

NETWORKS OR NEWSPAPERS; DEWEY OR LIPPMANN?

I'm grateful for Eric Alterman's long meditation on the future of newspapers, if only because he correctly balances a discussion of Walter Lippmann—who has rather bizarrely been adopted as the patron saint of American journalism—with John Dewey—who would in that formulation be the patron saint of blogging.

Lippmann likened the average American—or “outsider,” as he tellingly named him—to a “deaf spectator in the back row” at a sporting event: “He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen,” and “he lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct.” In a description that may strike a familiar chord with anyone who watches cable news or listens to talk radio today, Lippmann assumed a public that “is slow to be aroused and quickly diverted . . . and is interested only when events have been melodramatized as a conflict.” A committed elitist, Lippmann did not see why anyone should find these conclusions shocking. Average citizens are hardly expected to master particle physics or post-structuralism. Why should we expect them to understand the politics of Congress, much less that of the Middle East?

Lippmann's preferred solution was, in essence, to junk democracy entirely. He justified this by arguing that the results were what mattered. Even “if there were a prospect” that people could become sufficiently well-informed to govern themselves wisely, he wrote, “it is extremely doubtful whether many of us would wish to be bothered.” In his first

attempt to consider the issue, in "Liberty and the News" (1920), Lippmann suggested addressing the problem by raising the status of journalism to that of more respected professions. Two years later, in "Public Opinion," he concluded that journalism could never solve the problem merely by "acting upon everybody for thirty minutes in twenty-four hours." Instead, in one of the oddest formulations of his long career, Lippmann proposed the creation of "intelligence bureaus," which would be given access to all the information they needed to judge the government's actions without concerning themselves much with democratic preferences or public debate. Just what, if any, role the public would play in this process Lippmann never explained.

John Dewey termed "Public Opinion" "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned," and he spent much of the next five years countering it. The result, published in 1927, was an extremely tendentious, dense, yet important book, titled "The Public and Its Problems." Dewey did not dispute Lippmann's contention regarding journalism's flaws or the public's vulnerability to manipulation. But Dewey thought that Lippmann's cure was worse than the disease. While Lippmann viewed public opinion as little more than the sum of the views of each individual, much like a poll, Dewey saw it more like a focus group. The foundation of democracy to Dewey was less information than conversation. Members of a democratic society needed to cultivate what the journalism scholar James W. Carey, in describing the debate, called "certain vital habits" of democracy—the ability to discuss, deliberate on, and debate various perspectives in a manner that

would move it toward consensus.

Dewey also criticized Lippmann's trust in knowledge-based élites. "A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge," he argued. "The man who wears the shoe knows best that it pinches and where it pinches, even if the expert shoemaker is the best judge of how the trouble is to be remedied."

Recent celebrations of Lippmann's appeal to objectivity have ignored the need and tradition of a dialectic between Lippmann's institutionalized public and Dewey's conversation, not to mention ignoring Lippmann's profoundly undemocratic later stances. Alterman's description here provides a valuable historic lesson on these two seminal thinkers.

But I came away with the sense that Alterman doesn't quite get how that dialectic between Lippmann and Dewey works. That's partly because while Alterman admits that a more partisan press leads to a more engaged citizenry...

The transformation of newspapers from enterprises devoted to objective reporting to a cluster of communities, each engaged in its own kind of "news"—and each with its own set of "truths" upon which to base debate and discussion—will mean the loss of a single national narrative and agreed-upon set of "facts" by which to conduct our politics. News will become increasingly "red" or "blue." This is not utterly new. Before Adolph Ochs took over the *Times*, in 1896, and issued his famous "without fear or favor" declaration, the American scene was dominated by brazenly partisan newspapers. And the news cultures of many European nations long ago embraced the notion of competing narratives for

different political communities, with individual newspapers reflecting the views of each faction. It may not be entirely coincidental that these nations enjoy a level of political engagement that dwarfs that of the United States.

...He simply doesn't consider the tremendous importance of such a development. I've had great journalists dismiss the notion that if journalism doesn't result in an engaged citizenry, it has failed in an important respect. While Alterman doesn't go that far, his silence on the importance of heightened political engagement is telling.

Alterman also betrays an insufficient understanding of a Deweyan conversation when he labels the mono-vocal rants of an O'Reilly or a Limbaugh as the first blossoming of Dewey's conversations.

The rise of what has come to be known as the conservative "counter-establishment" and, later, of media phenomena such as Rush Limbaugh, on talk radio, and Bill O'Reilly, on cable television, can be viewed in terms of a Deweyan community attempting to seize the reins of democratic authority and information from a Lippmann-like elite.

Limbaugh may welcome callers to his show, but he'll cut the mike of anyone who dares disagree with him—or even deviate from Limbaugh's chosen narrative. And to suggest the corporate funded conservative media—complete with its designated elites at the Weekly Standard and well-funded think tanks—does not follow Lippmann's model of manufacturing and managing public opinion rather than conversing with it ignores the entire structure and history of the conservative media.

But the point where I got really exasperated with Alterman's depiction of the blogosphere

came when he claimed there was no match for Dana Priest in the blogosphere.

It is hard to name any bloggers who can match the professional expertise, and the reporting, of, for example, the *Post*'s Barton Gellman and Dana Priest, or the *Times*' Dexter Filkins and Alissa Rubin.

Don't get me wrong—I think Dana Priest is by far one of the best reporters out there; she contributes both deep expertise and a real ethic of journalism to produce important work.

[Incidentally, Dexter Filkins? Couldn't Alterman come up with a better example of a superlative NYT journalist?] But it just so happens I've been struggling to get a grasp on the Basra offensive since I've come back from vacation, and so turned immediately to Colonel Pat Lang to read what he had to say. And though Lang usually engages in the kind of "parasitic" blogging Alterman describes (riffing on press accounts rather than doing original journalism), and though Lang's acerbic commentary lacks all of Priest's balance and moderation, I'd pit Lang's expertise—knowledge of the military and intelligence—against Priest's any day. Oh—and he reads Arabic, which is a pretty big plus. And Lang is just one of the many experts who inhabit the blogosphere, participating firsthand in a conversation with citizens, explaining to those wearing the ill-fitting shoes why their feet hurt.

Similarly, Alterman mourns traditional reporting on the effect of violence on Kenya's middle class, but fails to note that some of the best reporting from crisis areas—most recently, Myanmar and Tibet—has come from ordinary people posting to blogs.

Obviously, what Dana Priest does is very different from what Pat Lang does. But in the absence of voices like Lang's engaging in unmediated conversation with real citizens, in a world where David Broder is seriously labeled as

the Dean of anything worthwhile (as Alterman does), our country has gone badly and dangerously wrong. It makes no sense to mourn the financial demise of dead tree newspapers without recognizing that, without an engaged citizenry, Dana Priest's best reporting might drop silently from the nation's consciousness.

We need both a viable press and an engaged citizenry. And for all the woes of the newspaper business, I think our citizenry remains the more fragile institution.