Democracy as Trust in Public Discourse

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Abstract

In his *Federalist* Papers Madison presents a vision of how opinions will be developed into a shared public view in a discourse among constituents and their representatives under the proposed republic in the U. S. Constitution. A republic requires a public assertive and knowing enough to express itself and officials trustworthy and attentive to the words of the people. The danger Madison sees is faction: one group overcoming others so as to force their intentions upon citizens rather than join with them in seeking to articulate a common good.

In the modern era, the role of the public in the discourse and decisions of government is again in question. Walter Lippmann and John Dewey had a notable argument over the place of the citizen in the formation of public opinion in the 1920s. As a way into the modern question of discourse I discuss Lippmann and Dewey. I address Lippmann's distrust of American democracy because voters—who think in simplistic "stereotypes"—cannot handle complex modern problems. Lippmann calls for a government of experts to handle modern problems. I then examine Dewey's response to Lippmann. Dewey argues that people create publics when private problems become a matter of wider concern. Lippmann's description of citizens indicates they are isolated and stunted intellectually. Abolishing democracy is no solution, but to regenerate it by bringing citizens back to a public life of active interchange is. I conclude with comments on the media's threat to democracy and possible ways of renewing public discourse among citizens who know the role they play and who trust one another as interlocutors.

I. "All governments rest on opinion"

-----James Madison[1]

James Madison, a principle author of the U. S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, was an accomplished student of political theory, both ancient and modern. The *Federalist* Papers were written as briefs for the ratification of the Constitution, but they were also reflections on government and human nature, making the Constitution itself a case study within a comprehensive theory of government. Madison states, "But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?"[2] Madison's statement in the epigraph above gains clarity as we fit it within his discussion of discourse. We can gain a better grasp of the American government—and of the people's role in it—through basing our own reflections on the intentions

[1]James Madison, *Federalist* No. 49, in Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, with an Introduction, Table of Contents, and Index of Ideas by Clinton Rossiter (New York and Scarborough: New American Library, 1961), 314.

[2]*Federalist* No. 51, 322.

for the new government, voiced by Madison, and how they have played out over the past two centuries.[3]

Taking Madison's thought as a starting point for clarifying what a democratic republic is, I will examine how citizens participate in the public discourse and decision-making of a democratic republic and where they place their trust when they do so.[4] Madison aims at a republic in contrast to a pure democracy in that he expects citizens to choose those who hold office but not handle the affairs of state themselves.[5] I will consider two later political thinkers, Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, who raise questions concerning possibility of republican government and of discourse in it. I will end with several observations on retaining or retrieving something akin to Madison's vision of a republic by making trust in civic discourse possible again.

Although Madison's purpose in his *Federalist* Papers is to explicate the republican character of the proposed national government, in the epigraph Madison writes of "[a]ll governments," not of republics alone, that what they have in common is opinion. He does not give priority to the more typical concerns of modern political thought: the capacity for coercion and for security of subjects and their property, although he in no way dismisses the importance of these. All governments are basically alike in that they rest on opinion. W*hat* does this opinion concern? *Whose* opinion is it?

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[3] To be sure, the founders' were not all of one mind on their proposed government, but Madison was a major figure both in working out the structure and purposes of the national government and in giving those purposes a public hearing.

[4] I borrow the term "democratic republic" from Martin Diamond to indicate a polity in which the people are able to participate in government activities through the election of their officials as representatives who, in turn, appoint all others. See Martin Diamond and Winston Mills Fisk, *The Democratic Republic: An Introduction to American National Government* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970).

[5] The many delegate the government "to a small number of citizens elected by the rest . . . ." *Federalist* No. 10, 82.

People learn about their worldly condition so as to develop and follow strategies for successfully adapting and living with a certain style or spirit not least by means of institutions: settled forms of organized memory and conduct, such as those of law and government. Governments establish hierarchies; they encourage certain ambitions, characters, and skills necessary for serving the authorities and for taking up professions for the good of their fellows; they rely upon, generate, and are themselves expressions of knowledge and confidence that help rulers provide guidance that will enable (at least some) members of the regime to flourish. Madison's term 'opinion' refers to the kind of knowledge or belief that provides people the capacities to act with confidence in the surrounding world so as to have lives in which they flourish. 'Opinion' is a component of a practical understanding relative to the perspective of the knower, expressive of how the world appears to that person. Opinions are shared with one another and refined by the members of a group so that a common view, an enlarged opinion, emerges and binds members together for action within a common world.

Throughout history, I propose, most people's opinions on their world have included their submission to a rule by others, whose views are not presented as some opinions among others, but as knowledge with a special importance commanding the attention of all. The opinions of the many necessarily included acquiescence in, and agreement with, the established order. In the extreme case of tyranny, the division of rulers and ruled reaches is widest and most destructive: all are ruled by one person or a small clique who must make fear pervasive in the populace. Prevailing fear protects the tyrant because those ruled are held in check by wariness of one another: informers are everywhere. As long as people keep fearfully silent, they are alone in their suffering, unable to look to one another for the power that could free them all by making possible public critique and common struggle against the tyrant.

In democracies and republics things are different: There, ideally, the ruled are the rulers. In all popular regimes citizens open a public space by speaking with one another and exchanging and refining their opinions. Through deliberation citizens are led by fellow citizens beyond their personal or private views to consider more refined, encompassing public perspectives that open possibilities for action toward a common future. The democratic public space succeeds because, by drawing citizens into conversation with their (prospective) representatives, their discourse takes the people's views "through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations."[6]

Opinion is not a product of thought achieved only by a few and promulgated to the many so as to insure stability; it is the public fund of experience articulated in speech from which agreements are sought among the people and their representatives who seek the views of the best among them on how things are and how things *ought* to be. Opinions gather significance as they become public, through persons confirming and enlarging their views through discussion, drawing them beyond their many private perspectives to agreements no matter how tentatively they are held.[7] The exchange of opinions enables people to envision possibilities for action together that none could have imagined alone. (Climate change is an example of a common problem that could come to light only through the scientific work of researchers around the world. Beyond its status as a scientific finding, climate change has led people globally to seek practical and technical solutions to the dangers it portends.)

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[6]Ibid.

[7]There is a two part movement here: First, persons' opinions are strengthened by being shared with and verified by others, See *Federalist* No. 49, 315. Second, people will have different opinions because their experiences and viewpoints upon the world differ. An impasse is avoided here because superior individuals with "the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters" will combine opinions into encompassing, refined views that bring people with diverse opinions into agreement on a superior view that subsumes many initial opinions. See *Federalist* No. 10, 83.

Madison was a keen reader of Montesquieu and of the Scottish Enlightenment writers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. From Montesquieu Madison learned of political liberty; from the Scots he learned of the *public happiness* that only comes from participating in actions with others for the sake of their community. Madison's thought on politics follows these thinkers and their attempts to find a balance between the moderns and the ancients on politics.

The ancient polity, whether Athens or Rome, admired by the Enlightenment *philosophes* offered a way of life, self-government, rooted in citizens' words and deeds in the public space they created and shared through their discourse. The polity offered public happiness gained by appearing in public before one's fellow citizens, speaking and acting with excellence for the city. Enlightenment thinkers offered this as an ideal to be modestly approximated through the renewal of popular government in modernity.

The public space opened by discourse is the necessary ground of all popular government. In the West it was discovered in Greek *poleis* such as Athens where the heads of households enjoyed leisure from household affairs so they could gather together as citizens and discuss the requirements of their *polis* and convince one another to act together upon projects for its benefit; and in the Rome where numerous assemblies—of plebians, soldiers, and the patricians confronted one another in making law and policy for the city. Enlightenment thinkers feared the destabilizing *direct democracy* of Athens where one assembly made decrees unilaterally, but they admired the moderating influence of numerous public bodies and public officials checking one another in the Roman *republic*. In both Athens and Rome, citizens were directly and continually involved in the public affairs of the city, for public action was the fulfillment of citizens' lives. Full political engagement is not reinstituted in the modern republic; in its place

moderns accept a functional, office-based inequality between officials and private citizens expressed as "the consent to be governed."

Montesquieu presented a way to think of freedom in keeping with political thought and public action. Freedom is not the capacity to do what one *wants* to do. For such freedom is a private matter that does not recognize the person as a citizen acting with others. Political freedom means the power citizens create among themselves to act upon a proposal they take to be what they *ought* to do. We are free, not when we do what we *want*, (whether we control our wants or they us is irresolvable), but when we do what we *ought* to do as we determine it through the discursive union of our thought and will with others.[8] We are free, as well, if we have *security* which assures us we can speak with the assurance that, even if we are in the minority, we are secure in our persons and property. If we do not have that security, we speak and act politically under constant danger of confinement, exile, or death.[9]

For Montesquieu, in that freedom is the power to do as one *ought*, freedom's power only comes into being when a number of people or institutions join together in an agreement to act in concert. Expressions of our wants put in action can be destructive of the community. Freedom for all is saved when power serves to check power so that if one seeks to act as he wills regardless of its effects on others, his action can be checked or stopped by the others. Montesquieu applies this principle of checking dangerous or thoughtless action to the institutions of government: A government is free only if its functions are divided into three branches—the executive, legislative, and judicial—so that those in each branch can act only with the consent of

[8]Montesquieu writes, "In governments, that is in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what one ought to will and in not being constrained to do what one ought not to will." Charles Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent, with an Introduction by Franz Neumann (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), Book XI, Chapter 3, 150. I have revised Nugent's translation slightly.

[9]See Ibid., XII, 1, 183. Madison draws upon Montesquieu's rich notion of freedom as security in the Bill of Rights.

others and actions can be checked by others' opposition. The division of powers, as Montesquieu understands it, is a requirement that all officials can act only by finding agreement with others or with institutional bodies such as the legislature and the courts. The concept of division of powers, of course, is crucial in the U. S. Constitution. The power to take action comes only with agreement. Disagreement is a check on power, prohibiting an action. Even in cases in which there are no citizens of estimable judgment, the populace can be protected against short-sighted and overly ambitious men because the Constitution presents a system of checks and balances by which to limit foolish or sinister actions.

In the above I have given a republican reading of Madison by depicting him as seeking to bring the republican tradition, as action for the good of one's polity, into the modern world in a way consonant with the spirit of the citizens of the nascent United States which, Madison claims, is republican.[10] What the republican tradition entails, not only for Madison but for many of the Enlightenment writers, is that modern citizens can be brought to think about their common condition from a *public* point of view in which they expect themselves to discern and do what is good for the community as a whole, not only for themselves. Citizenship requires that we step beyond private concerns, even sacrifice them when necessary, for the sake of our common community.

Madison, in this outline of the Constitution at work, has distinguished two types of citizens so far: (1) ordinary citizens who share their experiences by exchanging opinions with one another, and (2) those select citizens who can refine those opinions into insights on the state

[10]See *Federalist* No. 39, 240. Madison has also been read as a liberal, by which is meant that citizens are primarily self-interested; their representatives bargain with one another seeking to satisfy their constituents' needs as best as possible. For a statement of the liberal reading of Madison see A. O. Lovejoy, *Reflections on Human Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961). Colleen A. Sheehan argues that in a one hundred page manuscript, "Notes on Government," published as essays in the *National Gazette* in 1791-2, Madison clearly takes the republican position. See Colleen A. Sheehan, "The Politics of Public Opinion: James Madison's 'Notes on Government'," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 49, no. 4(October 1992): 609-627.

of affairs and propose courses of action for the sake of doing good, alleviating harms, and providing justice. There is a third sort of citizen, however, who introduces difficulties into the lives of republican citizens: (3) those who belittle people's opinions so as to sow doubts about the justice or desirability of some proffered state of affairs. Madison describes these citizens: "Men of factious tempers, of local prejudices, or of sinister designs, [who] may, by intrigue, by corruption, or by other means, first obtain the suffrages, and then betray the interests of the people."[11]

The danger the troublesome citizens present is *faction*. Madison defines a faction: "By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."[12] Factions are dangerous in a republic because factious citizens are not willing to act in accordance with republican principles and present their views before the public, argue for them as best they can, and allow the group to decide whether or not to accept them. A faction seeks only to prevail; there is no interest in persuasion through discussion, no revision to make the view more acceptable. A triumphant faction will take control, whether as a majority or well-organized minority, and force its view on all as a vanquished enemy. In several school districts in the United States in recent years, people have run for seats on their local school boards. Once elected, they announce that they are fundamentalist Christians who intend to cease the teaching of Darwinian evolution in public schools. These citizens are not troubled by taking office under false pretenses because they see their cause as just and the political subterfuge as trivial. Their thinking is factional: they have the truth; and it is their responsibility to promulgate it;

[11] *Federalist* No. 10, 82.
[12] Madison, *Federalist* No. 19, 78.

democracy can be abused to achieve this goal. Factions endanger the republican character of politics because those holding beliefs absolutely give greater importance to their beliefs than to their fellow citizens or to the republic itself. Yet, a republic is maintained in existence only by the commitment of its citizens to conduct their affairs in keeping with the spirit as well as the law of their republic.

Madison offers a solution to faction that depends upon the size and variety of beliefs and practices in the United States. Given a small constituency, such as that of a congressional district, one can imagine a faction being numerous and vocal enough to leave its opponents isolated and voiceless. The faction is sufficiently influential within the district that it can require the representative to vote in favor of its interests, otherwise they will back an opponent in the next election. Madison proposes that, if the size of the district increases, so that more and varied constituents are included within its borders, the faction faces increased competition. The representative must attend to all of the interests in the district. The representative might find it prudent to seek a pragmatic union of a number of groups in the constituency by helping them to discover common interests that the representative can support. To fit into this enlarged constituency, a group must disavow its factional interest in dominance and renew its dedication to a republican rule of law. The members of the faction may or may not believe their claim of acquiescence to republicanism, but they must voice it or lose their influence.

So, Madison provides a republican solution to faction: enlarge the sphere of the voting district so that its many members must deal deliberately with one another, through the efforts of the representative, so that their interests are re-expressed in an inclusive way. This solution to faction can be applied at various levels of government: from a local state representative's level, to the entire state, and, finally to the federal government. Factions might only agree to act

politically because their members are so numerous that they hope to overcome their opponents at *some* level of government in the near future.[13] The size of the public space can prevent faction's triumph so long as there is diversity of interests among the voters. Madison trusts that this diversity will most often be found. He writes, "Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength and to act in unison with each other."[14] As with religious sects, if their number makes it unlikely that any one will ever prevail against all foes, then the sole tactic available to each of them is to preach tolerance toward all, thereby protecting itself.

There are factions, such as religious groups that insist the United States is a Christian nation, seeking a rule over citizens in which obedience to commands of the leaders is essential. The Constitution is a radically secular document that prohibits both religious tests for all candidates for office in the United States and an established church. The recognition of the equality of citizens underscores the government's secular character again. People who think they have a duty of uncritical obedience to law mistake the nature of democracy. Obedience to law or "following orders" will not help a citizen escape moral complicity in violations of fundamental principles of humanity. Citizens are supposed to think through and refuse to do any deed that they *ought* not to do. The superiority of a democratic republic over other regimes lies in its expectation that people know what they are doing and are doing it willingly, asking whether a proposed deed is right or wrong, good or evil.

[13]See *Federalist* No. 10, 83 and passim.
[14]Ibid., 83.

Implicit in the solution to faction is the requirement of a representative to discuss disagreements with constituents in ways that bring them to agreement or willingness to disagree. The representative goes to the capital and works with other representatives from around the state or country. In doing so, the representative learns about the state or nation as a whole and must speak and vote on the basis of that knowledge. The representative must then return to the district and explain those votes to constituents thereby enlarging their thinking about their state and nation. An educative process takes place horizontally within the district and vertically between the district and the capital.

Madison's thought on republicanism developed with practical experience.[15] Among these changes were (1) an acceptance of political parties, and (2) desire for all non-propertied freemen to vote. (1) Madison came to realize that a political party can nurture a group of those refined, thoughtful citizens who turn popular opinions into thoughtful positions. Parties are not inherently factional because they prepare people to deal with political problems in a way consistent with some basic principles. Parties only become factional if they intend to capture power permanently and monopolize the public space and processes of government for party members alone. Unlike factions, parties attract the great majority of the people who agree with the general political and policy goals of the parties. (2) The limitation on suffrage to men with property protects those citizens from demands that might be pressed against them from the propertyless, but all men are subject to the requirements of the law, whether they have property or not. So, Madison concluded, all should have suffrage so that they are represented in debates on legislation that affects them. Moreover, far better than limiting suffrage to those with property would be the acquisition of property by those who are propertyless. As the West

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[15]See Robert A. Dahl, "James Madison: Republican or Democrat?" *Perspectives on Politics* 3, no. 3(September 2005): 439-448; especially 441-446.

opened, such a hope was far from empty. Madison could foresee a time when Americans would have property or work to attain it; the interest then even of the propertyless would be policy that protected the security of property.

Madison's depiction of the American republic shows a need for representatives, principled and intelligent persons in whom trust can be placed; for a people with sufficient knowledge of public issues to comment upon them as well as to comprehend and critique politicians' positions and personal trustworthiness, and for the maturity among them all to look coolly at positions being argued by those who would hold office. Madison's depiction of government requires of Americans openness toward difference and the ability to seek common ground with others lest difference, fed by passion, encourage ambitious leaders to install a faction as though it were merely a majority view.

II. "What the argument for democracy implies is that the best way to produce initiative and constructive power is to exercise it."
--John Dewey[16]

Thinkers opposed to democracy run back at least to Plato for whom democracy showed its vicious side in the trial and death of his teacher, Socrates. Plato and like-minded successors have argued that the business of government is too demanding intellectually to trust to the mass of citizens. In the cave parable in the *Republic* Plato draws a succinct picture of his view of popular government: A person is freed from the world of shadows in a cave and taken above so that, as his eyes grow accustomed to the light, he sees real things, whereas in the cave he had seen only their shadows. Forced to return to the cave, he tells his fellows what he has seen and

[16]John Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration," in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953* Ed. Jo Ann Boydston. 17 vols. (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 11: 224.

disparages their game of watching shadows. Given the chance, Plato's Socrates says, they would surely kill him.

Plato's point is clear: Only those who are intellectually capable of grasping what is true and enduring such as the Ideas (definitions of the virtues) ought to rule; others knowing only opinions about the sensible world are better off themselves—and do no harm to others—if they are convinced to attend to the orders of philosopher-kings who know the truth. This point is made repeatedly in Western history: there is a natural difference between those who should rule and those who should be ruled. *Everyone* will benefit from a system of education and social arrangements that draws upon this distinction between wise rulers and obedient, diligent workers.

After World War I a group of social and behavior theorists arose who termed themselves "democratic realists."[17] Influenced by Freud and by behaviorism, these scientists, such as Harold Lasswell, argued that human beings are not rational. Rather all humans are governed by deep-seated emotional needs and the traces of earlier experiences, especially events in the family. The old notion that people could form a public space and argue out and resolve political problems competently and rationally is not borne out by the facts. There can no longer be trust in the people or in the adequacy of a government rooted in consent of its people. Officials ought not count on the public for policy guidance because the people are not coherent and informed. Officials must turn to experts, academics with genuine knowledge of technology, natural resources, and the ways of distant peoples in order to form solid, fact-based policy. These

[17]See Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 275-286.

experts, "enlightened and responsible elites," bear a resemblance to the theorists of democratic realism themselves.[18]

Walter Lippmann was a notable political theorist and journalist influenced by the realists and by the conviction that political matters have become too complex to trust in the people to make wise decisions. People's knowledge about matters beyond their own experience consists largely of rough images or, in Lippmann's term, "stereotypes."[19] For everyday matters people's nuanced comprehension is not problematic because these things are real and concrete. Seeing something uncommon, most people will later report that they saw something commonplace, something they expected to see.[20] Decisions made by such people are woefully inadequate. So, elected officials ought not look to the people for legitimacy in decisions and policies; they will get emotional responses quickly changing with conditions and further provocative accounts.

Most people do not refine their stereotypes with experience and interchange, rather they hold on to them tenaciously. For persuading the populace, leaders design emotional symbols derived from stereotypes as a rallying point. Stereotypes are not scientific models, ceaselessly tested and discarded if they fail. Stereotypes are useful, however, for exciting a group and keeping them steadfast in what they think.[21] Consent of the people is not the joint product of serious discourse, it is an emotional bond. That is, consent is "manufactured" by those who want to control the people for their own ends. There is nothing new in manufacturing consent; it is a demagogic practice as old as democracy itself. In the modern era, however, the skills gained

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[18]Ibid.

[19]See Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press; London: Macmillan, 1922, 1949), 53-62.

[20]Ibid., 55-57.

[21]Ibid., 132-3, 140.

through psychology and media technology make the manufacture of consent a truly transformative power.[22]

Where does "manufacture of consent" leave democracy? The premise of democracy fails according to Lippmann: we cannot know people, events, and human conditions far from our own experience. It is ridiculous to think that legislators, much less voters, can meet in Boston and discuss knowingly conditions in Virginia; even more, is it ridiculous that we in the United States can know conditions in China. The expectations of the democratic founders were too high, electors and the elected cannot have knowledge so far beyond their own experience. In reality we are left with "the self-centered man who had to see the whole world by means of a few pictures in his head."[23] American democracy matured in small towns and on rural farms among people similar to one another. Founders, such as Jefferson, dedicated to a republic of yeoman farmers, thought it an easy matter for citizens to gain knowledge and apply moral virtues through reasoning carried out in discussion and in the press.[24] In the modern world, such confidence is misplaced because conditions, values, and experiences are too highly diverse to allow simple people to know those living under different conditions elsewhere.

Lippmann proposes that while Jefferson was a genuine democrat, other founders' true purpose was to curb the notion of 'democracy'.[25] After Jefferson's election to the presidency, the Constitution was given a false rereading as a democratic document. The document is still read today as democratic. Nevertheless, Lippmann suggests that the Constitution has been continually used to limit democracy as the power of the people.[26] Lippmann dismisses

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[22] See Ibid., 158.
[23] Ibid., 166.
[24] Ibid., 174.
[25] Ibid., 178-9. Alexander Hamilton is chief among these founders.
[26] Lippmann is equivocating on 'democracy'. The founders were opposed to democracy as direct rule by the people because this would quickly be mob-rule. They were proponents of republican government, indirect

American democracy as an empty pretense from the beginning and voters as, at heart, self-interested, private persons eager to collect what government disposes. "It was only the words of the law, the speeches of politicians, the platforms, and the formal machinery of administration that have had to conform to the pristine image of democracy."[27] This is a tendentious reading of the documents, and it introduces a confusion into Lippmann's own position. If Lippmann is correct that the Constitution intentionally provides a sham democracy, his central argument, that public opinion must be replaced by expertise, is otiose—public opinion has never had power in America.

Jefferson had expected that newspapers would educate Americans about the larger world and prepare them to be informed citizens. Lippmann disabuses his readers of this romantic notion of the press. The press is a business, not an educational or civic service. Newspapers sell space to advertisers who, in turn, want to attract a specific audience. The newspaper publishes a story because it attracts readers, not because it is true.[28]

Lippmann also dismisses the view that most people are citizens foremost. They are, rather, homeowners, employees, family members with complex private lives. This private life dominates each person's concern. People want to be warm, well-fed, and healthy. Insofar as their government can help in these ambitions, most people are interested citizens, beyond this they are not. Americans' lives are really centered on their private interests. Political matters are a chief concern to "comparatively few people."[29]

This does not mean we are condemned to life in a world of which we are largely ignorant, nor that our government is benighted due to a provincial, self-centered citizenry. Citizens might

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democracy, with elected and appointed officials charged in a system of checks and balances governing for the people.

[27]Ibid., 181.

[28]See ibid., 201-207.

[29]Ibid., 197.

know little of distant places, but there are those who make a study of them. If a government official needs to articulate policy concerning China, she should not ask for the opinion of her constituents or the general public; she should ask China experts, people who's profession is to learn about the country, its people, their economy, and the like. Government can develop intelligent policies by learning from experts, not by listening to the people. A Jeffersonian democracy is a nostalgic myth, but the actual government can operate quite well without the attention of the citizenry.

John Dewey is a philosophical proponent of democracy, but it is a democracy that is both broader and more active than its usual political form. Lippmann presents Dewey with a grave challenge. Knowledge that is cut off from experience and importance in people's lives remains undeveloped and static. Lippmann, in Dewey's view, too quickly gives up on the people and turns toward an elite to control society. Dewey, by contrast, sees in democracy the possibility for people to gain knowledge important for their world and their lives. Dewey wrote *The Public and Its Problems*[30] in large part as a response to Lippmann. Democracy, for Dewey, is far more than a form of government. It is that, but it is also a way of life and a form of inquiry. Dewey takes Lippmann's challenge to democracy seriously: that the public space where the discourse and decisions concerning the common world takes place has been cordoned off as a place proper only for specialists and elected officials.

In reality, Dewey argues throughout his philosophy, all knowledge is social and dynamic in that it arises among people who confront difficulties, describe their experiences for one another, propose and confirm possible solutions to common problems, and recover the important points of their discoveries in an account of their experience together. Stereotypes are static, if people were to consider them in common and apply them actively to solve real problems, they

[30]In *The Later Works*, 2: 235-372.

would grow into richer visions of the world around them. We develop abstract beliefs about the unknown from past experience as it fits a novel case. Through interaction and testing our ideas, abstract beliefs become more concrete and better fit our needs. Lippmann admits that even experts begin with stereotypes but move beyond them to concrete "reality."[31] If this is true of experts, why not everyone? Dewey does not confront Lippmann directly on stereotypes, but his philosophical attitude toward such a notion is easily traced. A Deweyan analysis of Lippmann's critique of ordinary citizens would indicate that what Lippmann uncovers is not merely that people have an overly simple grasp of things, but that their inner picture is not being reworked and reformed through shared inquiry toward a richer, more satisfactory and useful understanding. People don't just have ideas in their heads due to ideas' intrinsic value; they hold them because they use them, and, in using them, they rethink and improve them.[32] This social interaction, essential for even the simplest thoughts, is missing from Lippmann's account of stereotypes. This suggests that the people Lippmann describes are in isolation or are interacting in ways that are so rote and tired, so limited by the constraints of society, that the activity of thought as true human interchange has ceased. These people live thoroughly private lives, but not as satisfied consumers; they are private because they have been cut off from all public activities concerning their lives and thoughts.

A Pragmatic question is what is the effect of some, the experts, being privileged so that their thinking flourishes while others are denied the chance to grow intellectually but are dismissed as having no ideas on public affairs worth considering? Dewey suggests in the epigraph of this section people develop the ability to think and act only by doing so. Denied this opportunity, they are condemned to a subordinate, passive role.

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[31]See Lippmann, 82.
[32]See Dewey, *Public and its Problems*, 2:345-347.

For Dewey a public emerges whenever something going on between or among several people becomes significant to the larger community. Wages, for example, are a private matter between an employer and workers unless the standard amount paid is such that people cannot live on it but do not have the leverage individually to convince employers to raise them to a satisfactory minimum. People form publics by making something a topic of common concern with regard to which they need to take action in concert based upon a thorough discussion of what the problem is, how best to alleviate it, and how, precisely, their resolution should be enacted. Some publics are informal, the people involved simply organize themselves through discussion, decision, and action. Others are formal in that institutions are established through which discussion, decision, and actions occur according to protocol. Government is a set of institutions established to facilitate the activities of specific and highly important publics. It would, however, be a serious mistake to take 'public' to signify 'government': there is—or ought to be—a great deal of public activity apart from government.

The problem Dewey sees in the United States is that the public is in many ways "in eclipse" or "inchoate." People know they have serious problems and need some program of action to undertake together, but they are uncertain how to organize or how to diagnose and propose solutions to their problems. Government does not address this eclipse; so, for many people, it has lost significance as a system for public speech and action that deserves their participation. Dewey comments acerbically, "The number of voters who take advantage of their majestic right is steadily decreasing in proportion to those who might use it. The ratio of actual to eligible voters is now about one-half."[33]

Publics need to form in all vital areas of life: the workplace, the school, religion. By the experience of affecting their lives within these various contexts people will establish publics in

[33]Ibid., 2: 308. This was in 1927. The ratio today is closer to one-third.

which they can be free in word and deed. Democracy needs to be reactivated by people's engagement in shaping their lives. Democracy has always meant freedom. But, Dewey argues, this is not the freedom to do what we *want* to do. Democracy gives people freedom of *mind*; it enables people to apply their intelligence to their lives. Theorists who argue for some form of aristocracy, rule by a self-proclaimed élite, do so because they have *no trust in the people* to achieve responsibility and intelligence. Consequently, they argue, control must be seized by an élite who consider themselves alone capable of directing public affairs. Democracy is the faith that all people can offer something of value, and everyone is richer for that contribution. It is this freedom, Dewey holds, that the founders intended and the Bill of Rights protects.[34]

The founders did not expect the people to rule; elected and appointed officials would carry on the business of government—including seeking the advice of experts. The founders did expect that the people would have a say in public affairs, informing and questioning their elected officials. Madison gives elected officials the task of enlarging their understanding through reflection upon the perspectives of voters, thereby enabling them to help constituents take a public perspective larger than that of their private interests alone. Lippmann, by contrast, aims to increase the private character of citizens' lives by asserting that private benefits from government are all that concerns them.

Dewey is mostly silent on the Constitution in *The Public and Its Problems*.[35] He realizes that citizens need to be active members of publics before they can become astute citizens and voters. His emphasis, accordingly, is on the development of civic and workplace democracy.

[34]See "Democracy and Educational Administration," 11:220. While it is recognized that the First Amendment deals with political rights (speech, press, assembly), the other Amendments do as well. Unwarranted search and seizure, self-incrimination, denial of habeas corpus are all political weapons tyrants use against their own people.

[35]Years later, Dewey briefly states of Americans, "We have lived for a long time upon the heritage that came to us from the happy conjunction of men and events in an earlier day." He says nothing, however, about how to earn the "heritage" anew. John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us" (1939) in *Later Works*, 14:225.

The 1920s were a time of extraordinary civic activism with many strong and brilliant voices: Jane Addams, W. E. B. DuBois, Robert LaFollette, Upton Sinclair, A. Philip Randolph, Norman Thomas, and John Dewey himself. The women's movement and the labor movement were active; and organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the American Civil Liberties Union, were founded.[36] Many Americans were voiceless to be sure, but many others were forming publics and finding their voices by listening to and joining committed public Americans. Throughout the twentieth century, in fact, great political and social changes have been achieved in the United States because of the efforts of many joined together to fight for specific changes: women's suffrage and equality, racial equality, opposition to the Vietnam War, gay rights, and now the Iraq War. The opinions of the people are, at least at moments of great importance, clear and morally astute.

Dewey argues, and all of these Americans who have struggled for justice would agree, that speaking out is an essential part of being human. Political engagement might be hard, it might be unsuccessful, but it reflects the proper dignity of persons that they have a voice and it ought to be heard.

Lippmann would make Americans comfortable despite silencing many of them as ineligible intellectually to speak, so Dewey's arguments would leave him unmoved. The greatest utilitarian weakness in Lippmann's argument for experts, however, is an absence of accountability.[37] What benefit do these scholars expect? If they seek the public good, let them run for office and face the people's judgment directly both before and after they have shown their talents. If they work for elected officials, they will be held accountable by the officials who hire them. Lippmann, by robbing the people of an effective opinion, allows the experts to escape

[36]Dewey played a role in the formation of both organizations.

[37]To be sure, they hold one another accountable like university faculty. Lippmann, 244.

the judgment of those most affected by their wisdom or folly. Madison would recognize them to be a faction who escape accountability by silencing possible critics. Dewey recognizes that, if nothing else, the people are wiser than anyone else about one thing: "where the shoe pinches."[38]

> III. "Man, that flexible being, conforming in society to the thoughts and impressions of others, is equally capable of knowing his own nature whenever it is laid open to his view, and of losing the very sense of it when this idea is banished from his mind."
>
> -- Montesquieu[39]

Today, public opinion is as untrustworthy but no less significant than it was in Lippmann's and Dewey's day. With the unpopular war in Iraq, Katrina's devastation, signing statements, and intimations of the need for torture, there has been an upsurge in political awareness, but the opportunity for genuine political discourse, and so the formation of informed public opinion, is far less than circumstances demand. The main stream media have provided superficial reporting of recent political campaigns and have failed the American people by lock-step, uncritical coverage of the Bush Administration's campaign to undertake a war in Iraq.[40]

Knowledgeable discussion of Constitutional abuses by the Bush Administration, above all, has been seriously wanting in the popular print and broadcast media. The American people have come to the realization that the Iraq war was unjustified and many other policies of the current administration were poorly planned and incompetently pursued by officials who owe their offices to party loyalty rather than experience or skill. Most seriously, numerous actions have been taken in violation of the Constitution, many of which have established precedents that will pose a danger even after the current administration is past. American public opinion is

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[38]Dewey, "Democracy and Educational Administration," 11:219.

[39]*Spirit of the Laws*, Preface,

[40]*New York Times* reporters, for example, failed to question critically information received from the administration concerning weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The reporters involved as direct conduits of administration propaganda to one of the nation's major newspapers. See Glenn Greenwald, "The Ongoing Journalistic Scandal at the New York Times," *Salon.com*, July 9.2007, http://www.salon.co,/opinion/greenwald/2007/07/09/hoyt/print.html, (July 9, 2007).

manipulated by government, political parties, allied research organizations, newspapers, and journals. Political opinion-formation is dominated by technical methods in use by the above mentioned agencies. The people have found their way past manipulation on many issues, but it has taken them valuable time to do so. Meanwhile, government undertook projects that the public has belatedly denounced. Serious harm occurred before Americans grasped what was happening in their name and recognized that something must be done to change the current course of affairs. Experts have proven to be loyalists to the politicians they serve.

Lippmann told us that news is a business, but it is doubtful even he could have imagined the total commercialization of political coverage. Election campaigns increasingly rely upon the media for reaching the people. Yet, the media have failed to provide an open or adequate public space, either in print or on television, for candidates to express themselves informatively to the electorate. One reason for the failure of the media to take on issues like universal health care is its consolidation as the holdings of five corporations. Such concentration affects what is reported: Political discussion rarely questions the market economy or other issues antagonistic to the media's owners.[41] The media surreptitiously limit discourse to topics and proposals favoring their own interest.

Once, television news prized its excellent news coverage as the fulfillment of a civic duty; but, since around 1968, news was no longer accepted as a money-losing public good. Today, news is profitable or it is not aired or in printed. One sign of this has been a substantial drop in free campaign coverage on TV news programs. In 1968 the average length of a sound bite of a candidate speaking was 45 seconds; in 2000 it was 7 seconds. The major expense of campaigns today is television advertising. The less about a candidate given free in a newscast,

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[41]"Consistent with their self-interest, corporate owners prefer programming reaffirming their beliefs and values and programming with a pro-business, free-market message." Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Marketing Public Discourse," *The Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 3 (Fall 1004): 39-54, see especially 40.

the more the candidate has to buy in advertising.[42] The quality of information that is available has degenerated as well: news stories often cover the "horse-race" rather than the substance; ads are negative criticism of opponents rather than substantive statements about a candidate's position on issues. Campaign coverage in the news and ads alike is emotional, superficial, and largely negative. Why? It works. Voters are approached like consumers. Focus groups determine what best arouses attention and agreement; speeches and ads take shape accordingly. Television and, to a great extent, newspapers provide coverage that is fashioned with marketing prowess to grab readers emotionally, hence the celebrity news.

Citizens as single, private persons are lured to make a purchase with their vote. Both news media and candidates themselves, therefore, treat voters individually rather than as groups of citizens, as publics. Treating citizens as private consumers is costly politically because it encourages them to seek the fulfillment of private desires rather than public needs. Private persons are not willing or prepared to articulate the public good through public discussion with others in search of that good.

The state of public life, nevertheless, is not cause for despair because people are capable of forming public spaces and speaking out for themselves in unison. Bill Moyers finds that the Internet gives him hope even in the face of today's degraded corporate journalism: "The greatest challenge to the conglomeration of the media giants and the malevolent mentality of the partisan press is the innovation and expression made possible by the digital revolution."[43] The Internet also makes possible coordination for political action: Online organizations, such as Moveon.org, help form a public, not only by raising ad money or disseminating petitions, but by encouraging and assisting people to hold meetings in their homes and by organizing people to canvas

[42]Todd Gitlin, "Deliberation in Democracy," *Hedgehog Review* 6, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 7-13, 8.
[43]"Newsworthy: Bill Moyers on Journalism and Democracy," *Christian Century*, April 17, 2007, 24.

neighbors before an election and help the elderly to the polls: a digital precinct captain for the nation.

The loss of the public dimension of life is not foreordained. Many people involve themselves with various civic groups in efforts to solve social problems.[44] In doing so, they are acting for a common good that encompasses them and others in the community. Such civic efforts often move citizens to take a public view and pursue an active role in elective politics. That is, civic and public action demonstrate that it is not foreordained that American democracy slip from being a public matter concerning us all together to a private one concerning each separately. Some, like Lippmann, hold that self-centered consumers is all that is possible in modern America. If Americans accept this limitation, all they can expect of one another is an adversarial relation as all compete to get what they can. The American political tradition, especially its founding, rests upon a richer, more complex philosophy of human beings than *stereotypical* market thinking. The Constitution itself has its grounding in rich veins of Enlightenment thought on humanity, ethics, and politics. Americans would be wise to retrieve this for their own and their childrens' education if they determine to keep their republic.

The epigraph heading this section gives a final lesson Americans should learn from Montesquieu: we humans are malleable beings who form ourselves in keeping with our beliefs about ourselves. If we think we are by nature self-interested, at home only in a marketplace, such will we become. If we recognize our capacity to speak and act together as political, discursive beings who can articulate together a public purpose, then we can be that as well. Americans do need more education, but the *right* education that teaches about the capacity for public discourse and conjoint activity within democracy. Americans need to relearn the life of public discourse and *trusting* fellowship the founders, especially Madison and Jefferson—

expected as the ground for the Constitution. They need to learn again how to discuss critically what they learn from the media on politics and public affairs—and criticize the media for not doing its part in maintaining the republic. Moreover, they need to give constant attention to public affairs, not only awaken to them during crises. Only if they learn these lessons in citizenship, can they begin to hope that a union of the American people expressed as constant, informed public opinion in pursuit of effective political action can be trusted to retrieve the Constitution left in their trust by another age for enduring political benefit.

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