

LECTURE / DISCUSSION / DEBATE
PUBLIC OPINION, THE MEDIA, AND B.F. SKINNER

Terms and concepts to know:

Lippman / <i>Public Opinion</i>	Reification
Dewey / <i>Public and Its Problems</i>	Attitudes / beliefs / values
Partisan affiliation	Political efficacy
Political trust	Political tolerance
Primary / secondary groups	Opinion leaders
Institutional influences	Culture
Referendum / initiative / recall	Chomsky / <i>Manufacturing Consent</i>
Propaganda model	The “5-Filters” on the news

Study and discussion questions:

1. Heineman notes that Walter Lippman, “argued that most individuals cannot act in the common interest on questions of public policy because they neither have the time nor the information to act wisely.” Do you agree that this is true?
2. Discuss the differences and similarities of attitudes, beliefs, and values. How are each important in shaping public opinion?
3. Discuss the concepts of political efficacy, political trust, and political tolerance. How would citizens in the U.S. rate in each of these categories?
4. How do the institutions of family, school, church, and workplace shape political opinions? Is one or more of these concepts a stronger influence than the others?
5. Caitlin Johnstone makes the point that “[i]f you watch western news media with a critical eye you eventually notice how their reporting consistently aligns with the interests of the U.S.-centralized empire, in almost the same way you’d expect them to if they were government-run propaganda outlets.” That’s a helluva punch! What examples does she give and which do you think are the most consequential?
6. Can a Marxist agree with Trump? Yes! Paul Street takes the corporate mass media to task in a long article on *Counterpunch*. Where is he right? Where is he wrong? Examine his argument and analyze or develop your own.
7. Do you agree with Inglehart that “younger generations in advanced industrialized nations are moving toward postmaterialist values”? Is this, as Heineman suggests, necessarily a negative thing to be avoided?
8. Do you feel that Heineman’s suggestion that “[t]he influence of the media on the formation of public opinion can easily be overrated” is accurate? Why do you think he downplays the effect the media has on public opinion?
9. Discuss Herman and Chomsky’s “5 Filters” on the news. How important do you think each one of these filters are in distorting mainstream news?

Readings:

Heineman. *Political Science*, Chapter 8.

Video:

United States of Distraction.