



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Walter Lippmann: A Content Analysis

Author(s): David E. Weingast

Source: *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer, 1950, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer, 1950), pp. 296-302

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2745799>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



and Oxford University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Public Opinion Quarterly*

JSTOR

Walter Lippmann: A Content Analysis

BY DAVID E. WEINGAST

Content analysis can provide a more stable basis for the interpretation of the views of opinion leaders than can an impressionistic or "anecdotal" method. The "content category" approach is illustrated by an analysis of the columns of Walter Lippmann written during the 1932-1938 period. This analysis shows that the columnist took a clearly positive or negative attitude on only a few major New Deal issues. With respect to the majority of them he found himself initially in agreement, but became increasingly opposed as time went on. The same development characterized his attitude toward Roosevelt and the New Deal itself.

The author, who completed his graduate work at Columbia University, is Instructor in Politics at Rutgers University and author of a recent book entitled Walter Lippmann: A Study in Personal Journalism.

In "A Test of the News,"¹ published thirty years ago, Walter Lippmann and Charles Merz, then editors of the *New Republic*, did a pioneer job of evaluating the New York *Times*. Focusing their investigation on the *Times*' treatment of the Russian Revolution, Lippmann and Merz studied over a thousand issues of the paper between March 1917 and March 1920. Though they did their research before the days of the "content category," their labors were distinguished by a unique objectivity. Present-day students of social measurement cannot fail to be impressed by their work.

Acknowledging that available information on the Russian Revolution was incomplete, biased, or false, the two writers used as points of reference—we would say "content categories"—only facts that had been indisputably established: that the Russian offensive under Kerensky in July 1917 had failed; that the Soviets had overthrown the Provi-

sional Government in November 1917; that at Brest-Litovsk the Soviets and Germans had made a separate peace in March 1918; that the Kolchak, Denikin, and Yudenitch offensives had miscarried; that the Bolshevik Government was still functioning in March 1920. Lippmann and Merz tested the *Times*' stories against these events.

The investigators came up with some bitter conclusions. They found the *Times* guilty of having misled its readers on one of the most stupendous events in modern history. The paper had failed in its primary responsibility to publish accurate, reliable information. Whatever its purpose, the *Times* had not given its readers even the core of established facts on which intelligent judgment could be based. The two analysts saw as a "fundamental task of the Twentieth Century" the supplying of accurate news. It was impera-

¹ A supplement to the *New Republic* of August 4, 1920, Vol. XXIII, 42 pp.

tive, they wrote, that the newspaper industry police itself. It would have to establish a code of honor and enforce it. Almost three decades later the Commission on Freedom of the Press,² after an elaborate and costly study, proposed reforms that strikingly paralleled those suggested by Lippmann and Merz.

In the fullness of time Charles Merz has himself come to be Editor of the *New York Times*, and Walter Lippmann is recognized as the dean of America's serious columnists. In the meantime, specialists in sociology and political science have carried forward the work of appraising newspapers, and have refined—but not revolutionized—the technique used by Lippmann and Merz in 1920.

New crises have displaced the old. In the years since World War I the pace of history has been greatly stepped up; the need for an informed public opinion remains as pressing as ever. The responsibility residing in newspapers to enlighten the people was never more urgent than it is today. Here the 1920 researches of Lippmann and Merz are of great potential usefulness.

Today's columnists—the Lippmanns, Winchells, Peglers, and Pearsons—are successors to the great tradition of "personal journalism" identified with such names as Isaiah Thomas, Thomas Paine, John Fenno, Philip Freneau, Horace Greeley, James Gordon Bennett, Henry J. Raymond, Charles A. Dana, and Joseph Pulitzer. Like their famous predecessors, present-day columnists give a distinctly individual interpretation of the news; they enjoy great personal followings.

These practitioners of personal journalism share in the sense of authority that newspapers convey. To their read-

ers they are experts on public affairs, possessing extraordinary powers of insight, if not of divination. They are widely quoted to support or contest prevailing views. They help, in short, to fashion public opinion. Accordingly, they are appropriate subjects for special study. Since they operate in the public realm, their background, thought patterns, and prejudices are matters of immediate public interest.

The Use of Content Analysis in Studying Opinion Makers

There are several possible approaches to the study of these opinion-makers. One is the conventional historian's technique of gathering myriad facts about the subject, organizing this material into an acceptable pattern—topical, chronological, or both—and writing the most readable account the author's talents permit. Many great and important studies have employed just this procedure.

But in recent decades this so-called "anecdotal" approach has been brought into question by a group of social scientists who deplore what they regard as a lack of objectivity inherent in the method. The conventional historian's area of discretion, they contend, is so vast that his selection of "facts" must be largely a subjective one. He is constantly harrassed by questions of what to include and what to leave out; and how much one fact is worth as against another. Lasswell, Lazarsfeld, and others have pioneered the thought that objective points of reference must, wherever possible, be employed. All relevant data must then be "tested" against these points of reference. Then, and only then, judgments can be made that may

² *A Free and Responsible Press*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947, 139 pp.

be considered relatively objective and accurate. The "content category" was devised to give effect to this principle.³ This may be described as a subject, item, or quality with relatively well-defined limits, which is adapted to statistical treatment such as tabulation.

The author applied this technique—adumbrated by Lippmann and Merz in 1920—to a study of Walter Lippmann himself. As author, editor, and columnist, Lippmann has been a prominent publicist for over thirty years. Since 1931 writer of a column, "Today and Tomorrow," that appears in 175 newspapers in both hemispheres, he is widely respected as a keen, thoughtful, and informed analyst of public affairs.

Content Categories Based on New Deal Issues

During the whole period of the New Deal, Walter Lippmann's column appeared regularly. Throughout the crisis years 1932 to 1938, he wrote frequently on the measures advanced by the Roosevelt Administration to repair the effects of a shattering economic debacle. After 1938 Lippmann—like the Administration itself—turned increasing attention to foreign affairs.

The New Deal issues suggested themselves as highly satisfactory content categories. They were definite; and Lippmann had expressed himself on all of them. If his views could be evaluated—say as "favorable," "unfavorable," and "neutral"—and then tabulated, an accurate interpretation might be made as to his position on some of the most controversial legislation ever debated in Congress. Such an interpretation would represent not the author's "impression" of where Lippmann stood, but rather a factual summary of Lippmann's own

stated opinions. Above all, any other researcher using this content category approach would develop the same findings. This, it must be admitted, is a novel concept in historiography, where it has long been accepted that different writers using the same data are likely to emerge with different conclusions.

The author read every Lippmann column written during the years 1932 through 1938—fortunately indexed⁴—that included a reference to a domestic issue. A "reference," for purposes of this analysis, was the "smallest meaningful unit." It might be a phrase, a sentence, or even a whole essay. The writer picked the following subjects or content categories, on all of which Lippmann had written with some frequency during this period:

President Franklin D. Roosevelt
The New Deal (as a whole)
The First Agricultural Adjustment Act
The National Industrial Recovery Act
The Tennessee Valley Authority
The National Labor Relations Act
The Social Security Program
Wage-and-Hour Legislation

The President and his Program

Lippmann's statements about the President and his program were divided into three groups: "favorable," "unfavorable," and "neutral." When Lippmann expressed approval of a measure, a tally was entered in the

³ For the theory see Douglas Waples, Bernard Berelson, and Franklin R. Bradshaw, *What Reading Does to People*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940, 222 pp.

⁴ By Robert O. Anthony, Curator of the Lippmann Collection now housed in the Yale University Library.

“favorable” column; when he opposed a measure he was recorded as “unfavorable”; when he presented a “balanced” view or was non-committal he was put down as “neutral.”

Only those references were tabulated in which Lippmann expressed a definite “value judgment” or personal opinion. Mere incidental mentions of the President or his measures, of which there were a vast number, were not included in the tabulations.⁵

Table 1 shows the “favorable,” “unfavorable,” and “neutral” references made by the columnist to Mr. Roosevelt in the years 1932 through 1938.

TABLE 1

REFERENCES TO PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT,
1932-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	13	61	46
Per cent	11%	51%	38%

In this period Lippmann's attitude toward Mr. Roosevelt went through several stages. He was firmly opposed to Roosevelt's 1932 candidacy, hoping to see the nomination captured by Newton D. Baker, a long-time friend. He found New York's Governor Roosevelt altogether unequal to the requirements of the Presidency.

The columnist became reconciled to the inevitable, however, and in October 1932, a month before the election, declared that he would “cheerfully” vote for Roosevelt. Lippmann condemned Hoover's use of “scare tactics,” and gave his blessing to projected Democratic reforms.

After the election, he urged the fullest support for the new President, emphasizing that Roosevelt's mandate to

act was clear. This ardent support continued through the middle of 1935.

In the summer of that year, however, Lippmann took issue with the President for insisting on a strong holding-company bill, which the columnist had previously applauded as old-fashioned, American trust-busting. Thereafter, Lippmann's hostility to the President's program mounted. He sharply criticized the “soak-the-rich” tax plan, the relief expenditures, and the agricultural program, and became openly suspicious that Roosevelt was scheming to install a “planned economy.” The President, he claimed, was not even a true liberal, but a “Tory philanthropist” who was more inclined to help the people than to let them help themselves. He also charged that the Chief Executive had perverted the “spending program” into an instrument of political aggrandizement. The columnist announced that Alf Landon was his choice for President in 1936.

Roosevelt's Supreme Court plan of 1937 touched off a sharp outburst by the columnist, who went so far as to predict that if the President succeeded in enlarging the Court, he would next attempt to “muzzle the press.”

As Table 2 makes clear, Lippmann's references to the New Deal as a whole in the years 1933 through 1938 were predominantly unfavorable.

⁵ After eliminating all “incidental mentions,” the author weighed each of Lippmann's “value judgments” and assigned it to whichever of the three categories seemed the best fit. In almost all cases the designation was obvious. In a small percentage of cases there was doubt as to the appropriate category. Here the author decided, subjectively, where the reference belonged. He reviewed his conclusions at intervals of several weeks and made virtually no changes in designation.

TABLE 2

REFERENCES TO THE NEW DEAL, 1933-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	5	38	11
Per cent	9%	70%	20%

In the early days of the Roosevelt Administration Lippmann rejected the idea that the New Deal tended toward either communism or fascism. He found, instead, that it was in the spirit of Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom.

But he soon began to sense plans for a collectivist economy directed from Washington. He predicted that any such program would be attended by the noisome evils associated with Federal Prohibition. Well before the close of Mr. Roosevelt's first term, the columnist was rousing his followers to a defense of their liberties.

Box Score on the Issues

The AAA. The First Agricultural Adjustment Act, designed to raise farm income by limiting production, seemed reasonable to Lippmann in the beginning. After it had been in operation a short time, however, he found that it was promoting scarcity and high prices. After the Act's invalidation in 1936 he decided that it had been a "collectivist" measure. This completed the indictment. (See Table 3.)

TABLE 3

REFERENCES TO THE FIRST AGRICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT ACT, 1933-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	2	19	9
Per cent	7%	63%	30%

The NRA. The National Industrial Recovery Act, a far-reaching plan to stabilize industry, end price-cutting, and strengthen labor, enjoyed brief favor in Lippmann's eyes. (See Table 4.)

TABLE 4

REFERENCES TO THE NRA, 1933-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	2	32	4
Per cent	5%	84%	11%

He objected to the pace set by NRA's Administrator, General Hugh Johnson, and to the hysteria that might result in reprisals against small businessmen who couldn't afford to comply with the codes. He charged that the NRA would encourage monopoly and neutralize the Administration's efforts to achieve lower prices for the consumer.

By the end of 1934, Lippmann was writing NRA off as a costly failure. When, the following year, the Supreme Court invalidated NRA, he insisted that the President himself should be grateful.

The TVA. Lippmann's references to the Tennessee Valley Authority, while few in number, were generally favorable. (See Table 5.)

TABLE 5

REFERENCES TO TVA, 1933-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	3	1	4
Per cent	37.5%	12.5%	50%

TVA represented to Lippmann a wholesome decentralization of industry. It was an undertaking of long-range social utility that came more properly under public than private auspices. Its operational policies, moreover, were in-

spired more by Henry Ford than by Karl Marx.

Lippmann expressed concern, however, for the utility operators who couldn't know where the Administration would strike next. He demanded that the Government state the limits of its intentions along these lines.

The Wagner Act. As Table 6 shows, Lippmann was firmly opposed to the Wagner Act. This is the more remarkable in view of his long record of professions in labor's cause.

TABLE 6

REFERENCES TO THE NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS ACT, 1934-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	0	12	0
Per cent	0%	100%	0%

His basic objections were that the Act imposed duties on the government that it could not carry out, and that employers were placed under the obligation to bargain collectively with their employees. The effort to guarantee collective bargaining on a national scale, he said, was an impossible burden for any government agency to assume. Paralysis would overtake the organization.

While government could protect labor's right to organize, it could never compel an employer to bargain in good faith. Lippmann found the Act "biased," and its administration "incompetent" and "prejudiced."

Social Security. Toward the 1935 Social Security Program Lippmann had mixed feelings. Before its enactment, he had approved the report of the President's Committee on Economic Security with its recommendation of unemployment insurance. And he had categori-

cally denounced the dole as demoralizing as well as uneconomic. But his enthusiasm for the Social Security Act was short-lived, as indicated by Table 7.

TABLE 7

REFERENCES TO THE SOCIAL SECURITY PROGRAM, 1933-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	5	6	9
Per cent	25%	30%	45%

While he approved of old-age pensions, Lippmann began to doubt the value of the unemployment-insurance plan. The insurance fund, he feared, would quickly be emptied, and the payments would then be a dole paid by the Treasury. At the same time, he supported the projected public-works program.

Increasingly, however, Lippmann's emphasis was on balancing the budget. That part of the Social Security Act under which the Federal government made grants he called "Siphon No. 5." He spoke also of a "pipe" having been "laid into the Treasury." He came finally to recommend that the relief problem be turned back to the localities, the families, and the individuals concerned.

Wages and Hours. The 1937 Connery Bill was designed to effect minimum wages, a limit on hours, and the prohibition of child labor. This, said Lippmann, was the wrong way of correcting admitted evils. It would be much better, he thought, to launch a large-scale, Federal program to conserve the soil, retire marginal lands, relieve farm tenancy, and develop the TVA. Such measures would raise regional living standards and workers would necessarily benefit. (See Table 8.)

TABLE 8
REFERENCES TO WAGE-AND-HOUR
LEGISLATION, 1937-1938

	<i>Favorable</i>	<i>Unfavorable</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
Number	0	16	1
Per cent	0%	94%	6%

Wage-and-hour legislation, according to Lippmann, was really a scheme by Northern manufacturers to wipe out the "natural" advantages of Southern industry. He saw in it, too, further evidence of a power-hungry Administration arrogating to itself a new field of operations. He comforted the underpaid Southern worker with the prospect of improved conditions when the area was rehabilitated—a benefit remote, even if certain.

Advantages and Limitations of the Content Category Approach

Here, then, is the raw material for the interpretation of a publicist. The tabulations are not, in themselves, conclusions. But, properly used, they make it possible for the social scientist to reach conclusions based on something better than capricious selection.

The pitfalls are many. In the case of Walter Lippmann, for example, his views have been stated not only in his "Today and Tomorrow" column, but in a score of books and a great many magazine articles, as well as in public addresses. His various statements have not always been congruous, by any means. This clearly points to an area where the most careful analysis and interpretation are required. These and other aspects of Mr. Lippmann's work and career are discussed in the author's full study of the columnist.⁶

Another serious question relates to the matter of intensity. For example,

Lippmann lauded the social-security principle—frequently and eloquently. Yet, eyeing the cost of Federal relief in 1936, he recommended forcing the problem back upon localities, upon families, and upon individuals. How many of his pro-Social-Security articles were washed out by this recommendation at a time when the impotence of "localities," "families," and "individuals" was widely acknowledged?

Nevertheless, the content-category approach is ripe with suggestions for better interpretation of social phenomena. It introduces a needed element of definiteness and objectivity in a field notoriously susceptible to subjective judgments. The scholar who employs this device is obviously not relieved of his major responsibility of weighing evidence and drawing conclusions. But he will be the beneficiary of a technique that is capable of rendering his evidence more accurate. One distinguished historian, noting the author's tabulations on the Wagner Act, insisted they were "misleading." He had "always regarded" Lippmann as friendly to labor. Yet Lippmann's written record on the Wagner Act showed uniform opposition.

Historical works—not to mention the enormous non-scholarly output of books, magazines, and newspapers—abound in myths based on unsupported generalizations. Fragmentary evidence is still being dignified as universal truth.

But the bastions of convention are not as impregnable as they appear. The "anecdotalists" must gradually concede that that which is measurable should be measured—not guessed at.

⁶ David E. Weingast, *Walter Lippmann: A Study in Personal Journalism*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949, 175 pp.