from Harvard in three years in 1910 after studying with William and George Santayana. He served in Army intelligence in World War I and afterward advised President Woodrow Wilson on his 14 Points speech, the first of his informal presidential advisory roles that continued through the Lyndon Johnson administration. Though convinced that the “bewildered herd” of the masses needed the help of a class of public affairs experts, he became increasingly skeptical that the “guiding class” was undermining the framework of democracy, concerns articulated in *The Public Philosophy* (1955). He won two Pulitzer Prizes, the first in 1958 for his syndicated column “Today and Tomorrow” and the second for his interview with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1961.