
Rethinking Walter Lippmann's legacy in the history of public relations

César García, Central Washington University

Abstract

This paper argues that Walter Lippmann's contribution to the field of public relations has tended to be overlooked because, unlike often-cited figures such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, he did not implement public relations campaigns. However, an analysis of Lippmann's political theory reveals that his view of society emphasised the importance of communication management by government. Indeed, Lippmann provided a rationale that shaped the development of public relations practice in the life of organisations as a hegemonic practice to control publics. Moreover, this public relations perspective transferred to the broader communication field as Lippmann's paradigm for the study of communication was adopted. This paper looks at how Lippmann's political ideas framed and guided the development of the public relations profession and its influence beyond its own field.¹

Introduction

Walter Lippmann can arguably be considered one of the most important figures of American history in the 20th century. The influence of his ideas spanned numerous aspects of American public opinion. As a journalist, he exerted unprecedented influence through his *New York Herald Tribune* newspaper column *Today and Tomorrow*, nationally syndicated for 36 years. His biographer, Ronald Steel (1980), pointed out that despite some frequent disagreements, "readers turned to Lippmann, not for solutions, but for dispassionate analysis" (p.

XIV) on the issues of the day. Lippman won two Pulitzer prizes for his writing.

As a political philosopher, he actively participated in shaping the events that he wrote about in his columns. He counselled numerous presidents of the United States of America on major issues, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, John F. Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, who presented him in 1964 with the Congressional Medal of Freedom. Lippmann worked closely with President Wilson drafting the Fourteen Points Peace Program after World War I.

Regarding the history of communication, Lippmann appears as the author who for first time in a media era diagnosed the failures of democracy. He wrote about "the absence of the omnicompetent citizen and the inability of the news media to help citizens achieve minimal competence" (Herbst, 1999, p. 88). Famously, in his 1922 book *Public opinion*, Lippmann coined the term 'stereotype' to refer to the preconceptions, based on unexamined and *a priori* opinions, on which people base their judgments.

Being born on the threshold of the mass society, Lippmann soon developed a strong critique of the negative effects of democracy on culture, particularly in the United States. Contrary to popular belief, which tends to posit World War I as the moment of Lippmann's disillusionment with democracy, this disinclination was already present during his youth. As early as 1911, during his socialist period, Lippmann encouraged liberals to accept "once and for all the limitations of democracy" (Steel, 1980, p. 214). A product of his time, Lippmann was mentored by a philosopher critical of democracy, George Santayana at Harvard, and was influenced by other sceptics such as disappointed Fabian socialists like political thinker Graham Wallas and writer H. G. Wells. Those men can be categorised as

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belonging to the most pessimistic sector of the Tocquevillian tradition in their acknowledgement of the challenges modern man faced to maintain a rich spiritual life while living in democracy. In an era of mass power, Lippmann proclaimed the hierarchy of the intellect, the spirit and the aristocracy of the most talented people, values that earned him a certain reputation for snobbishness.

Beyond his intellectual merits, his dimension as a public figure has also given place to a high level of criticism within the field of communication. Some authors have emphasised Lippmann's inherently conservative, elitist personality and his use of a veneer of objectivity in his analyses while acting as an interested propagandist for the social elite to which he aspired to belong (Alterman, 1999; Soderlund, 2005). Other authors have considered Lippmann's democratic ideals as "cynical and utilitarian outlooks" (Ewen, 1996, p. 146). They emphasise how his apparent detachment as a social scientist or political analyst "conferred legitimacy to social scientists between the war by framing endeavours as objective, while rendering their actual political commitments invisible" (Soderlund, 2005, p. 325). Or in other words, Lippmann's pretended objectivity would have served the interests of a political elite to legitimise structures of power.

Hitherto, the public relations field has paid relatively scarce attention to Lippmann. The limited space dedicated to him in public relations history books and textbooks tends to reduce Lippmann to an intellectual forerunner of the ideas that Edward Bernays put into practice. In this article, I investigate how Lippmann's political and communication thinking has affected the theories and ethos of public relations. I argue that Lippmann's communication discourse has been relevant, if not essential, to the positioning of public relations as a hegemonic practice in organisations, as well as to the transfer of its paradigm to communication research. First, I review Lippmann's current standing in the history of public relations. Next, I analyse the roots of Lippmann's thinking on

communication, and how his view of society expressed in his early political books, such as *A preface to politics* (1913) and *Drift and mastery* (1914), informed his approach. I also describe his work as a propagandist for the American government during World War I. Third, I review his discourse on public opinion exposed in seminal works such as *Public opinion* (1922) and *The phantom public* (1925), and how he legitimised the use of deliberate and organised communication efforts by the government. Fourth, I discuss how his top-led ideal society, a sort of enlightened despotism, legitimated the use of communication management to privilege the organisation's perspectives within society. Through this analysis, I offer one example of how political ideas may have framed and guided the history of public relations.

Lippmann in public relations books

In most cases, Lippmann's presence in public relations history tends to be token in comparison with the extensive discussions in other fields such as journalism or communication theory. In his classic and voluminous history of public relations, Scott Cutlip mentions Lippmann's contributions to the field only twice. First, he refers to Lippmann's vindication of "the need for intermediaries in a complex society" (1994, p. 107). Second, he talks about Lippmann's *Public opinion* as the book "that applied what was known of the public opinion process to public relations" (1994, p. 635).

References to Lippmann in public relations textbooks are even scarcer. In some cases, they acknowledge the role of the book *Public opinion* in generating awareness about the needed role of public relations techniques to change public attitudes (Cameron, Wilcox, Reber, & Shin, 2008, p. 70), and to change the stereotypes created by the media in the form of slogans (Newsom, Turk, & Kruckeberg, 2010, p. 33). In other cases, Lippmann is named as a member of the Creel Committee on Public Information (CPI), an independent agency of the United States government created to influence American public opinion regarding the country's participation in World War I, and whose ideas on persuasion strongly influenced

Bernays (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, & Toth, 2009, p. 27).

Interestingly, in the books that focus on public relations history from a critical approach – basically identifying public relations with propaganda – the figure of Lippmann receives much more attention. Lippmann is defined as a political scientist who supported the extensive use of mass media to manipulate public opinion in order to manage perceptions, or in other words, as an enemy of democracy. This is, for example, what Ewen suggests in *PR! A social history of spin* (1996):

Lippmann's most practical contribution to public relations thinking was his systematic approach to how media might be understood and exploited. It was not enough, for example, to see the press as the shaper of public opinion. Modern leadership required specialists who would formulate how the press itself would cover a given issue. (p. 151.)

In his biography of Bernays, Tye (2002) portrays Lippmann as a sort of Machiavellian figure, basically in the same group as Gustave Le Bon and Gabriel Tarde, and whose main concern was how to control the masses through the shrewd utilisation of symbols – words and images – by public relations experts: “Public relations men were just the ones to tame and mold the mass mind and make sense of a world where technology seemed out of control and the old order seemed to be crumbling” (p. 232). Similar approaches can be found in more recent books that emphasise Lippmann as a shaper of reality (Morris & Goldsworthy, 2008, p. 171).

These typical portrayals probably explain the relative oblivion of Lippmann in the history of public relations. But there is one main factor that should be taken into consideration. Public relations historians tend to acknowledge only the contribution of those professionals who implemented public relations campaigns (Bernays, Lee, Page, etc.) or created big public relations firms (Golin, Burson-Marsteller, Edelman, etc.). Lippmann

was, unlike Lee or Bernays, an academic who worried about the big theories but despised the practical problems that affected public relations campaigns. With the exception of his participation in the Creel Committee and the Inter-Allied Propaganda Board during World War I, Lippmann was never involved in organised propaganda or public relations efforts, although he certainly played a prominent role as an agenda-setter in his column *Today and Tomorrow*. However, his ideas on public opinion shaped the self-perception of public relations practitioners about their legitimate role in society and projected a public relations paradigm onto the entire communication research field.

Lippmann's view of society, and experiences as public relations consultant

Lippmann's instrumental view of communication obeys a holistic view of society. Thus, it is useful to analyse the bases of his political thinking as well as some biographical circumstances that inform his view of communication and public opinion.

Right after his Harvard graduation, at the age of 24, Lippmann published his first book, *A preface to politics* (1913). In this book, the socialist ideals cultivated in his youth are contradicted by reality. Lippmann's ideas were fully couched in the tyranny of the majority intellectual tradition, following a path already forged by authors such as de Tocqueville (1835), Mill (1859), Le Bon (1897), and Tarde (1901), who had denounced the irruption of the masses in public life. Lippmann tried to reconcile the objection to reinforcing the public opinion power to reach a full democracy with maintaining the leadership of the most capable individuals. He believed that leading politicians should provide meaning to the masses' desires because, although in most cases those wants were meaningless, they were also real.

To-day, it is as if a hungry man asked for an indigestible food, and we let him go hungry because he was unwise. So with agitations. Their specific plans may be silly, but their demands are real. (Lippmann, 2005, p. 70.)

A preface to politics sketched “a therapeutic mode of communication” (Soderlund, 2005, p. 316) based on the diagnosis of a public moved by emotions that needed to be brought to order and tamed by a rational statesman. These were very similar conclusions to the ones reached by Bernays 15 years later when he used Trotter’s and Le Bon’s ideas that the group mind “in place of thoughts it has impulses, habits and emotions” (Bernays, 1928, p. 50) and when he wrote that the successful propagandist must understand people’s “true motives” (p. 52) to control modern society. The main difference is that Lippmann was mainly concerned about the state, while Bernays had in mind the interest of corporations.

In many ways, Lippmann’s *Drift and Mastery* (1914) was a continuation of the sceptical thinking about democracy expressed in his *A preface to politics* (1913). In the existence of a civilised, rational, and scientific government, Lippmann newly found a way to face social and economic changes brought about by mass society. In this book, Lippmann outlined some pioneering thinking on the irrational nature of the consumer, easily manipulated by the force of advertising: “he is told what he wants, and then he wants it” (p. 66). He predicted the shift from a society of citizens to a society of consumers: “We are finding, I think, that the real power emerging to-day in democratic politics is just the mass of people who are crying out against the ‘high cost of living.’ That is a consumer’s cry” (p. 71). These ideas were echoed in Bernays’ works such as *Crystallizing public opinion* (1923) and *Propaganda* (1928), where he described a society transformed from active citizens into passive consumers by the force of public relations strategies.

Subsequently, Lippmann worked as an associate editor from 1914 to 1916 at the *New Republic*, a then-young magazine addressed to well educated elites. This job gave Lippmann the opportunity to experience first-hand how he could influence the political establishment and set the war agenda. He even had the opportunity to meet President

Woodrow Wilson in person for a one-on-one interview and maintain a regular contact with Colonel House, Wilson’s main advisor. Lippmann expressed his ideas about the war to Colonel House in a blueprint about how to publicise the war effort. His document included ways to set the political agenda and the importance of an effective monitoring of media and public opinion to anticipate perception crises. Among other actions, Lippmann suggested giving “specific attention to the importance of industrial warfare, to policy articles supporting the government, and to a surveillance of the foreign press, allied, neutral, and enemy. It should also keep a close watch over public opinion, and be vigilant to track down rumours and lies” (Lippmann, 1917; as cited in Luskin, 1972, p. 36.).

Soon Lippmann’s blueprint would become the Committee on Public Information (CPI). His career as a propagandist started with his participation in this committee created by President Wilson in 1917 to influence American public opinion regarding the US intervention in World War I. During this period, Lippmann developed a variety of novel and ingenious intelligence actions, such as monitoring the foreign press and tracking down information that could undermine American morals (Steel, 1980, p. 129). In 1918 Lippmann was appointed American representative to the Inter-Allied Propaganda Board in London to persuade the German people to stop the war. The main contribution of the new board was that the US decided to spread its own voice across Europe, rather than relying on its allies to do so (Steel, 1980, p. 141). “We should avoid all the tricky and sinister aspects of what is usually called propaganda, and should aim to create the impression that here is something new and infinitely hopeful in the affairs of mankind” (Steel, 1980, p. 143), Lippmann wrote enthusiastically to the Secretary of War, Newton Baker, expressing his desire to move American diplomacy away from crude propaganda efforts.

Unfortunately for Lippmann, numerous bureaucratic problems with other departments meant he only lasted six months in that position, but during that period he expressed

with clarity ideas that established the bases of public relations efforts by the American government overseas. For example, Lippmann referred to a need to locate the creation of “a real centre of political information in Europe to coordinate American propaganda” (Steel, 1980, p. 145). Until then, most propaganda efforts were conducted from Washington D. C., without the personal contact appreciated more by Europeans than Americans, and relying frequently on the propaganda efforts of the British and French armies.

His experience in the CPI and the Inter-Allied Propaganda Board gave Lippmann the opportunity to put into practice many theoretical aspects expressed in a *A preface to politics* (1913) such as the use of persuasion techniques to convince the population to adopt certain common interest politics, ideas later conceptualised in *Public opinion* (1922).

Lippmann also conducted in 1920 one of the first and most thorough analyses of foreign press media coverage. He can be considered, along with Charles Merz, as a father of one of the earliest and most comprehensive studies of foreign news, forerunning many of the modern techniques of media content analysis still in use. In their media coverage study, ‘A Test of the News. An examination of the news reports in the New York Times on aspects of the Russian Revolution of special importance to Americans. March 1917–March 1920’ (Lippmann & Merz, p. 1920); they predicated theoretical and methodological issues of international communication research arising in the 1950s as well as the application of qualitative research design methods.

As suggested by Hardt (2002), the innovations were numerous, including the study’s main purpose: the follow-up of newspaper coverage for a considerable period of time. Lippmann and Merz set up the pattern for the way in which much media content analysis is still done today in domestic and international public relations programmes. They organised the information by space, time, and segments of particular events, providing a sense of unity through a

coherent, single description. Their critical analysis addressed problems of objectivity and accuracy. They also provided quantitative criteria, such as the distinction between optimistic and pessimistic coverage. Their conclusion, also later theorised in *Public opinion* (1922), acknowledged the limitations of foreign reporting and the ethnocentric nature of American news.

Although Lippmann always considered himself a journalist during most of his life, his experience as a propagandist and/or public relations consultant (since there are reasons to argue for both) for the American government left a footprint in his conception of the communicative process. In each of his following books, *Liberty and the news* (1920), *Public opinion* (1922), and *The phantom public* (1925), Lippmann provided a rationale that legitimised the perspectives and actions of the government in society, ideas that would later be used by the public relations practice to assert its role in organisations.

Lippmann’s legitimisation of communication management

Lippmann’s ideas have also affected the way that communication scholars – particularly media scholars – interpret the media as institutions in modern democracies. In *Liberty and the news*, Lippmann dismantled for the first time the democratic myth that the media would enable citizenship to judge public affairs by providing the truth. He wrote:

The most destructive form of untruth is sophistry and propaganda by those whose profession it is to report the news. The columns are common carriers. When those who control them arrogate to themselves the right to determine by their consciences what shall be reported and for what purpose, democracy is unworkable. (2009 [1920], pp. 10-11.)

Undoubtedly, his opinions about the press could have stemmed from a sentiment of frustration while working for the CPI with the work of some reporters who did not buy the government line during war. That is something that public relations professionals have

experienced since the beginning of the profession. Nevertheless, Lippmann's criticism had deeper roots and still sounds surprisingly familiar in the digital era. Lippmann decried the role of the press to educate and inform the masses based on several factors: its lack of access to reality; the existence of political and/or military censorship (then in European countries); the high economic cost of doing journalism; the lack of knowledge of journalists; and, last but not least, the ideological and sociocultural biases of editors (2009 [1920], pp. 42-53).

Lippmann believed that a misinformed press and propaganda experts were responsible for manipulating American public opinion. He expressed his disappointment with respect to the social role of the press, whose superficiality would only serve to set the public agenda but in no way act as a public opinion guide.

News and truth are not the same thing, and must be clearly distinguished. The function of news is to signalise an event, the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act. (Lippmann, 1997 [1922], p. 226.)

His disbelief in the positive role of the press in democracy led him to suggest an inversion of the roles of the press and public opinion: "My conclusion is that public opinions must be organised for the press if they are to be sound, not by the press as is the case today" (1997 [1922], p. 19).

As a solution, Lippmann suggested the creation of bureaus of experts (statisticians, accountants, auditors, engineers, researchers, etc.) working for leading institutions and agencies to educate journalists and the citizenry as a whole on the increasingly complex nature of public affairs. These bureaus of experts, he wrote,

... reverse the process by which interesting public opinions are built up. Instead of presenting a casual fact, a large screen of stereotypes, and a dramatic identification, they break

down the drama, break through the stereotypes, and offer men a picture of facts, which is unfamiliar and to them impersonal. (Lippmann, 1997 [1922], p. 233.)

Lippmann's biggest critics have seen these words as proof of a legitimisation of a more manipulative role for governments and other institutions regarding the press (Ewen, 1996, p. 151). However, from today's perspective it can be acknowledged that Lippmann's thinking on the media was ahead of its time. Many media and communication scholars have abandoned the political correctness that used to attribute to the press a democratic role as truth provider, and now acknowledge that the media "is no substitute for reporting institutions. They are the lighthouses and the journalists are the lighthouse keepers" (Petersen, 2003, pp. 251-252). These scholars agree with Lippmann that "news and truth are not synonymous, and to believe that they are is to ignore basic limitations of human perception" (Herbst, 1999, p. 92).

Indeed, Lippmann suggested a concept that is plainly accepted today in modern public relations textbooks, although not in the fields of journalism or media studies where it is still seen as somewhat taboo, which is the existence of a symbiotic relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners. It would be the duty of the government, in Lippmann's scenario, to provide accurate information to the media to supply the citizenship with thorough information.

In *Public opinion* (1922), Lippmann demystified the notion that average citizens are able to give thorough or nuanced opinions on public affairs. He questioned the idea that man can transcend his subjective experience through reason. Far from using rationale or scientific criteria as a guide, people make judgments based on emotions, prejudices or preconceptions, according to Lippmann who used the term 'stereotype' to describe "the pictures inside the heads" (1997 [1922], p. 18) of human beings. The pictures guide people's decisions in an increasingly complicated world. Lippmann blamed a misinformed press and propagandists for manipulating the public. He

also accused politicians of being mere followers of irrational public desires. In difficult times, Lippmann suggested an appropriate use of symbols by the government to put people to work for a common end and maintain society on the right track. “When quick results are imperative, the manipulation of masses through symbols may be the only way of having a critical thing done” (1997 [1922], p. 151). As in *A preface to politics* (1913), he suggested that too much democracy is pernicious and makes society ungovernable.

In *The phantom public* (2005 [1925]), Lippmann continued his critique of the omnicompetent citizen initiated in *Public opinion* (1922). He went one step further in the deconstruction of public opinion when he defined the public as “a mere phantom” or “an abstraction” (p. 67). Lippmann rejected the use of the word public as it had always been used before as “a fixed body of individuals”, instead calling it “merely those persons who are interested in an affair and can affect it only by supporting or opposing the actors” (p. 67). In this book, Lippmann spoke of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to make a distinction between those parts of the public with direct knowledge of the events and those without such knowledge. Thus, for Lippmann, every public affair in a democracy has actors and spectators. There are a few actors (insiders) with a purpose and a capacity to act, and then there is the majority (outsiders) who would only intervene if there were crisis maladjustment. “I have conceived public opinion to be, not the voice of God, nor the voice of society, but the voice of the interested spectators of action” (p. 187). The definition of public in situational and operational terms, as a group of people who could be activated in certain circumstances according to their self-interests, was, as with many other aspects of Lippmann’s work, ahead of its time. It questioned the hitherto prevalent notion of the public as a holistic entity and opened up new ways of developing a science of public relations to target publics more specifically.

During this time, other ideas rivalled Lippmann’s thesis. In fact, Lippmann maintained with John Dewey an intellectual debate that changed the course of communication research in its day. This discussion put Lippmann’s legitimisation of the government’s management of public opinion face-to-face with Dewey’s defence of participative democracy. The perspective of Dewey’s pragmatist thinking on the role of masses in public life was much more optimistic and, in many ways, opposed to Lippmann’s top-led conception of society. In *The public and its problems* (1927), Dewey became an advocate of the role that communication between citizens should play in a democratic system. He believed that citizens played an important role in defining major issues. Thus, for Dewey, every individual’s opinion should count and be listened to by decision makers for a good functioning of the state. “Only through constant watchfulness and criticism of public officials by citizens can a state be maintained in integrity and usefulness” (Dewey, 1988 [1927], p. 67). Although Dewey’s view is much more in accordance with today’s more sceptical view of the influence of propaganda, it did not square as well during a time of political tension and economic depression. Lippmann’s ideas “of message-delivery understanding of communications, around which a well-funded research agenda on mass society, mass communications, and public opinion measurement” (Soderlund, 2005, p. 308) provided the communication research field a much more precise theoretical framework than Dewey’s.

Discussion

Lippmann is widely recognised in the history of communication and public opinion as the author whose positivist thinking laid the groundwork for the new methodological and empirical approaches prompted by social psychologists such as Bernays and Allport. Bernays was one of those who quickly adopted in his book *Crystallizing public opinion*, Lippmann’s approach that “public opinion is the aggregate result of individual opinions” (Bernays, 1961 [1923], p. 61). One decade

later, in his article *Toward a science of public opinion*, Allport wrote about “the group fallacy of the public” (Allport, 1937, p. 9). The subsequent development of polls by George Gallup and Elmo Roper in the 1930s was born as a response to Lippmann’s new concept of public. Interestingly, although these developments also had direct consequences on the implementation of research techniques in public relations, the acknowledgement of Lippmann’s merits in the discipline has been minimal.

Nonetheless, Lippmann’s major contribution to the field of public relations is better explained in terms of the ethos, or the spirit, of the profession. With his emphasis on the government’s need to control what the public should think, Lippmann positioned public relations as a hegemonic practice in the life of other organisations. Lippmann’s ideas acted as legitimisers of the management of communication to eliminate conflict and dissensus in society. This conception of communication cannot be considered exclusive of the persuasive communication era but also of the current strategic focus where organisation perspectives and management interests are still prevalent. Lippmann’s perspective on the role of government included public relations concepts such as research on audiences and media, message design, and segmentation of publics.

However, his idea of communication was somewhat idealistic. It was not, as in modern times, only persuasive or the product of a dialogue between the organisation and the publics. Instead, Lippmann had a moral ideal in mind. He was inspired by a sort of ‘enlightened despotism’ whereby the government knew what was better for its publics for their own good. Lippmann truly believed that his view of communication was ethical. For example, Lippmann believed that communication management was compatible with respect and authenticity between organisations and publics. Indeed, he wrote in favour of regulating the practice of lobbying and public opinion in politics to prevent manipulation. “The inquisition is necessary if

we are to keep the propagandists and lobbyists within any bounds whatever” (Lippmann, 1963 [1930], p. 307). Furthermore, he attacked the role of public relations practitioners who forge the image of politicians. “I call this conception of publicity inherently insincere because it assumes that the public aspect of a person can be fabricated by men who have specialized in the art of manipulating public opinion” (Lippmann 1963 [1942], p. 318). Lippmann also condemned the prominent role played by ghost-writers in the construction of political leadership, arguing that it was destroying the bonds of confidence between leaders and the people. He felt this was equivalent to taking the public to be stupid. “No one can write an authentic speech for another man; it is as impossible as writing his love letters for him or saying his prayers for him” (p. 320). Lippmann believed that the true experts could only be real politicians involved in the tasks of government, because “anyone who knows what he is doing can say what he is doing” (p. 320).

Lippmann’s view of communication also set up the paradigm of research in communication when he described communication as the accurate and deliberated transmission of messages (Soderlund, 2005, p. 308). *Public opinion* (1922) provided social scientists like Laswell (1927) and Lazarsfeld (1948) a rationale for the establishment of the discipline’s priorities and research goals a decade later (Soderlund, p. 324). And this is a legacy that, interestingly, the public relations discipline has not claimed, or at least not strongly enough. Communication scholarship has done so, but perhaps, in the search for more noble origins, has tended to focus on Lippmann as an exclusively political figure, circumventing the link with the public relations perspective. In other words, communication scholarship has minimised the fact that the study of how an organisation (government, political party, corporation, etc.) influences people’s behaviour through the delivery of information is in actuality an expression of the public relations perspective that has dominated most of the 20th century. Some might argue that Lippmann was not a public relations practitioner, or that during his working life the

field of public relations as a defined discipline was still in a creation process; however, in this author's opinion, this is a mere formalism. His work for CPI, the Inter-Allied Propaganda Board, and his views on the government's use of communication expressed in his books, are proof that Lippmann was thinking as a public relations strategist. He emphasised government's interest as legitimate in a way similar to what would later be done by organisations. Perhaps if this legacy had been more vindicated by the public relations discipline, the field might have played a more prominent role in the history of communication studies.

Concluding remarks

This essay has explored the relationship between Lippmann's view of society, and the ethos of the public relations practice. It acknowledges Lippmann as the first social thinker to place communication management as a deliberate effort in the life of organisations. In no way, does it suggest a diminishing of the contributions made by figures such as Lee and Bernays in the development of the profession. Instead, it tries to emphasise the link between the social and the political context in any given era and in the history of public relations. This paper argues that, in the history of public relations, there is a need to take into consideration how the history of ideas in different periods has influenced the perspectives adopted by the public relations practice. Until very recently, the view of the field by public relations practitioners and scholars has been dominated by an instrumental conception, based mainly on collecting and analysing information and/or experiences to implement better campaigns, or on the development of public relations models to build better relationships between organisations and their publics. Perhaps it is time to pay more attention to other aspects that allow us to better understand the spirit of the profession, such as the historical impact of political ideas on the practice of public relations.

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Author contact details:

César García, PhD
 Central Washington University
 Department of Communication
 Bouillon Hall, Room 230
 400 East University Way
 Ellensburg, WA 98926-7438
 Phone No: (509) 963-1097
 E-mail: garciace@cwu.edu

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