

Semantic Tyranny: How Edward L. Bernays Stole Walter Lippmann's Mojo and Got Away With It and Why It Still Matters

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The history of public relations has recently attracted the interest of critical media scholars. Edward L. Bernays, the author of several pioneering PR books, has profoundly influenced how critical scholars have conceived of public relations. Bernays deceptively claimed that Walter Lippmann provided the theory and that he provided the practice, creating the false impression that Lippmann was an apologist for PR. Lippmann actually denounced government and corporate publicity agents as propagandists and censors. Yet critical PR scholarship has uncritically accepted and amplified Bernays' misrepresentation. This article seeks to correct this error by comparing the key texts: Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922) and Bernays' *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923).

For the most part, the way we see things is a combination of what is there and of what we expected to find. The heavens are not the same to an astronomer as to a pair of lovers; a page of Kant will start a different train of thought in a Kantian and in a radical empiricist.

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922, p. 76)

Pages of Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, filtered through the resourceful imagination of Edward L. Bernays (1891–1995), set off a mischievous train of thought that has profoundly affected how Lippmann's work is perceived and interpreted today. What Bernays represents as a friendly reading of *Public Opinion* in his own quickly crafted sequel to Lippmann's book, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* (1923), is actually a calculated reversal of Lippmann's argument. Lippmann (1889–1974) was a vehement critic of propaganda who condemned the "manufacture of consent" by public relations when that field was still in its infancy. *Crystallizing Public Opinion* inverts and subverts Lippmann's radical critique into an apology for PR.

From start to finish, *Crystallizing Public Opinion* serves as PR for PR, and more specifically for the PR firm of Edward L. Bernays. Defining public relations through a series of examples, Bernays uses the third person to applaud solutions that public relations counselors offer to clients who present them with a

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Date submitted: 2012–12–12

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wide spectrum of problems to solve, ranging from a packing house trying to sell more bacon to Lithuanian nationalists seeking independence. As the self-styled genius behind these ingenious solutions, Bernays successfully creates the illusion of a third-party endorsement of his own work—an extraordinary example of a tactic that he would later describe approvingly as “semantic tyranny” (*The Image Makers*, 1983).

Future U.S. senator Ernest Gruening (1924, p. 14) published a scathing review of Bernays’ book in *The Nation*, entitled “The Higher Hokum.” But Bernays considered *Crystallizing Public Opinion* a promotional success regardless of whether reviewers praised or panned it. His objective was to distance public relations from its historical antecedents: circus promoters and publicity agents. Bernays (1965) claimed that the very existence of the reviews ensured that “hundreds of thousands of people were exposed for the first time to the concept of counsel on public relations” (p. 292): a term that he claimed his wife and silent business partner Doris Fleischman coined, although that claim has been disputed (St. John, 1998¹).

Hokum or not, Bernays used his newly acquired status as a published author to convince New York University to let him teach the first public relations course ever offered, even though his only academic credential was a bachelor degree in agriculture. This added a veneer of academic respectability to his lifelong quest to legitimate the field of public relations as a profession comparable to law and medicine. Bernays’ early efforts on behalf of bacon, hotels, and hairnets were soon dwarfed by far more ambitious PR schemes that would take on a quasi-legendary status within industry lore (Museum of Public Relations, 1997; Tye, 1998).

Claiming the title of “father of public relations,” Bernays played a decisive role in the development of corporate propaganda. He cultivated an image of himself as a liberal intellectual with expertise in the scientific analysis of the public mind. Widely advertising the fact that Sigmund Freud was his uncle, he frequently punctuated his speech with Freudian terms as well as references to sociology and psychology; he even managed to publish in academic journals (for example, Bernays, 1928a). But Bernays was no social scientist, he was a promoter.

Why Bernays Still Matters

Why should we care about interpretive mischief committed almost a century ago by a shameless self-promoter when even many PR people today regard Bernays’ legacy with embarrassment? He was certainly no intellectual match for Lippmann. Yet Bernays’ distortion of Lippmann does still matter—not only to the integrity of the historical record but to the future development of a vital new interdisciplinary area of research and social activism. In the interest of democratic transparency—a cause young Lippmann championed—this movement researches and exposes government and corporate misinformation campaigns that attempt to mislead the public. It addresses a broad range of topics from warmongering to consumer safety, but perhaps the most compelling example is exposure of campaigns, funded by the fossil

¹ St. John (1998) cites a reference to “public relations” in the preface to *The Yearbook of Railroad Literature* (Chicago: Railway Age, 1897).

fuel industry, to deny climate change and undermine the credibility of climate science and scientists (Beder, 2002; Bowen, 2008; Hoggan, 2009; Oreskes & Conway, 2010).

Responding to the rapid global expansion and restructuring of the PR industry since the end of the Cold War, this movement has more visibility in English-speaking countries outside the United States.² Because it is still a new area of inquiry, scholars engaged in this work have few critical academic precedents to draw upon.³ Consequently, a few early efforts—specifically the work of Alex Carey, Noam Chomsky, and Stuart Ewen—have exercised inordinate influence.

These authors ascribe a prominent place to Bernays in their accounts, and in the process revive and amplify Bernays' once nearly moribund misrepresentation of Lippmann. In doing so, they not only reproduce Bernays' old mischief but mislead a new generation of critical scholars and activists who are crafting theoretical grounds for critical studies of promotional industries. Inexplicably, Chomsky and Ewen do readily acknowledge Bernays' penchant for exaggeration. Yet they appear to accept Bernays' claims about Lippmann at face value. As we shall see, Alex Carey does get Lippmann right, but he is still indirectly implicated in this story.

Bernays' claims need to be systematically interrogated. This article does that: it compares what Bernays purports to find in Lippmann's classic work with what is actually there, and it demonstrates that Bernays' interpretation of Lippmann grossly misrepresents and misuses the original in ways that invert and betray Lippmann's intent.

Lippmann, Bernays, and Critical Studies of Public Relations

Still a young man when he published *Public Opinion*, his sixth and most scholarly book, Lippmann already had a national reputation as the leading voice of the younger generation of Progressives, a founding editor of *The New Republic* magazine, and advisor to presidents. He attracted considerable

² Globalization produced rapid international expansion of PR which critics abroad generally regard as an unwelcome American export. Industry mergers in the 1990s created a handful of giant global communication conglomerates that combine advertising, marketing, PR, lobbying, litigation, and other business functions, blurring the lines formerly distinguishing these practices. This restructuring provided global persuasion industries with the fluidity, versatility, and capacity for reflexivity that Nigel Thrift (2005) argues capitalism requires to navigate the complexity of electronically integrated global markets. For an account of this process and profiles of the major conglomerates, see Jansen (2011).

³ While there were many early critics of PR besides Lippmann and Gruening (including John Dewey and the U.S. Congress), my focus here is on post-Cold War critical inquiry. PR Watch (prwatch.org), under John Stauber's leadership, began reporting on spin and disinformation in 1993, first in print and later on the Internet. Ewen's book made an important contribution by legitimating critical academic studies of PR. Scholars in the United Kingdom have made the most expansive efforts to secure intellectual foundations for this work, including Moloney (2000), Miller and Dinan (2008), and Morris and Goldsworthy (2008). A new journal dedicated to critical PR studies, *Public Relations Inquiry*, was launched by SAGE Publications in 2012.

scholarly interest during his lifetime, but after his death and the publication of Ronald Steel's still unsurpassed, authorized biography, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century* (1980), interest in Lippmann waned. He is now more often cited than read; and as a result of a series of widely reproduced post-1980 interpretive errors, his work is widely misunderstood (Jansen, 2008; Schudson, 2008). In that sense, critical media scholarship also builds on a well-established, but erroneous, precedent.

There are, however, signs of a renewal of interest in Lippmann—as a generative thinker who pioneered the study of modern media of communication while they were still in their formative stages. Some of this interest is, however, a secondary effect of the critical attention that the public relations industry and Bernays have recently attracted. This strand of the larger Lippmann revival tends to resurrect him in order to defame him. By passively accepting the role Bernays ascribes to Lippmann in the genesis of PR, critics of the public relations industry transfer responsibility for Bernays' views to Lippmann. This, in turn, not only does a grave injustice to Lippmann, it also has the unintended effect of softening their critiques of Bernays.

Bernays' Lippmann was an opportunistic invention designed to promote Bernays' business interests. Bernays (1965) acknowledges as much in his memoirs:

I suggested to Horace Liveright that he publish a book on public relations. I believed it would be a sound public relations move for what we were doing. . . . We discussed possible titles. I wanted the words "public opinion" in the title. Lippmann's book was stimulating general discussion of public opinion. If we had put "public relations" in the title, only a handful of people would have had any idea what it was all about. (p. 291)

Bernays used Lippmann's golden coattails to launch his book; even his title, *Crystallizing Public Opinion*, is lifted directly from Lippmann's work (*Public Opinion*, pp. 19, 140–141). As Lippmann's fame and influence expanded, so did Bernays' claims to his legacy. Well into old age, Bernays would say that Lippmann provided the theory and he provided the practice. He may have convinced himself of this. He certainly convinced Stuart Ewen, author of *PR! A Social History of Spin* (1996); and Ewen's account convinced Larry Tye, author of *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (1998), as well as Adam Curtis, director/producer of the widely influential BBC television documentary, *Century of the Self*. In his book, Ewen provides a fascinating portrait of Bernays based upon an interview with his 98-year-old subject.

Although there had been some earlier critical analyses of the public relations industry, Ewen's provocative book along with Alex Carey's posthumously published *Taking the Risk out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda Versus Freedom and Liberty* (1997) are the key texts in contemporary critical PR studies. My argument is intended as an amendment to that work.

Alex Carey's treatment of Lippmann is incidental, essentially accurate, and benign. Conversely, he excoriates Bernays for "firmly and deceitfully" claiming that the "engineering of consent . . . is the very essence of the democratic process" (Carey, [1997], p. 81). Carey does, however, link pragmatism and PR. Describing William James—one of Lippmann's mentors—and John Dewey as "men of exemplary character

and generous human intent" who, like Marx, could not determine how others would use their theories, Carey nonetheless implicates James' pragmatic theory of truth in the rise of American propaganda and public relations, specifically James' contention that an idea is true if it is "profitable to our lives," if it is "expedient," or if it "works" (Carey, 1997, p. 77). Carey accurately attributes these statements to James, but it is important to remember that James was a man of science, a radical empiricist, who regarded experimental verification, peer review, and the self-critical norms of scientific inquiry as the most reliable arbiters of truth claims.⁴

Nonetheless, Lippmann credited another one of his mentors, George Santayana, a former student of James, with saving him from pragmatism. Although today both Santayana and Lippmann are categorized within the realist wing of the pragmatic tradition, their shared objection to pragmatism was the same as Carey's: its loose renderings of the concept of truth.

Despite Alex Carey's balanced treatment of Lippmann, his book still plays a role in critical PR studies' misrepresentation of Lippmann. Noam Chomsky's foreword to *Taking the Risk out of Democracy*, written six years after the Carey's death, frames Lippmann as an antidemocrat—a charge Chomsky repeats and amplifies elsewhere, even claiming in a moment of rhetorical excess that Lippmann and Dewey represent "a typical Leninist view" (Chomsky, 1997, p. 10). Chomsky coauthored *Manufacturing Consent* with Edward Herman; the title is taken from and accredited to a concept Lippmann popularized, but beyond this, the book does not directly engage with Lippmann's work.

Chomsky's hostility to Lippmann is multifaceted. Among its rationales are: (1) Lippmann's realist, rather than idealist, opposition to the Vietnam War and (2) Chomsky's anarcho-syndicalist animus toward the emergence of an elite class of public intellectuals and technocratic experts after World War II, for which Lippmann and Dewey were early advocates and prototypes.⁵ Chomsky's arguments may have some

⁴ Carey is, however, correct that PR pioneers adopted "expedient" and "profitable" concepts of "truth" that bear no resemblance to truths that meet credible tests of scientific verification. Ewen (1996) quotes Ivy Lee from a 1916 speech to railroad executives in which Lee asks, "What is a fact? The effort to state an absolute fact is simply an attempt to . . . give you my interpretation of the facts" (p. 81). And Bernays repeatedly demonstrated that he regarded truth as liquid.

⁵ In "The Responsibility of Intellectuals" (1967), Chomsky attacks Lippmann's stance on Vietnam, as it was interpreted through the lens of conservative Irving Kristol. In an article in the CIA funded Cold War magazine, *Encounter*, Kristol (1965) criticized Lippmann's opposition to the Vietnam War, but drew a distinction between what he viewed as Lippmann's flawed reasoning and the anti-war stances of university protestors. Kristol charges that "Lippmann, the [*New York Times*], and Senator Fulbright provide an invaluable 'establishmentarian' umbrella for the most vocal and militant critics of American policy—the professors and students involved in the so-called 'teach-ins'" (p. 67). Kristol's hostility to university protests is unambiguous, contending that "within the teach-in movement there are many unreasonable, ideological types—pro-Castro, pro-Viet Cong, pro-Mao, and anti-American" (p. 70). As I read it, Kristol is faulting Lippmann et al for providing legitimacy to university protests. Chomsky's famous essay is a long and nuanced indictment of the complicity of intellectuals in American imperialism: Kristol, not Lippmann, is the direct target of his criticism in the relevant part of the essay. However Chomsky accepts Kristol's

merit; however, his references to Lippmann are polemical, unsupported by sustained argument or evidence. They have, however, been widely influential, and that influence has been greatly amplified by Peter Wintonick and Mark Achbar's video profile of Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*.

Ewen's treatment of Lippmann, which inspired the popular BBC documentary, *The Century of the Self*, is much more specific, fully developed, and well sourced than Chomsky's. Ewen draws on primary sources, Edward Bernays himself, as well as archival research. Nevertheless, Ewen's Lippmann is still Bernays' Lippmann. Bernays effectively set the agenda for Ewen's interpretation of Lippmann, so much so that Ewen devotes an entire chapter, "Unseen Engineering: Biography of an Idea" to Lippmann's purported influence on Bernays, with the implication that Lippmann and Bernays shared a common project, Bernays project: engineering consent of the masses.

Conversely, in the vast scholarship on Lippmann, which includes Steel's 669-page biography, 10 book-length critical studies, and numerous essays and historical studies, I have, to date, found only one reference to Bernays. It appears in Barry D. Riccio's critical study *Walter Lippmann: An Odyssey of a Liberal* (1994, p. xii); and that reference supports the argument I am advancing here. Riccio frames Bernays' rendering of Lippmann as exploitive: a "sophisticated pitch" that is unfaithful to the original. In short, if Lippmann and Bernays shared a common project, Lippmann and three generations of Lippmann scholars were unaware of it.

Ewen (1996) candidly confesses that he had "greatly underestimated" Bernays when he conducted his interview:

I had presupposed that this keenly aware shaper of public perception, this trader in realities, was at the same time open to being candidly cross-examined. Yet, in the days following our meeting, it became clear to me that my entire visit had been orchestrated by a virtuoso. (p. 17)

Ewen, like so many others over Bernays' long career, succumbed. Bernays may have resisted Ewen's cross-examination, but the texts of *Public Opinion* and *Crystallizing Public Opinion* remain open to interrogation.

Biographical Sidebar

Some very tenuous links between Bernays and Lippmann do exist. They both attended the same New York City private school, the Sachs School, at different times. They had a brief formal, largely one-sided, correspondence in 1919. Bernays wrote at least three letters to Lippmann—unsuccessful attempts to recruit Lippmann to Bernays' campaign on behalf of the Lithuanian National Council. Lippmann initially

dichotomy and defends the idealism of university protestors against Kristol's "realpolitik point of view", which by extension includes Lippmann, Fulbright and the *Times* (Chomsky, 1967, p. 8). In my view, Chomsky's critique of Kristol is persuasive; however, Steel (1980) and others regard Lippmann's Vietnam opposition as a return to his youthful progressive idealism.

responded by referring Bernays to two Harvard professors with expertise on the Lithuanian situation, but Bernays persisted. The correspondence ended on August 12, 1919, when Lippmann summarily wrote Bernays, "I have no suggestions to offer, the problem being one with which I am altogether unfamiliar" (Walter Lippmann Papers, Series I, box 4, folder 144). Lippmann also had a correspondence with the other "father of public relations," Ivy Lee. It was more reciprocal than the exchanges with Bernays, and Lee and Lippmann appear to have met or at least exchanged invitations.⁶

It is conceivable that Bernays and Lippmann were present at the same time (1919) at the Hotel de Crillon in Paris, although I have found no evidence of this. Both men attended the Paris Peace negotiations. Bernays was involved for an extended period as a member of the large entourage of George Creel, head of the U.S. Committee on Public Information (CPI), America's wartime propaganda agency. Lippmann was there briefly as an aide to Colonel House, Woodrow Wilson's chief advisor. The Crillon was the headquarters of the U.S. mission, and its bar was a popular gathering place for U.S. reporters and officials.

Bernays was a member of the CPI, and proud of it. Some histories of the CPI also describe Lippmann as a member. The evidence here is murky. As a captain in the army, Lippmann was assigned to the Military Intelligence Branch (MIB), which was created independently of the CPI by the army. Stationed in France, Lippmann wrote propaganda leaflets urging German and Austrian soldiers to surrender; he also interviewed prisoners of war in an attempt to assess the effectiveness of U.S. and allied propaganda. Creel objected to the MIB's independence from his operation, and for a time there was a stalemate with

⁶ Tantalizing though this information may seem, one would expect press agents to try to establish a relationship with a leading editor and editorialist. The Lippmann archive is vast, containing thousands of letters ranging from exchanges with important public figures of the 20th century to students writing term papers or seeking career advice. The Lee-Lippmann correspondence consists of 20 letters: 4 from 1915 and the rest between 1925 and 1927, although there are gaps in the exchange, suggesting there could have been a few more letters. All are formally addressed to "Dear Mr.____," with Lee consistently misspelling Lippmann's name. Like Bernays, Lee initiated the correspondence. Claiming that a friend, James Howard Kehler, said "sometime ago" he was going to "get us together," Lee sent Lippmann a copy of his book on railroads. In the initial 1915 exchange, Lippmann seems interested in meeting Lee. Lee's letters tend to be much longer than Lippmann's, usually addressing a specific issue: criticizing a position taken by Senators Harvey, Johnson, and Borah, affirming Judge Mack's decision condemning the alleged slander of John Foster Dulles, and opposing the Chamber of Commerce's position (presumably on Russia). Lee sends Lippmann copies of correspondence and asks for their return, and sends Lippmann a copy of his book on Russia, noting that he is sending it to Lippmann "as one interested in foreign affairs, *but not as a newspaper editor*" (emphasis in the original). He concludes, "I beg to request that you will not consider it as a public document" (July 1, 1927). Lee may have feared that Lippmann would publish a negative review of the book. After 1915, Lippmann's responses tend to be one or two sentences, pro forma acknowledgments of Lee's letters, with one exception. Lee seems to have had a connection with Coolidge's undersecretary of state, Robert Olds, and urges Lippmann to meet him. On April 18, 1927, Lippmann wrote a two-sentence letter saying he would be glad to meet Olds "if he cares to see me." In sum, Lee's correspondence with Lippmann is only slightly more substantive than the Bernays correspondence.

Lippmann's unit remaining inactive. Historians offer conflicting accounts of how the stalemate was resolved and what lines of authority were established. It is, however, very clear that Lippmann was one of the CPI and Creel's harshest critics, privately to House during the war, and very publicly after (Lippmann, 1919b; Steel 1980).

I have found no evidence that Lippmann ever read or responded to Bernays' interpretation of his work or that the two men knew each other, although that is certainly possible since they both lived and worked in New York City at the same time.

Except for the 1919 exchange of letters, the only available primary evidence that I am aware of consists of the two books and Bernays' own later claims about Lippmann's influence in his memoirs and interviews, including Ewen's interview. To determine how much of what Bernays found in *Public Opinion* consisted of what he expected to see—wished to see or invented—and what is actually there, we must turn to the texts themselves.

Public Opinion

Public Opinion drew upon his training in philosophy and politics at Harvard, under the influence of William James, George Santayana, and Graham Wallas, as well as the social science literature of the day, and more immediately on his wartime experience. It grew out of his profound disillusionment with Woodrow Wilson, whose election and subsequent "war to end war" he had once supported enthusiastically: Lippmann saw Wilson's domestic propaganda campaign, censorship, suppression of civil liberties, and prosecution of dissenters as a betrayal of the ideals of liberal democracy. He spent the immediate postwar years trying to understand the flaws in U.S. democratic theory that made this betrayal possible. He explored this question in articles and books, including *The Political Scene* (1919b) and *Liberty and the News* (1920), and in a long monograph coauthored with Charles Merz, "A Test of the News" (1920), that systematically documented *The New York Times'* distorted coverage of the Russian Revolution. *Public Opinion* (1922) and its sequel, *The Phantom Public* (1925), were the culminating works of this quest.

Summary cannot do justice to the original, highly nuanced argument of *Public Opinion*, a social science classic and a founding work in political philosophy that takes the press seriously. Reduced to bare bones, however, the book examines the structural and cognitive constraints on what citizens in modern democratic societies can know, and it profoundly challenges the classic liberal conception of the "omnicompetent" citizen who can render informed judgments on all public issues. Lippmann maintains that the modern world is so complex, its communication systems are so powerful and deeply flawed, and citizens' time commitments and attention spans are so fragmented by the responsibilities of everyday life that informed public opinion about public affairs, as envisioned by Jefferson, is not possible. The problem is especially acute when citizens are expected to form opinions about distant, "unseen" events. Introducing the concept of stereotyping into the vocabulary of social science, Lippmann claims that conception precedes perception: we tend to see what we expect to see and to ignore contradictory evidence. As a result of these structural and cognitive limits, public opinion, as it is conceived in liberal democratic theory, is a fiction—what he would later call "a phantom." Given the contradiction between the

premises of Jeffersonian democratic theory and 20th-century realities, Lippmann sees "method" as democracy's best hope. Approaching science from a communitarian, Peircean, rather than positivist, perspective, Lippmann conceives of method as a means of controlling and partially countering the effects of stereotyping, propaganda, publicity, and public relations.⁷ In *Liberty and the News* (1920), he proposed creation of "political observatories," which would use scientific methods to generate "disinterested" information about public affairs. Although he leaves the term behind, he develops the idea further in *Public Opinion*. The purpose of these research centers is to enhance what Lippmann calls "the machinery of record" to provide reliable information for governance, business, and journalism.⁸

Except for the last chapters, in which Lippmann tries to identify ways to ameliorate the contradictions in democratic theory that he has identified, *Public Opinion* is descriptive, not prescriptive. He characterizes the book as sociological analysis: an effort to document how things actually work in technologically advanced modern societies, not how he would like them to work. In Lippmann's vocabulary, propaganda, censorship, "manufacture of consent" (whether by government or private interests), and "invisible government" are all critical concepts, describing practices that are antithetical to democratic theory and processes: abridgments of "liberty." Stereotypes are "blind spots," obstacles to critical thinking and reasoned judgment; in Lippmann's view, they should be subjected to Socratic interrogations and whenever possible deconstructed and corrected. "Pseudo-environments" are "fictions," "counterfeit realities" that are inserted between people and their environments, whether as a result of individual eccentricities or psychosis, cultural traditions, or by the conscious intervention and manipulation of demagogues, propagandists, or commercial tricksters. Like stereotypes, they cultivate "pictures in our heads," which do not accurately represent the world outside.

Lippmann accompanies his definitions of these concepts with numerous examples, which unequivocally demonstrate that he regards them as impediments to achieving Enlightenment ideals of reason and democracy. Much of his lifelong work, as a journalist and student of democracy, was dedicated to exposing propaganda, overt and covert censorships, duplicitous attempts to manufacture consent, and invisible governments operating without the consent of the people, as well as to exploding harmful stereotypes and uncovering counterfeit realities.

As Lippmann himself acknowledges, multiple good faith readings of texts are possible, even common, but no literate reader who seriously engages with *Public Opinion* can possibly fail to recognize that Lippmann's intent is critical. Yet Bernays systematically inverts Lippmann's critique into an apology for public relations by selectively and deceptively quoting him in support of positions that Lippmann clearly rejects.

⁷ Lippmann discusses his humanistic conception of science in *Drift and Mastery* (1914) and explicitly embraces Peirce's epistemology in *The Public Philosophy* (1955, p. 133).

⁸ Lippmann was envisioning something akin to modern databases before they existed. See Schudson (2010) for an informative exploration of Lippmann's concept of political observatories and its relevance to the current news crisis.

Crystallizing Public Opinion

Lippmann was consistently critical of the manipulation of public opinion by wartime propaganda and the transfer of propaganda techniques to peacetime endeavors. Conversely, Bernays contends that propaganda has positive social value in creating unified purpose in wartime and agreement on industrial purposes in peacetime. Bernays (1923) regards stereotypes as “a great aid to the public relations counsel in his work” because they can be grasped by “the average mind,” even though, he acknowledges, they are “not necessarily truthful pictures of what they are supposed to portray” (p. 163). No matter, according to Bernays (1923), PR practitioners can use stereotypes to reach a public and then add their own ideas to fortify their position and give it “greater carrying power” (p. 163). PR can also create new stereotypes to advance clients’ interests. He does, however, acknowledge that stereotypes have one disadvantage: demagogues can use them to “take advantage of the public” (p. 165).

Where Lippmann regards the structural flaws in the news system as obstacles to informed public opinion, and seeks ways to improve the quality of news, Bernays sees opportunity for PR to manufacture and manipulate news. He urges PR practitioners to create events, to design and develop counterfeit realities or pseudo-environments to promote clients’ products or services. Later, Bernays (1928b) would also co-opt Lippmann’s uses of the phrases “manufacturing consent” and “invisible government” and change their signs from negative to positive, advocating the “engineering of [public] consent” by PR counselors who engage in the “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses . . . and thereby constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country” (p. 37).⁹ In sum, Lippmann’s and Bernays’ positions are diametrically opposed.

So how does Bernays accomplish his semantic tyranny? Where the first section of *Crystallizing Public Opinion* is overtly promotional, the discursive style of the second section of the book shifts dramatically—perhaps it is the work of Doris Fleischman, a former *New York Times* writer who, according to Anne Bernays, actually did much of the firm’s work (Bernays & Kaplan, 2003). A more scholarly voice emerges, theories are propounded, quotes are marshaled, and authorities are cited, albeit casually. Conventions of scholarly citation were, however, less firmly established in 1923 than they are today, and Bernays’ or Bernays and Fleischman’s primary audiences were not academics but future clients and the reading public at large.

⁹ In *Propaganda* (1928) Bernays reiterated and amplified many of the ideas that he had attributed, often inaccurately, to Lippmann in 1922; however, I only located one direct reference (p. 53) to Lippmann in that book, attributing the term “stereotype” to him. At some points in *Propaganda*, Bernays appears to argue against Lippmann’s critique of PR without naming him. For example, Bernays writes, “There can be no question of his [the PR counsel] ‘contaminating news at its source’” (p. 163). Bernays puts the phrase in quotes, but does not name the author of the claim, presumably Lippmann, although others also shared this view. If *Propaganda* was influenced by *The Phantom Public* (1925), Bernays does not directly acknowledge it.

The primary social theorists cited are Lippmann, William [sic] Trotter, and Everett Dean Martin. While Trotter is frequently cited, Lippmann is definitely the star of the show, referenced on 20 pages, usually in long quotes running a full paragraph or more. Wilfred Trotter was the author of *Instincts of the Herd in War and Peace* (1916) and Martin of *The Behavior of Crowds* (1920). Trotter explores the implications of the "instinct" of gregariousness; Martin uses Le Bon's crowd psychology as his point of departure, but tries to bring more depth and precision to the study of crowd behavior, drawing extensively on Freud and concluding that crowd behavior is based on delusion.

Neither Trotter's nor Martin's views are compatible with Lippmann's. In *Preface to Politics* (1913) Lippmann definitively rejects instinct theory as outdated and discredited. Although Lippmann was an early enthusiast of Freud, he specifically states in the opening chapter of *Public Opinion* that the psychoanalytic approach is inappropriate to the study of public opinion because it assumes that the environment is knowable and that the problem is individual maladjustment. For Lippmann, however, the datum of public opinion research consists only of *opinions*, based upon impressions or constructions of the external world, which do not necessarily have known correlates in the material world. Moreover, Lippmann (1922, p. 127) dispatches Le Bon to the hoary realm of prophets who explain human behavior by invoking an "oversoul," collective mind, or other mystical abstractions. Clearly a coherent synthesis cannot be constructed by integrating the theories of this trio.

More telling, however, is the way Lippmann is used and frequently misused to support Bernays' argument, which is often taken out of context and sometimes quoted in support of a position he overtly rejects. In one instance, Bernays even invents a quote. Below I identify, enumerate, and analyze *all* of Bernays' uses of Lippmann, even those that represent the original accurately. I believe this methodical, though inelegant, approach is crucial to definitively establishing Bernays' systematic misrepresentation of Lippmann views, which deceptively perverts critique into advocacy.

Comparing the Texts

The pages cited are from the 2011 reissue of *Crystallizing Public Opinion* with an introduction by Stuart Ewen. Where Bernays provides quotations or his references to Lippmann can be located in *Public Opinion*, those pages are also identified using a recent edition of *Public Opinion* (1997). Interested readers can then independently compare the texts and judge for themselves; more casual readers, seeking only the most dramatic evidence, can skip directly to items 2, 8, and 13; however, they should be aware that none of Bernays' uses of Lippmann, with the exception of item 6, are unproblematic.

1. Bernays (pp. 68–69), Lippmann (p. 158): Bernays' first citation, a quotation ascribed to Lippmann and *Public Opinion*, is invented: Bernays claims that Lippmann declares the "significant revolution of modern times is not industrial or economic or political, but the revolution which is taking place in the art of creating consent among the governed." What Lippmann actually writes is: "A revolution is taking place, infinitely more significant than any shifting economic power." Bernays follows this invention with a much longer Lippmann quotation, which is largely intact except that he eliminates some words without marking the deletion with ellipses and makes a small change in punctuation. There is

nothing malign in the invented quote except perhaps attributing clumsy prose to a careful stylist, but it is symptomatic of the license Bernays takes throughout his book.

2. Bernays (p. 81), Lippmann (pp. 217–218): Bernays' next use of Lippmann, also a quotation, is profoundly deceptive. He frames Lippmann as an advocate of public relations. Bernays sets up the quote with two claims, which he (Bernays) contends, "taken together, have resulted inevitably in the public relations counsel": (1) in a complex environment, "only small, disconnected portions are available to different persons" (a claim consistent with Lippmann's position) and (2) "the great and increasing importance either of making one's case accessible to the public mind or determining whether that case will impinge favorably or unfavorably upon the public mind." Bernays follows this with,

Mr. Lippmann finds in these facts the underlying reason for the existence of what he calls the "press agent: The enormous discretion," he [Lippmann] says, "as to what facts and what impressions shall be reported is steadily convincing every organized group of people that, whether it wishes to secure publicity or avoid it, the exercise of discretion cannot be left to the reporter. It is safer to hire a press agent who stands between the group and the newspapers.

Bernays adds a footnote to this quote: "Mr. Lippmann goes on to say that 'having hired him, the temptation to exploit his strategic position is very great.'" Bernays concludes the note, "As to that aspect of the situation, see later chapters."

Lippmann's actual preamble to this statement is very different from Bernays'. Lippmann is discussing flaws in the news system, pointing out that great precision in reporting exists where there is a good institutional "machinery of record," births, deaths, marriages, bank clearances, realty transactions, imports and exports that pass through customs, and so on. Conversely, he contends that reporting is quite unreliable when journalists try to describe subjective states of mind, descriptions of personality, motives, questions related to private income and profit, and other areas where "no objective system of measurement" has yet been invented. Consequently, reportage on such subjects is always contestable. "This," Lippmann writes, "is the underlying reason for the existence of the press agent." He follows this sentence with the quotation that Bernays accurately transcribes. It is, however, very clear that Lippmann's intention here is not to support Bernays' advocacy for PR. This is not a major lapse in intellectual integrity, but what follows most certainly is: Bernays ignores the rest of Lippmann's discussion of press agents, which consists of a blistering attack on the contamination of news by PR. Due to the ascent of press agents, Lippmann charges,

Direct channels to news have been closed and the information for the public is first filtered through publicity agents. . . . But it follows that the picture the publicity man makes for the reporter is the one he wants the public to see. *He is censor and propagandist, responsible only to his employers, and to the whole truth responsible only as it accords with the employers' conception of his own interest.* (emphasis added)

From *Liberty and the News* (1920) through to the end of his long career, Lippmann embraced and fought for the ideal of “disinterested” news: news free of special interests whether of a political, economic, religious, class, or other nature.

3. Bernays (p. 95), no direct parallel in Lippmann: In this citation, Bernays conflates the views of Martin, Lippmann, and Upton Sinclair on the power of the press. In *Public Opinion*, however, Lippmann is actually highly critical of Sinclair’s theory of the press. Bernays may make a valid point that collectively these men overestimate the influence of the press, although Bernays’ inflated rhetoric overstates the case by attributing to them the “theory of the regimentation of the public mind by the daily press.” To the contrary, Lippmann recognizes that readers filter what they read through their own preconceptions (stereotypes), and that, in a heterogeneous society, this precludes regimentation. Indeed, for Lippmann, it precludes the formation of coherent public opinion. This is, in fact, the thesis of *Public Opinion*.

4. Bernays (pp. 97–98), Lippmann (p. 221): Once more Bernays decontextualizes a quotation from Lippmann and mobilizes it to support a position Lippmann would lament. Because public opinion is malleable and the news system flawed, Bernays maintains that the public relations counsel should use news channels to advance the interests of their clients.

5. Bernays (pp. 114–115), Lippmann (p. 91): Bernays accurately uses a long quote from Lippmann, describing the nature of stereotypes, to open Chapter 5. Lippmann treats stereotypes as blind spots that are obstacles to reason; however, Bernays regards them as useful tools: “The stereotype,” Bernays writes, “is the basis for a large part of the work of the public relations counsel.”

6. Bernays (p. 121), Lippmann (p. 55): Bernays accurately quotes Lippmann’s discussion of social perception.

7. Bernays (p. 128), Lippmann (p. 223): Bernays observes that in attempting to change public opinion, PR people work against a “background which they cannot entirely control.” Lippmann is recruited to affirm this claim; however, Lippmann is actually making a more complex point about how readers locate familiar footholds in newspaper stories through personal identification. He is not offering a recipe for changing public opinion, although that seems to be the message Bernays takes from Lippmann’s text.

8. Bernays (p. 133), Lippmann (p. 218): At the end of Chapter 7, “The Group and Herd,” Bernays takes off his mask and cuts to the heart of the matter, and candidly acknowledges an *essential disagreement* with Lippmann:

Mr. Lippmann says propaganda is dependent upon censorship. From my point of view the precise reverse is more nearly true. Propaganda is a purposeful, directed effort to overcome censorship—the censorship of the group mind and the herd reaction.

The average citizen is the world’s most efficient censor. His own mind is the greatest barrier between him and the facts. His own “logical proof compartments,” his own

absolutism are the obstacles which prevent him from seeing in terms of experience and thought rather than in terms of group reaction.

Unless readers of *Crystallizing Public Opinion* are independently familiar with Lippmann's charge that the press agent is a censor and propagandist (item 2 above), which Bernays has not shared, the meaning and significance of Bernays' disagreement with Lippmann is likely to remain unclear. For our purposes, it is, however, telling, because it demonstrates that Bernays is familiar with and actually does understand Lippmann's critique of PR, but consciously chooses to excise it.

9. Bernays (p. 137), no direct parallel in Lippmann: Bernays may be referring to Lippmann's discussion of 18th-century America in Chapter 18. Bernays says that in early America, one man "was able single-handed to crystallize the common will of his country in his day and generation." Lippmann suggests that in the insular, homogeneous small towns or rural villages of early America, democratic deliberation, as envisioned by the founders, was closer to reality than what is possible in modern, heterogeneous, technologically advanced societies. If this is Bernays' referent, he reframes and exaggerates Lippmann's claim, because Lippmann maintained that even in Jefferson's time, the ideal of democratic deliberation that the great Enlightenment thinker extolled was already out of date.

10. Bernays (pp. 139–146), Lippmann (p. 184): Bernays paraphrases Lippmann on methods of achieving what Bernays calls "common consciousness" (p. 140), claiming this is best done using existing channels of communication, because people "like to hear new things in accustomed ways" (p. 146). While Lippmann would take exception to the term "common consciousness," he might agree with the rest of Bernays' paraphrase. But Bernays' and Lippmann's contexts bear no resemblance. Lippmann is not discussing PR; Bernays cites the last page of a chapter in Lippmann's book that actually examines the origins and development of the U.S. Constitution, federalism, the separation of powers, and Congress. It is not about PR, a 20th-century corporate innovation.

11. Bernays (pp. 159–160), Lippmann (Chapter 11, esp. pp. 104–109): Bernays quotes Lippmann on "pugnacity" and implies that Lippmann is suggesting that forcing people to take sides in a controversy is an effective PR strategy. Actually Lippmann is describing how narratives (cinematic and journalistic) create interest by arousing emotions and identification using sex and violence. His point is that ideologues—what he refers to as "skilful propagandists" (p. 109)—use threats and fear of imminent danger along with visions of an idealized peaceful future to rally support for their causes. Here Lippmann is critiquing, not advocating, mass manipulation by ideologues.

12. Bernays (pp. 170–171), Lippmann (pp. 103–104): Bernays describes the PR counsel's "duty to create news for whatever medium he chooses to transmit ideas." To do this, he says PR must "lift startling facts from the whole subject and present them as news." He uses the headline, "a compact, vivid simplification of complicated issues," and the cartoon, "a visual image which takes the place of abstract thought," as examples. He then quotes Lippmann's description of how human qualities are represented by physical metaphors: England becomes jolly John Bull, migrations of people meandering streams or floods, courage becomes a rock, purpose a road, doubt a fork in the road, and so on. Lippmann sees such reductive, anthropomorphic metaphors as the "deepest of all stereotypes," which create human interest

but impede accurate representation of the external world, while Bernays sees them as fertile fodder for semantic tyranny.

Lippmann recognized and underscored the flaws in news production, its vulnerability to stereotyping and sensationalism. He never endorsed these practices. He saw them as problems to be addressed by news reform. Lippmann sought to complicate thinking about public affairs, not to simplify, caricature, or stereotype it; he even claimed that a little boredom in presentational styles could improve the accuracy of news reports.

13. Finally, Bernays (pp. 185–188), Lippmann (pp. 217–218): Bernays repeats the claim developed earlier in his book, which creates the impression that Lippmann is an advocate of public relations rather than a vociferous critic of it. Where there is “no machinery of record,” which for Lippmann means no verifiable facts, Bernays contends, “the public relations counsel plays a considerable part” by filling the void with information that advances a client’s position. Bernays continues, “Mr. Lippmann has observed that it is for this reason that what he calls the ‘press agent’ has become an important factor in modern life.” Bernays then repeats the long quote in item 2 above, and once again ignores the critical paragraphs that follow, where Lippmann calls press agents censors and propagandists who distort news at its source.

Bernays contends that, unlike the reporter, the PR counsel “is not merely the purveyor of news; he is more logically the *creator* of news” (p. 188, emphasis in original)). He continues, “The counsel on public relations not only knows what news value is, but knowing it, he is in the position to *make news happen*. He is a creator of events” (p. 189, emphasis in original).

Given the way Bernays uses Lippmann to frame his claims, a reader who has not read *Public Opinion* would quite reasonably assume that Lippmann endorses Bernays’ views, even though Lippmann directly and unambiguously denounces the practices that Bernays advocates.

Conclusion

Some of these lapses may be attributed to the fact that Bernays, despite his intellectual pretensions, was not a scholar, and therefore did not feel bound by or was unfamiliar with logics and conventions of social science discourse. Others are clearly intended to deceive readers about Lippmann’s positions to capitalize on *Public Opinion*’s success and add intellectual authority to Bernays’ argument for propagandizing the U.S. public.

Lippmann was not the only early critic of public relations, but he may have been the most visible one. As the author of serious books, editor of an influential magazine, advisor to presidents, and a prominent public intellectual, he was a force to be reckoned with. Clinging to Lippmann’s coattails, instead of honestly engaging and responding to his critique, was certainly expedient. But Bernays was no disciple of Lippmann. *Crystallizing Public Opinion* loots and vandalizes *Public Opinion*.

Bernays' misrepresentation of Lippmann is semantic tyranny: a form of communication that censors critical thought at the source. In explaining this technique in a television interview, Bernays proudly cited the name he gave to the worldwide pseudo-event he created in 1929 for his client, General Electric, to honor the 50th anniversary of Thomas Edison's invention of electric light, and to increase GE's sales: "Light's Golden Jubilee." Composed only of terms with positive associations, Bernays explained that his semantic tyranny disarmed potential critics. In effect, this is what Bernays does to *Public Opinion*. Claiming his book is a friendly reading of *Public Opinion*, Bernays bathes in the reflected glow of Lippmann's achievements while neutering and censoring Lippmann's criticism of public relations.

It is understandable why some early readers of *Crystallizing Public Opinion* easily succumbed to Bernays' "higher hokum." It is more puzzling why contemporary critical public relations scholars have not interrogated the deceptive rendering of Lippmann by the "father of spin" (Tye, 1998, title page). When they do, they will discover that young Lippmann was actually a prescient ally in their cause, not the evil genius they have constructed from Bernays' semantic tyranny.

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