From the Pseudo-environment to the Meta-verse. Recontextualising Lippmann's thought

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Abstract. The Social Sciences have been investigating the processes of Public Opinion formation since the second half of the 19th century. From Tocqueville to Le Bon, from Toennies to Allport, from Lazarsfeld to Habermas, from Niklas Luhmann to Pierre Bourdieu, from Noelle-Neumann to Landowski. Among these authors, Lippmann stands out for his theoretical-practical orientation that anticipated themes and scenarios. Exactly one hundred years ago, in his best-known work Public Opinion (Lippmann 1922) he had opened the way to the inevitability of the construction of a world "beyond the real", through the concept of "pseudo-environment".

The need for representation determines "pseudo-environments", interstitial realities made up of stereotyped images and contents that the public interprets to construct shared imaginaries that do not adhere to reality: «The world outside and the picture in your head» (Lippmann 1992: 3).

Pseudo-environments enable decision-making and action, reducing complexity (Luhmann e De Giorgi 1992). This phenomenon anticipates the concept of simulacrum, in the sense of Braudillard (1985), but also that of Second Life and the Meta-verse in the sense of Stephenson (1992).

Starting from Lippmann's vision, this proposed paper intends to recontextualise his thought.

Keywords: pseudo-environment, public opinion, simulacrum, social construction, stereotype

INTRODUCTION

One hundred years after its publication, Public Opinion is an icon, a fetish, and a polemical idol.

The work has been reinterpreted by authoritative scholars over time.

However, the topics that have sparked more debate focus mainly on the second part of the work, where the relationship between democracy, propaganda, power, and information manipulation is analyzed (Crisante 2004; Regalzi 2011; Milanese 2020).

In the present essay, the researcher has preferred to focus on the first part, where Lippmann illustrates the ways in which one gets to know the facts without having a direct experience.

The researcher examined problematic issues and key words that remained even after Lippmann and were reused or reworked by authors from different schools of thought, regardless of the implications of a political nature.

In the first chapter of this essay, the philosophical tradition is taken into consideration that allows the author to be, at the same time, the continuer of a specific tradition and an anticipator of models and interpretative schemes of the future. The inevitable mediation between truth and perception of reality is a concept that Lippmann takes up from the ancient philosophy of Plato (the latter distinguished the search for truth from opinion influenced by the fallacious perception of reality) and from the modern philosophy of Kant (the German philosopher distinguishes between noumenon and phenomenon).

From these assumptions Lippmann constructs his distinction between truth, fact, news, fiction, verisimilitude, and reality. The chapter also underlines the influence of Dewey's pragmatism which allows Lippmann to reflect on the relationship between mental images, belief systems and experiences of the individual, leading him towards the construction of the following concepts: pseudo-environment, standardization of news and stereotype. These terms will influence the scholars who will come after him. The second chapter considers authors who have distanced themselves from Lippmann's thought despite having drawn heavily from his legacy, most notably Braudillard.

If the concept of the "pseudo-environment" had not existed, the concept of the "simulacrum" would never have arisen. The third chapter emphasises another issue often overlooked by Lippmann scholars (and which, in some ways, anticipates Gramsci's reflections): the function of intellectuals and researchers in a society where the mass media play a role in the construction of opinions.

The concluding chapter summarises the crucial issues raised by Lippman through three research questions posed by the author and still relevant today:

- Can public opinion change the world based on the images (stereotypes, beliefs, and experiences) it has of the world?
- Is it possible to inform public opinion correctly?
- Do the flaws of the mass media reflect the flaws of public opinion?

Lippman answers the above questions in a partial manner, but still provides valuable suggestions to researchers today.

LIPPMANN BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE: CONTINUER OF TRADITION, ANTICIPATOR OF SCENARIOS

Our way of knowing reality has always been indirect, but as the complexity of a social system has increased, the level of mediation has differed widely, determining demarcations between news, fact, truth, fiction, verisimilitude, and reality. In short, the above statement constitutes the first legacy of Lippmann's thought, one hundred years after his best-known work: *Public Opinion* (Lippmann 1922).

The author shows mediation as an inevitable destiny, following in the wake of an ancient research tradition that starts from Plato and arrives at William James, anticipating the theses of Sybille Krämer (2020). The influence of the media on subjects - both as individuals and as public opinion - was already present in the pre-modern age: knowing the world is always an act of mediation between what is external to the subject and the subjective representations that allow the comprehensibility of a real fact. The human being understands reality through the senses, which allow the first mediation between the knowing subject and the experienced object. Ancient philosophers considered perception fallacious and misleading for the reconstruction of truth as episteme[1], but the caesura between phenomenon and noumenon will be shown in modern times by Kant.

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1 The most important ancient philosophers pursued episteme: the science that imposes itself "on" (epi) everything that claims to deny "what is certain" (steme). The ancients contrasted episteme as incontrovertible truth with doxa, which was uncertain, fallacious, interpretable opinion. Western knowledge was born with a dogmatic and scientistic overtone.

Over the centuries, this "authoritarian" (rather than authoritative) approach will return with Hegel, the positivists, the Vienna Circle, structural-functionalism, and the systemic-cybernetic currents. A knowledge that imposes the incontrovertibility of its laws of reason and opposes the "understanding" sciences.

In the wake of this tradition, Lippmann posits the relationship between news, truth, fiction, reality, opinion, and verisimilitude. News is distinguished from truth, but truth is distinguished from reality, and reality is subdivided between reality constructed from the internal images of the subject (hence the Kantian approach) and reality per se, which belongs to an external environment that cannot be observed by human beings. The individual reworks reality through archetypal images, mythopoetic narratives and already lived experiences (James 1890; Freud 1901).

According to Lippman, if we do not have an image of what we think reality is, we cannot elaborate a belief system about a given phenomenon.

Moreover, if we do not possess images we tend to "not see" unusual social phenomena that are distant from our way of observing; or we try to «construct a new image from what we have in our repertoire» (Lippman 2018: 20). Collectively shared images, in turn, influence the actions of «groups that constitute public opinion» (Lippmann 2018: 23). Human beings constitute an interface that mediates between reality and themselves. When human beings decide to aggregate in order to express a collective understanding of a specific issue, the tendency towards stereotypical simplification becomes the only way forward[2]. After Lippmann, biologists such as Maturana and Varela (1980) and sociologists such as Luhmann (1990) show the irreducible principles of an autopoietic and self-referential living system that posits a clear difference between system and environment (just as Kant posited the caesura between phenomenon and noumenon). Similarly, Lippman, while using different terms, following his vocations as a scholar and practitioner (immersed in a constant dialectical process between participatory observation in the field and theoretical reflexivity a posteriori) anticipates the Luhmanian "differenz" by coining a neologism: pseudo-environment.

The pseudo-environment feeds the shadows of the Platonic cave (the author quotes Plato on more than one occasion), mediating between the individual and the environment that Husserl called the vital world. The human being does not grasp the authentic truth, but that which he has reconstructed through narratives. In many cases, he reconstructs based on unconscious images or based on previous experiences that have stabilized over time. In order to understand a new fact, he uses the images of an old fact in an attempt to find analogies. Lippmann does not have the tools to go beyond these causal links, nor can he explain why certain images are replicated as "memes" (Jouxtel 2010).

He intuits the human need to simplify based on recurrent selections: in this he anticipates Herbert Simon's (1955) theses on bounded rationality and the economy of attention. But from other points of view, Lippmann prepares the conditions for a key concept in systems thinking: "complexity reduction". Fiction for Lippman is not a lie, but a constitutive element of news: «a representation of the environment fabricated by humans themselves» (Lippmann 2018: 13), thus a social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This idea comes from the psychological theories of William James (1890) who deeply influenced Lippman but also Merton's sociology.

Humans need to build models and feed them with the automatism of routines that stabilize social practices. Inevitably, this leads to a *sclerotization* of procedures, resulting in bureaucratic phenomena - the Weberian steel cage - even in the field of information.

The news is an integral part of a standardised machine and therefore becomes fiction. Lippman analyses the triangular relationship between the scene of action, the representation that the human being makes of this scene and the reaction to this representation, which in turn operates on the scene of action, constructing self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton 1971). This process will be examined forty years later by Shannon and Weaver (1963) through the concept of feedback and will come back in the concept of re-entry in Luhmann who observes the social system through the lens of communication[3]. The environment perturbs the system, but the system responds to this perturbation based on what it can understand from its observation model. Thus, the system will never see the environment, but only what it can see from

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2 Sociologists like Berger and Luckmann (1969; trad.it 1997) will show, after Lippmann, that reality - understood as the set of phenomena that are recognized independently of the will of each member of reality - is "socially constructed" and that shared representations risk being taken for granted and favor the affirmation (also in terms of power) of certain values with respect to others.

3 For Luhmann, communication promotes structural coupling between the system and the environment through processes of complexity reduction that give rise to mechanisms of action and feedback.

itself. Lippmann analyses this issue in depth - with examples from history and the news - also reasoning in terms of classes and memberships.

A well-educated and well-off woman will observe social phenomena - even those most distant from her cultural, economic and value context - thinking that she will find a certain homogeneity of attitudes and behaviour in all environments. The same thing will happen to a metalworker, a teacher and so on. This "self-referentiality" builds up the blindness of the human being to the unusual, the contradictory, the unconventional and the not directly experienced.

Each individual believes that others behave in the same way as him or her in certain circumstances, although they have different reasons. This imagery of expectations is, according to Lippmann, the first stereotype to be combated. Each of us navigates in our own limited pseudo-environment, reassuring our way of life. The human being needs meaning, but also to coherence the excess of contradictions in reality (Festinger 1957[4]). The defensive response consists of a verisimilar image in place of the fact itself because «the verisimilar is faster than the slow and careful search for truth (...) it gives us the ease of habit» (Carboni 2020: 11). The image at hand becomes a stereotype.

The context in which stereotypes are reproduced is the pseudo-environment: the mass media disproportionately increase the distance between the individual and the real environment.

The metaverse - a term introduced in 1992 by Neal Stephenson in the science fiction work 'Snow Crash' to refer to a type of immersive virtual experience somewhat similar to what Facebook is now recreating[5] - was already potentially present in early modernity dominated by the newspaper.

The printed press is a virtual world different from the living world: «News is distinct from truth. The function of news is to report visible facts, the function of truth is to bring hidden facts to light, to relate them to each other and to give a picture of reality that enables men to act» (Lippmann 2018: 265). Stereotypes constitute the shortcut to thinking and dichotomise reality.

Pseudo-environments construct «radiant points of conventionality» (Lippmann 2018: 40) by selecting news and the way to interpret it based on the reference values most useful to the community. Stereotypes and prejudices already present in the community prevent them from seeing other facts hidden behind the news.

News is digested through media consumption, but mainly by word of mouth, which feeds further misleading interpretations. This mechanism is more evident in big cities than in small communities, asserts Lippmann. In a small community the alteration of a news story may stop or be unmasked.

In a large and articulated environment, it can survive and change continuously, distancing itself from what it was at the beginning. So, Lippmann asserts, in fact, that in a complex environment fake news (although he does not call it that) evolves, going beyond the fact. This was evident before the advent of the Metaverse.

Lippmann is also the first scholar to introduce the term stereotype into the social sciences. This word came from the typographic environment where it was coined towards the end of the 18th century to indicate the reproduction of printed images by means of fixed forms.

Its first translational use was in psychiatry, referring to pathological behaviour characterised by obsessive repetition of gestures and expressions. Its appearance in Sociology is due to the work of Lippmann. The stereotype constitutes the «cognitive core of prejudice» (Mazzara 1997: 16).

There is a level of maximum generalisation of the term prejudice - understood as a judgement prior to experience - which can suggest that any cultural construct is a prejudice. This interpretation does not allow an analysis of prejudice aimed at finding strategies to reduce it. But there are prejudices that arise

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4 In 1957, Festinger published research entitled *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. If an individual carries out mutually consistent ideas and behaviours, he or she is in a situation of cognitive consonance. Conversely, he or she will be in cognitive dissonance. To avoid states of malaise, the individual will try to coherence the contradictions, to eliminate them or to reduce them. This process of self-deception that makes certain divergent thoughts coherent a posteriori was also understood (but not systematized) by Lippmann.

5 The Metaverse is often identified as the successor to the Internet. To describe it, some authors speak of a network composed of collaborative and immersive virtual worlds, where an unlimited number of users can use avatars to interact, work, shop and participate in various activities.

from a deliberately distorted and consciously incomplete use of data and that lead to an unjustifiably unfavorable perception of the phenomena examined[6].

This sub-level needs to be examined to be eradicated or reduced, Lippmann asserts, because certain beliefs can perpetuate themselves even after the evidence of facts that falsify them (even today this phenomenon is evident: during the pandemic, denialist beliefs have never been definitively extinguished). In this section we have reconstructed the cultural tradition that influenced Lippmann and his ability to anticipate key words and research perspectives. In the next section we will try to look at what Lippmann did not grasp of his times, alongside what has been reconfigured from his insights to create post-modern visions.

FROM PSEUDO-ENVIRONMENT TO SIMULACRUM: UNEXPECTED HERMENEUTICS

Lippmann anticipated themes and introduced neologisms that allowed his epigones to build new paths. But there are also interpretative drifts triggered by thinkers who have reconfigured Lippmann's intuitions. If the pseudo-environment is the realm of stereotyped news that hides the truth, Braudillard's "simulacrum" becomes truth that hides nothing.

In *La Précession des simulacres*, the French sociologist opens the essay by quoting Ecclesiastes: «The simulacrum is never what hides the truth; but it is the truth that hides the knowledge that there is no truth. The simulacrum is true» (Braudillard 1978a: 24).

He argues that today's society has replaced the meaning of reality with symbols and signs, leaving human experience a permanent simulation. Simulacra are not based on reality, nor do they hide reality. They say that nothing like reality is relevant to the understanding of our lives, but we are distracted by the simulation. Simulacra represent the meanings and symbolism of the media that construct perceived reality, the acquired understanding with which our lives are made legible: we are saturated with simulacra, which is why all meaning has become meaningless.

In another work from 1978, translated into Italian only in 2019 and with the emblematic title – *All'ombra delle maggioranze silenziose. Ovvero la fine del sociale* - Braudillard observes the world from a hyper-real perspective, a world that is more real than reality because it is simulated.

According to him, polls, tests, and referendums do not represent, but simulate reality: the difference is abysmal. The actual evolution of our era is not the virtual, but the information bulimia that exceeds sense, making the relationship between reality and fiction paradoxical.

According to the French sociologist who also updates the thought of Ortega y Gasset (1930), the masses «are not good conductors (...) of the social, nor good conductors of meaning in general» (Braudillard 1978b: 25). On the contrary, they represent the power of inertia and the neutral.

They behave implosively and non-explosively. They are a black hole that absorbs without returning. The power of the masses is in the desire for the here and now. But it is a desire that is expressed in silence, as opposed to the deafening bombardment of the mass media. Then the masses nullify the concept of public opinion. Their behaviour escapes any sociological analysis and represents the death of the social. For Braudillard, trying to give definitions to the behaviour of the masses is nonsense, because it would mean giving meaning to the senseless: «Neither hysteria nor potential fascism, but simulation by precipitation of all lost referents. (...) A black box of all uncaptured meanings. The mass is what remains when the social has been forgotten» (Braudillard 1978: 29).

Every day the media pretend to make the masses speak, but in reality they only reaffirm their own self-referentiality. When too much sense is produced, rejection occurs and the black hole, the inertial mass, is created. What do communication systems do at this point? Instead of understanding the need to produce less information, they increase the quantity. We see two complementary forms of emptiness: the implosion of meaning by the masses, and the explosion of meaning by the mass media.

If McLuhan relied on the fact that «medium is message» (McLuhan 1967: 54), Baudrillard shows that «mass(age) is message» (Braudillard 1978: 67).

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6 This particular form of prejudice, based on a logic of "difference", can lead to a so-called "heterophile" racism, aimed at preserving the differences between groups, as shown by Pierre-André Taguieff (2001).

Our society has carried out the perfect crime (a key word that will be reused by Baudrillard in 1996 as the title of one of his best-known works) by killing off the reality that produces differentiations on the basis of dialectical exchange and replacing it with a hyper-reality based on the simulation of a model of reality given to a mass that does not know what to do with it. The hyper-reality of the media - according to Braudillard (1984; 1985; 2008) and at the opposite of Lippmann - reminds the masses that the reality of the life-worlds is not useful to orient them in the world of mass communication.

The important thing is not to fight for the distinction between real and fake news. After all, fake news and post-truth existed even before the advent of digital media and before Lippmann's theories.

The historian Marc Bloch reminds us of this in his 1921 book War and Fake News. Altered or simulated (because over-represented) news has been the norm since the introduction of the first media. Evidently, the hyper-real media machine also remains a rhetorical connecting figure: hyperbolic or lithotic as needed. It exaggerates certain facts that it considers desirable for the public, minimising what does not correspond to people's stereotypes. But the postmodern novelty is the reaction of the masses to hyper-connection, speed, and excess of meaning: elements that Lippmann could not have foreseen. The mass reacts to this hyper-real by absorbing without giving back.

It handles every idea as waste to be thrown in the dustbin. It lets itself be seduced, without being convinced. According to Braudillard, the media are under the illusion that they can affect the masses. They believe that the masses are permeable to discourse. But the masses only enjoy the spectacle. The mass is the strongest of all mediums, which is why Baudrillard says: *mass(age)* is *message*.

The mass demands security, rights, and welfare. It sees public services as commodities to be consumed without limits. At times, it may have points of contact with terrorist action and organised rebellion: for years it lives in anonymity and normality. Suddenly, it pursues a keyword in an impulsive manner, triggering chain effects that produce forms of urban guerrilla warfare, destined to deflate within a short time. The protest movement of the "yellow waistcoats", which emerged on social networks in November 2018 and provoked clashes in France as in other nations, was predicted by Braudillard's theories. Moreover, Morozov also shows that the Arab Spring was not triggered by the network and the tools of connection, but by a very concrete and analogical fact: a man who set himself on fire. The spark spread first through interpersonal relations and later amplified by the web (Morozov 2019). But mass does not make phenomena enduring, because it does not organise meaning. According to Baudrillard's post-modern interpretation: mass, media and terrorism seem to triangulate in an illusory explosive movement. On the surface more social dynamics are produced; in the deep down, relationships, and the sense of the social are neutralised. If primitive societies were devastated by social explosions, will we be destroyed by a-social implosions? At the end of the essay, as in a pataphysical performance, Baudrillard reverses his argument, posing two questions: either the social has never existed, but has always existed as a simulation managed by different media (consequently, public opinion would be a symbolic construction of the media); or the social has always existed and is destined to exist more and more. However, in this second case, the author states that the perfect socialisation of the contemporary world coincides with welfarism, which leads to the annihilation of the social, which becomes a residual part of an economic system: «When the first great institution for the poor opened in 1544, vagrants, the demented, the sick (...) were taken care of under the nascent sign of the social. The social became assistance, no longer a relationship. This will expand to the dimensions of public assistance in the 19th century and then to social security in the 20th century» (Braudillard 1978: 94). With universal welfare the intention is to make the community "marginal". The community must be assisted because it serves «useless consumption» (Braudillard 1978: 99). Assistance transforms citizens into docile consumers entertained by the media, which in turn have the task of distracting them from reality. But this excessive and senseless consumption becomes the deadly mass weapon that could make the system fail. Baudrillard anticipates by forty years the current social in which individuals-masses become terminals of consumption and information, vectors of flows and connections (Castells 2006; Khanna 2016). The hyper-real has won over the real because it has abolished the real, replacing it with a simulation. All media have the task of producing this superabundant world. There is too much of everything: it is the pornography of meaning. Baudrillard, at the end of the book, proposes a metaphor with the shots of porn films. None of us would make love (which is part of reality) by looking too closely at what happens during sex, because this would not allow us to lose

ourselves in the deep and consistent relationship. On the contrary, porn proposes zooms, resulting in something hyper-real where reality with meaning disappears. Exaggeration and entertainment remain. Perhaps the function of the intellectual could bring order to this catastrophic path, but the intellectual - from Lyotard onwards - becomes part of the entertainment system. His propulsive, modifying and/or restoring role in reality disappears. He becomes part of the society of the spectacle that Guy Debord (1967) was already talking about. If he does not accept this role of cultured storyteller, he is isolated or voluntarily chooses academic self-isolation. As we shall see in the next chapter, Lippmann thought of involving the world of research in order to create a balanced relationship between news and hidden facts.

THE FUNCTION OF THE INTELLECTUAL IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND INSTITUTIONS

Lippmann shows that news is a standardised exposition of the manifest phases of the facts that affect the newspaper. The pressure for the newspaper to follow a routine comes from the following actors: the publisher, the newspaper editor, the advertising agent, the loyal readers, the institutions, and the business sector. But serial standardisation also comes from cognitive, cultural, organisational, and economic elements:

- The cognitive savings brought about by the stereotypes that condition the way news is packaged.
- The difficulty of finding journalists who can see what they have not learned to see.
- The difficulty of making an unconventional opinion plausible.
- The economic necessity to interest the reader quickly.

In this context, «all the subtlest and deepest truths are unsafe truths» (Lippmann 2018: 260).

«Without standardisation, without stereotypes, without pre-established judgements, without a ruthless disregard for subtleties, the editor of a newspaper would soon die of agitation» (Lippmann 2018: 261). Thus, stereotyping is likely to be a structural necessity not only inherent in the way we are human, but also in the way we organize systems of communication. Yet, standardisation makes newspapers unproductive for long-term memory.

If a historian or a sociologist were to rely only on newspapers as sources, they would have a misleading restitution of the phenomena that occurred. To get out of this quagmire, Lippman proposes a solution that is still unimplemented (perhaps unworkable): building a different relationship between the world of research (not only academic) and the world of journalism. Researchers should be independent entities, embedded at all levels of society and paid by public entities to fulfil the function of equidistant observation of non-obvious facts, proposing perspectives capable of eliminating stereotypes. The function of these experts is to be far from partisan, as opposed to the function of opinion leaders. According to Lippmann, these researchers should be placed in political institutions, trade associations, research centers, academies, and other centers of power.

They would have the task of communicating and building new bridges with the world of the media, avoiding connivance and conflicts of interest. Although the most current research and theories have shown that it is a naive thought (such as in Hall S.M., Mellino M. 2007).

Lippmann believes that the invisible environment can only be made visible by constant independent research: «When men act on the principle of research and documentation, they go in search of facts and form their own wisdom. When they neglect it, they go back into themselves and find only what they have inside. And so, they elaborate their prejudices instead of increasing their knowledge» (Lippman 2018: 294). But how come this bridge has not been created after Lippmann?

If early modernity was conditioned by the value of production and an ethical guidance of the intellectual, in post-modernity the value of consumption prevails, and the intellectual is replaced by the communicator-influencer. Lyotard (1981) has shown us that the intellectual has ceased to exercise the role of guidance on knowledge, limiting himself to selling his skills as a bargaining chip. Thought has become consultancy at the service of business organisations, as Dal Lago (2007) also reminds us, and the intellectual performs ambiguous functions, becoming a guru in charge of fostering consensus around

new trends or a polemicist supporting the rules of the audience. Intellectuals become "paper heroes" (Dal Lago 2010) to be used for specific and contingent purposes.

As a result, it is intellectuals who conform to the stereotypical rules of the media, rather than inducing communication subjects to shift their field of observation. Intellectuals no longer guide the processes of change and become media entertainers who have to construct conspicuous generalisations in a short period of time. Tenbruck, also in 1979, states that all societies, except today's, have «had to rely for their existence and survival on some intellectual authority that could successfully claim to possess superior knowledge» (Tenbruck 2002: 50; trad. it.).

The social systems of past eras needed an intellectual class to guide them (whether philosophers, priests, amanuensis, poets, scientists, academics, or politicians), whereas in postmodern society the educated leader is marginalised or self-excluded from processes, because he is not recognised as the holder of legitimate, credible, and indisputable knowledge.

For the first time, knowledge also becomes entertainment. The web has merely accentuated a phenomenon already present in the 20th century. Over the last 40 years, we have witnessed the progressive construction of a redundant and pervasive communication-centric system that has overturned the power relations with social, cultural, and political reality, gradually replacing these systems with the exception of the economic one.

Baudrillard (1980) speaks of the perfect crime: the disappearance of reality, replaced by a hyper-reality that simulates social intentions. Donolo (2011) analyses the behaviour of ruling classes homogenised by the media process, attentive to representation, but incapable of modifying processes. Intellectuals are no longer able to change society. There is a noise that has silenced their intentions: the dictatorship of communication, the container-vector that replaces content and agents.

At present, communication is not a collateral element, but represents the dominant system that claims to replace the shortcomings of the other components.

The system is not based on the credibility of the source, but on the pervasiveness of its planning, the needs of its target audience and the verisimilitude (not truthfulness) of a fact. Following this logic, what is imposed is accepted, and if the information is disproved a posteriori, it is not weakened, but remains anchored to a system of beliefs and is generally indelible and unchangeable, because it is difficult to trace, despite the existence of the right to be forgotten.

In today's communication system, there is not only human-generated communication, but also communication processed automatically by algorithms that feed what humans produce or search for (another element that Lippmann could not foresee).

Before the advent of the web, Karl Popper (1994) suggested a solution to this problem. Reopening the issue raised by Lippman, the Austrian epistemologist argued that those who disseminate information of general interest should be assessed by the state and should have a licence to carry out their work. Those who do not communicate correctly should be sanctioned by independent intellectuals (also independent of the journalists' register).

Those who repeatedly behave irresponsibly or feed an incorrect perception by manipulating data should be prosecuted. Authorities could play a similar role, but currently have reduced powers and staff. Popper's proposal has been endorsed by some authoritative scholars who have shown the power of the media to modify attitudes and behavior (desensitization to violence, detachment from politics, increase in narcissism, consumer indoctrination), but it has also been criticized by other researchers who have considered it "dirigiste" and "anti-democratic". The debate between "apocalyptic and integrated" remains open (Eco 1997): between those who emphasize the lack of influence of the media on the cultural models of society and those who establish a direct link between models proposed by the media and public taste (Bourdieu 1983).

CONCLUSIONS: LIPPMANN'S QUESTIONS STILL RELEVANT TODAY

Lippmann reminds us (with data, case studies and participant observations) that in every era opinion groups have believed in a range of false and manipulated information.

The propaganda construction of the conspiracy is not a postmodern or even a modern invention.

It originated with the creation of the first instruments of symbolic and communicative mediation.

According to Lippman every man formulates theories[7]. A subjective theory of reality is a model that constructs a pseudo-environment. If the relationship between reality and man were direct and immediate, neither indecision nor failure would be known. But the relationship with reality is only indirect and public opinion constitutes a collective mediation of a previous individual mediation.

If McLuhan (1967) reminds us that the mass media also disseminate the rhetoric of conspiracy in an emotional key, Foucault (1992) reminds us that man is born with technologies of the self that are inevitably medial, while Baudrillard (1978; 1981; 1996; 2019) considers us predisposed to the construction of simulacra that kill the real in favour of simulation.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Lippmann quotes Plato's myth of the cave at the beginning of his work. Reflected shadows constitute that inevitable mediality of the human being which begins with language and continues with the alphabetic system, arriving at the current digital forms.

Moreover, the germinal forms of the digital can already be found in the alphanumeric textual space, which constitutes the first form of arbitrary stylisation of pictographic language (Krämer 2020).

Lippmann's topicality also lies in the fact that he identified problematic nodes that are still topical and to which he tried to give still valid answers.

The first problematic node: can public opinion change the world on the basis of stereotypes, beliefs, and self-evident facts? The author argues and demonstrates (through data and observations possible at the time) that there are a number of unseen facts and information that are more important and less stereotypical than those reported by the media.

The second problematic issue is: can the public be correctly informed about everything it learns from the media? Lippmann calls this claim unrealistic, and the stereotypical fruit of a pseudo-environment constructed by the media themselves. Non-stereotyped facts must be used by those who have the competence and power to intervene (political decision-makers, economic parties, associations dealing with a specific issue, etc.). The task of the mass media would be to make visible what is not yet seen by these subjects, but this depends on an organisation that goes beyond the media, because the quality of information on modern society is an index of its social organization.

Here we come to the third problematic issue: do the defects of newspapers reflect the defects of the organization of public opinion? Lippmann notes that public opinion must be organised "for the press" and not "by the press". This is where the role of research (academic and otherwise) would come in.

If an independent, adequately remunerated research machine were to be built and present within all the ganglia of society, it would be possible to expose facts not seen by the communication system and form a mature public opinion. This is the synthesis of Lippman's democratic theory of communication, which is, however, still looking for concrete instruments of implementation.

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7 As Bateson will shows us after Lippman: the map is not the territory (Bateson 1984).

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