

The Year in Climate Controversy

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Top: Opening ceremony at the COP15 United Nations Climate Change Conference, Copenhagen, December 7, 2009.

Bottom: Demonstrators marching during COP15, Copenhagen, December 17, 2009. Photo: Kris Krüg.

WHEN WALTER LIPPMANN (1889–1974) wrote his masterpiece *The Phantom Public* eighty-five years ago, he vividly demonstrated that democratic ideals were at risk. The reason lay in what we would now call globalization, a geopolitical shift that was already rendering old procedures of local and even national government obsolete. According to Lippmann, there could be no such thing as an “omniscient citizen,” that great hope of traditional democratic theory: No individual could possibly be fully informed of all the issues he—at the time, it was still very much a “he”—was supposed to tackle. And even if citizens could be well informed, they could do nothing more than meddle from the outside in the complex affairs of those who were in charge. Globalization made impossible the very idea of democratic action, of the people taking their affairs into their own hands, as had been imagined before by the Continental tradition from Rousseau to Marx to Hegel. The enlightened, unified, and active public faithfully represented by its government was simply out of reach.

Lippmann, however, was no reactionary. If the public was a phantom, this ghost had to be conjured, because there remained no alternative to democracy. Hence the paradox that Lippmann summarized in this stunning and famous passage about the great disputes of the day “between nations, between sectional interests, between classes, between town and country, between churches”¹:

Yet it is controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge. Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. They are the public’s problems.²

Let us now fast-forward to 2009–10 and pick up one of the problems that the phantom public must consider: the controversy over the anthropic origin of “climate weirding,” or global warming, or any of the other popular monikers this phenomenon has been given. Indeed, if we look at the way the issue of climate change was staged in Copenhagen at COP15, last winter’s United Nations Climate Change Conference, during which little agreement or progress was achieved, we may measure just how much the situation has deteriorated since the interwar period.

Lippmann could not have anticipated that the scale of globalization would expand to such a vast degree that it would encompass the entire earth’s climate. The poor citizens who were already lost in the aftermath of the Great War are now utterly puzzled by the consequences of actions that they

Lost in the problem, the public is now also lost in the media addressing the problem.



Top: Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at a press conference at the COP15 United Nations Climate Change Conference, Copenhagen, December 18, 2009. Photo: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg/Getty. Bottom: Greenpeace's Climate Rescue Station at COP15, Bella Center, Copenhagen.

cannot track—and that nevertheless reverberate over the whole planet.

But what Lippmann could not have foreseen either was the breakdown of the instruments of communication that are the only means for the public (“in all its unfitness,” remember) to read the “coarse signs” in a controversy—to parse information and to detect bias, so as to avoid partisanship and restore some kind of *modus vivendi*. The prototypical newspaper that Lippmann had described in great detail in his earlier book *Public Opinion* (1922) has now been replaced by a maelstrom of confusing media outlets—none of which can be said to simplify the detection of partisanship by the spectral public. Lost in the problem, the public is now also lost in the media addressing the problem.

And of course, there is no single institution able to cover, oversee, dominate, manage, handle, or simply trace an issue of such shape and scope. Even a summit of all the nations of the earth, preceded by

the most strident media campaigns, could not digest an issue so intractable and so enmeshed in contradictory interests as this one. We have a problem, but we don't have the public that goes with it. And no wonder, for the climate crisis asks for nothing less than a radical revolution. Not a sudden upheaval—class against class—but myriad changes at all levels of existence, from cars to clothes, from architecture to industry, from agriculture to sewage. How could we imagine a global agreement amid so many entangled interests?

Such disorder and misprision were all the more compounded because—and this is another turn of events that Lippmann did not have to witness—in the month before Copenhagen, scientists themselves were ensnared by a terrible campaign, ridiculously called “Climategate,” that portrayed them as one lobby among others vying for their own petty interests. Experts and scientists, far from playing the role of a court of appeals for the confusing affairs of politics, were dragged into the very confusion they could no longer settle from above and from afar.

No media, no court of appeals, no governing institution, and yet many more controversies for which “precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything”: Yes, the situation is much worse now than before. This is why, as John Dewey argued in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), in response to Lippmann's indictment of naive democratic ideals, completely new definitions of art, science, and politics are needed.

The first task is to make possible the representation—in all the meanings of the word—of the issues to be tackled. As the philosopher Noortje Marres has said: “No issue, no politics.” And to render the issues visible to the nascent public, not only the resources of the social and natural sciences but those of art are demanded. Without the diverse cooperation of artists, activists, and social and natural scientists, as Dewey argued, it is impossible to explore and retrace the unwanted consequences of our collective actions—and, most of all, to restore confidence in scientific institutions by making their work and, yes, their controversies fully visible. This is what Peter Weibel and I attempted to simulate in the exhibition “Making Things Public” at ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2005: how to forge new techniques of representation, to add “art forums” and “science agoras” to the arenas of conventional politics.

As Dewey wrote so dramatically: “Since conditions of action and of inquiry and knowledge are always changing, the experiment must always be retried; the State must always be rediscovered.”³ Such is the aim of what could be called “political arts”—and this, then, is the field of exploration of the School of Political Arts that we are starting at

Sciences Po in Paris this fall. How can you have a “representative democracy” without changing the forms and the forums by which issues are represented? The Public is to be composed, and the State rediscovered. □

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NOTES

1. Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1925, repr., New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 121.
2. Ibid.
3. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1927), 34.



Above: Independent Climate Change Email Review panel holding press conference on their investigation into the “Climategate” scandal, Royal Institution of Great Britain, London, July 7, 2010. From left: James Norton, Sir Muir Russell, Geoffrey Boulton, Peter Clarke.

Below, from top: Demonstrators marching during COP15, Copenhagen, December 17, 2009. Photo: Kris Krüg. Avaaz's “No Forest Fraud” event at COP15 in protest of Austria, Finland, and Sweden's policy on the calculation of deforestation emissions, December 8, 2009. Photo: Matthew McDermott.

