

The Plasticity of Social Knowledge

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and U.S. Communication Research, 1937–1952

▼ RESEARCH ARTICLE

▼ **ABSTRACT** This article describes how the Austrian-American sociologist Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his Bureau of Applied Social Research applied a consistent bundle of findings—about the interplay of mass media and personal influence—to sharply different contexts. From the late 1930s through to the early 1950s, Lazarsfeld stressed a stable set of social-psychological conditions that complicate media persuasion, which, however, could still be effective if paired with face-to-face campaigns. He developed the claim, first, with the aim of promoting educational radio. At the outbreak of war in Europe, Lazarsfeld and the Bureau moved to apply the findings to domestic morale and propaganda. In the immediate postwar years, Lazarsfeld redirected the Bureau's energies towards domestic-facing social problems, retrofitting his personal-influence framework to the promotion of peace and tolerance. With the Cold War, finally, Lazarsfeld reverted to a martial posture, as social progress gave sudden way to psychological warfare. Thus, the paper describes a four-stage seesaw pattern: persuasion for social ends in the first and third periods, succeeded in both cases by war service. The Bureau's communication research in the century's middle-third is, the paper argues, a case study in the plasticity of social knowledge—variation around a stable theme. What was pliable was the topical enclosure, dictated in the main by the sponsorship on offer.

▼ **KEYWORDS** History of social science; sociology of academic knowledge; social problems; funding

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BREPOLS

“Communication research,” as a self-understood U.S. field of interdisciplinary social science, was born during World War II. The sociologists, political scientists, and psychologists who adopted the label were brought together, first, by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1939 and then—once the U.S. entered the war—by the federal government’s massive wartime mobilization of social scientists. The result was a field hitched to, even defined by, the urgent task of morale and propaganda research. The dramatic escalation of the Cold War just a few years later produced a remarkable revival of that World War II formation—a remobilization of the propaganda and morale network, oriented to the new Soviet enemy.

This article lingers on the interregnum of the immediate postwar years, when the field’s martial posture was briefly relaxed. In a series of books, conferences, and collections from the period, communication researchers—once and future propagandists—recast the nascent field as relevant to longstanding social problems. In a 1947 special issue on the “maintenance of peaceful group relations,” for example, Columbia University sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld promoted face-to-face communication as a tool for spreading anti-prejudice tolerance.¹ Chicago’s Louis Wirth, the same year, delivered his presidential address to the American Sociological Association on “consensus and mass communication.”² And education scholar Lyman Bryson, introducing a 1948 lecture-series-turned-collection, described “communication for world community” as “our most urgent problem, immediate peace”—in a liberal internationalist key that would, in a few short months, come under ferocious Cold War censure.³ Indeed, by the late 1940s this literature and its authors were restored, in near real time, to their wartime preoccupation with propaganda themes.

The paper traces the field’s broader arc through the case of Lazarsfeld and his Columbia-based Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR). The experience of Lazarsfeld and his Bureau colleagues, in this respect at least, stands as a proxy for the wider field. The short-lived postwar peace had many self-identified communication researchers applying propaganda lessons to the home front—and to the project of international comity. They, like the Bureau researchers described here, resumed their wartime footing in due course.

The field’s interval of social relevance is presented as a case study in the plasticity of social knowledge—since the same theories, and even empirical findings, were deployed for very different ends, as social progress gave sudden way to psychological warfare. My core question is how to account for the blend of whiplash and consistency that the paper documents. The stable claim put forward by Lazarsfeld and his colleagues, as I develop in more detail below, was really a pair of findings united by a theory. The first finding was that mass media campaigns to change people’s minds tend not to work, at least not

1 Lazarsfeld, “Some Remarks.”

2 Wirth, “Consensus and Mass Communication.”

3 Bryson, “Problems of Communication,” 4–5.

on their own. Face-to-face efforts to persuade are much more effective—the second finding. The theory was that, if personal appeals were *coupled* with the mass-media sort, persuasion might work after all.

Lazarsfeld developed the claim—that face-to-face campaigns could supplement media appeals—in the late interwar years, as I show in the paper’s first section. His patron was the selfsame Rockefeller Foundation, which was aiming, at the time, to promote educational radio. With the outbreak of war in Europe, the foundation made a hard pivot to domestic morale and propaganda—convening the scholars, Lazarsfeld included, who took on the new “communication research” label. As I develop in the article’s second section, Lazarsfeld and his Bureau adapted their face-to-face persuasion findings to aid the war campaign. In the immediate postwar period, they—like many others in the war-forged communication-research fraternity—pivoted again, in what was (for Lazarsfeld) something of a revival. Lazarsfeld redirected some of the Bureau’s energies to domestic-facing social problems, as chronicled in the article’s third and longest section. His personal-influence framework, in particular, was retrofitted to the promotion of peace and tolerance. It was, however, a brief interlude, as I take up in the fourth and final section centered on the field’s abrupt Cold War reversion to propaganda.

The paper, in short, describes a four-stage seesaw pattern: persuasion for social ends in the first and third periods, succeeded in both cases by war service. The article attends most to the postwar interval between the two mobilizations, since the period’s brief turn to social problems has gone unrecognized in the literature. The broader burden raised by the case study is to explain the continuity-in-rupture—the stability of the BASR’s core claims about persuasion set against the divergent ends to which they were, over time, applied.

To make sense of the puzzle, I point to the context of mid-century applied social science. Large-scale, team-based research organizations, joined to new, labor-intensive methods like survey research, were in ascendance in the mid-to late 1930s.⁴ The example of organized war research boosted interest in such centers after the war, many of them, indeed, modeled on Lazarsfeld’s BASR.⁵ Studies in the new, team-based mode were expensive to run; they required sponsors or patrons in government, philanthropy, or commerce to cover the bills. The result, for institutes like Lazarsfeld’s, was a ceaseless campaign to secure funds.

Most would-be patrons, in the U.S. case, had instrumental purposes in mind. This was true even of Rockefeller, after the foundation’s high-profile turn to an applied agenda in the early 1930s.⁶ At one important register, then, the shifting ends served by Lazarsfeld and his fellow communication

4 Geiger, *Research and Relevant Knowledge*, chap. 2; Converse, *Survey Research*, chap. 8.

5 Barton, “Lazarsfeld as Institutional Inventor.”

6 Bulmer and Bulmer, “Philanthropy and Social Science,” 403.

researchers reflected the goals of their rotating cast of underwriters. In wartime, the money was in morale and propaganda; before and after, funds for uplift and amelioration were on offer.

It is tempting to conclude that communication research—born in exigency—hired itself out to whomever would pay. The impression has some truth, but can be taken too far. The field's patrons dictated its topical domains, even the kinds of questions—around short-term persuasion—that could be asked. But communication researchers were using their funders too, for their own intellectual ends.

In Lazarsfeld's case, those ends were the study of methodology itself, together with the psychology of decision-making.⁷ The pet projects of a succession of client-funders were, for him, convenient vehicles for *his* relatively stable research agenda. He was, indeed, an early and eloquent proponent of the view that applied work should yield scientific fruit.⁸ This was a not-uncommon stance among U.S. social scientists in the mid- to late 1930s, but the war experience accentuated the point, demonstrating that team-based research on applied problems could produce rich theoretical returns. By the end of the 1940s the Ford Foundation had given this postwar sensibility a name: the behavioral sciences.⁹

Communication research occupied, as it were, a forward position in this double-barreled scientific worldview—an “ideology of science and service” in J. Michael Sproule's phrase.¹⁰ For Lazarsfeld and others in the field, there was, I suggest, an implicit distinction between a scientific core and an applied periphery. On this view, academic questions could be posed within an enclosure of acceptable, even welcome, plasticity—in the form of a plurality of applied ends. It was in these terms, I conclude, that Lazarsfeld and the Bureau reconciled stability with change.

The Lessons of Educational Broadcasting

Lazarsfeld was an unlikely pioneer of communication research. Born in 1901 to Jewish parents prominent in Austrian socialist politics, he earned his doctorate in applied mathematics at the University of Vienna. Blocked by anti-Semitism from a conventional academic career, he established in the early 1920s a psychology-oriented market research bureau—the prototype for what would become the BASR. He won a Rockefeller fellowship to the U.S. in 1933, and arranged to stay after the fascists' seizure of power the next year. He quickly forged connections with U.S. attitude psychologists and market researchers, and established himself as an important figure in the new interdisciplinary field

7 Boudon, “Introduction,” 6–10.

8 E.g., Lazarsfeld, “Radio Research and Applied Psychology,” 5–7.

9 Pooley, “A ‘Not Particularly Felicitous’ Phrase.”

10 Sproule, “Propaganda Studies,” 75.

of sampling-based public opinion polling. In 1936 he was recruited to direct a Rockefeller-funded project on radio research which, a few years later and after an unlikely appointment to Columbia's sociology department, he would recast as the BASR.¹¹

Lazarsfeld's late 1930s radio research centered on educational broadcasting. The project was conceived by John Marshall, a Rockefeller officer who had hatched a plan to convince the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting Systems (CBS) to run educational programming—after the commercial networks had successfully warded off legislative efforts to set aside significant radio spectrum for educational stations. Marshall's plan was to fund audience research that would, his thinking went, show the networks that educational programming had a large, underserved listenership.¹²

As summarized in *Radio and the Printed Page* (1940), Lazarsfeld's key finding was that educational radio, with its aim to uplift the uneducated, tended to miss its target. The main audience for educational programming was, he found, the already educated. The less-learned listeners—the educationalists' target audience—were opting instead for the medium's lightest, least edifying fare. There was, Lazarsfeld concluded, no vast pool of under-informed listeners eager to have their minds stocked with broadcast knowledge.¹³

Marshall's hope had been that the data would prompt commercial broadcasters to embrace the educationalists. Not only did Lazarsfeld plunge that vision into a cold, statistical bath; he also explicitly shifted the public interest burden off the radio networks and onto the educationalists. Much of the book is taken up with the recommendation that educational broadcasters engage in "audience building": If the problem is the audience and its disinterest—and not, say, the paucity of programming itself—then it is the educational advocates' responsibility to wake the slumbering listener. An aggressive "audience-building" campaign, Lazarsfeld counseled, will finally win over the networks: "Nothing will do more to remind the radio industry of its obligation to give public service than a public enlightened to the fact that this is its due."¹⁴

Lazarsfeld urged educationalists to organize their audiences on the ground, community by community. Educational advocates should cast themselves in a local mold—"canalize" the "many suitable radio programs" for their community, with local tie-ins and guided discussion. If the educator had imagined himself, before, as the provider of broadcast "powder" which "drove the bullet forward," he would do better, instead, as the local "trigger" which releases the "ever-present energy" of radio programs. Lazarsfeld concluded that the failures of mass mediation could be partly salvaged through face-to-face contact.¹⁵

11 There is a large literature on Lazarsfeld that covers these biographical facts. See, for example, Sills, "Paul F. Lazarsfeld," 254–59.

12 Buxton, "Political Economy."

13 Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*; Lazarsfeld, "Audience Building," 535.

14 Lazarsfeld, "Audience Building," 541.

15 Lazarsfeld, "Audience Building," 536.

Here was the core personal-influence construal, in kernel form—conceived, notably, in the service of cultural uplift. Almost immediately, however, the nascent framework was repurposed, as German tanks rolled into Poland.

The First Mobilization

Before 1939, there was no such thing as communication research, at least under that name. There were, instead, scattered clusters of medium-specific study—devoted to book reading, radio, film, and newspapers—overlapping with a loosely organized field of “propaganda studies” concerned, in part, with inoculating Americans to the cunning art of propaganda. The onset of war motivated a new and countervailing imperative, to make propaganda *work*—in the service of domestic morale and the overseas struggle for hearts and minds. It was in this martial context that the “communication research” label was adopted, as a self-conscious alternative to propaganda studies.¹⁶ John Marshall, the enterprising Rockefeller officer, was the new field’s key convener. Under Marshall’s direction, the foundation assembled a propaganda bureaucracy-in-waiting in the months after the 1939 Polish invasion, when political sensitivities made such a move infeasible for the Roosevelt administration. He enlisted a few dozen social scientists in the effort, including Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, Hadley Cantril, Hans Speier, and Douglas Waples.¹⁷

The Rockefeller campaign included over a dozen research centers and “listening” posts, alongside a “Communications” seminar tasked with plotting a strategy to counter German propaganda and to boost Americans’ support for joining the conflict, should it come to that.¹⁸ The group’s 1940 report (“For private circulation only”) is drenched in no-time-to-waste crisis language. Its unambiguous message is that communication research—the newly named field—must be marshaled to identify “the means by which leadership can secure consent” of the American populace. The report cites Lazarsfeld’s in-progress, Rockefeller-funded study of a small Midwestern city which, four years later, would be published with much fanfare as *The People’s Choice*. Here the study’s early findings are framed as breaking-news insight into the hard task of persuasion. Lazarsfeld’s team has learned that “opinion in a community tends to be channeled through key opinion leaders,” who, in turn, read “more serious national magazines and metropolitan newspapers.”¹⁹ This is, in unpublished form, the two-step flow of communication model—the soon-famous idea, elaborated in *The People’s Choice*’s last chapter, that media messages flow first to opinion leaders, who then spread the news to their social circles.²⁰

16 Sproule, “Propaganda Studies,” 68–75.

17 Gary, “Communication Research.”

18 Gary, “Communication Research,” 142–44.

19 “Research in Mass Communication,” July 1940, Fol. 2677, Box 224, RG 1.1, RF, 1, 29–31.

20 Lazarsfeld et al., *The People’s Choice*, chap. 16.

It is, too, a significant tweaking of the “audience building” theme developed in *Radio and the Printed Page*, with the same over-arching takeaway, that direct media persuasion rarely works, relative to face-to-face influence, which, however, can be used to supplement direct appeals. But here the focus has shifted, decisively, from education to wartime propaganda.

When the much larger mobilization of U.S. social scientists got underway after Pearl Harbor, there was, then, already a nucleus of communication researchers in place.²¹ The core Rockefeller group fanned out to the dozen or so agencies and units that comprised the sprawling wartime propaganda bureaucracy, taking up positions or consultancies.²² Speier, Lasswell, Cantril, Edward Shils, and many others moved from post to post as the war dragged on, building a web of contacts and collaborators in the process. Their students—future scholars like Ithiel de Sola Pool, Daniel Lerner, and W. Phillips Davison—had their graduate training in the field, at the same agencies and alongside their teachers.

Meanwhile, Lazarsfeld—who in 1940 had moved to Columbia with his radio research shop—began an enduring collaboration with the sociological theorist Robert Merton. With Merton as associate director, the radio research unit was soon re-christened the Bureau of Applied Social Research.²³ In a series of wartime consultancies, talks, and studies, Lazarsfeld and Merton were—like most everyone else in the emerging “communication research” community—preoccupied with the campaign to boost domestic morale and to spread Allied propaganda abroad. A slew of federal agencies—the Department of Agriculture and the Treasury, the Army’s Research Branch, and the Office of War Information (OWI), among others—hired Lazarsfeld and his research office to help measure and improve persuasion campaigns.²⁴

In a 1943 published talk, for example, Lazarsfeld and Merton drew on the Bureau’s research to advise the script-writers and producers then serving on the propaganda-and-morale front lines. They had rushed the studies, with the war in mind; it was, they said, research conducted “with a pistol to our head.” They proceeded to draw out, from past and present Bureau studies, all the ways that propaganda fails or even boomerangs. Their aim was to show that careful measurement of persuasive content and its target audiences could avert such backfiring—and make victory more likely.²⁵

21 There is a large literature on U.S. social scientists’ wartime service. See, for example, Converse, *Survey Research*, chaps. 5–7; Herman, *Romance of American Psychology*, chap. 4; Bernstein, *Perilous Progress*, chap. 4; Simpson, *Science of Coercion*, chap. 2.

22 Gary, “Communication Research,” 142–44.

23 Lazarsfeld, “An Episode in the History,” 276. The Office of Radio Research was not officially renamed to the Bureau of Applied Social Research until 1944, but the latter is used throughout this paper to avoid confusion.

24 Converse, *Survey Research*, 163, 173, 180–81.

25 Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Studies in Radio,” 59. See also Merton and Kendall, “Boomerang Response.”

The shift from education to war was registered in a pair of *Radio Research* collections that Lazarsfeld edited with Frank Stanton, the CBS research chief. The 1941 volume is a peacetime document, reporting on studies of “serious music,” young people’s reading habits, and farmers’ experience with radio. The studies strike the familiar theme: Media persuasion is hard, owing to audience predispositions and selective exposure. Thus, campaigns to improve musical tastes, convince children to read, or educate farmers—to take the volume’s examples—must be carefully designed, and supplemented by face-to-face contact whenever possible.²⁶

The same lessons appear in *Radio Research 1942–1943*, the second volume, but they are here mobilized for war. Lazarsfeld and Stanton observe, using the new “communication research” label, that the war “was responsible for expanding greatly the area in which communication research has become important.” What was, two years before, the work of small, university-based research operations, is now the “extensive activities of large government offices.” The “present emergency” has, if anything, “strengthened demands” for research. Chapters on “radio in wartime” and German radio propaganda blend with methodological studies whose promise, in this volume, is science in the service of propaganda and morale.²⁷

The Peace and Tolerance Interval

By late 1943, with Allied victory a likely if unsecured conclusion, Lazarsfeld and his Bureau colleagues began to imagine a postwar order, one in which their propaganda swords might be beat into pro-social ploughshares. Indeed, in their 1943 talk Lazarsfeld and Merton predict, and endorse, a post-conflict pivot to social problems. Should the government “seek to maintain the educational and propagandistic functions which it has assumed in an effort to maintain morale during the war,” they said, their lessons could apply to the “promotion of public health, nutrition and educational activities in the postwar period.”²⁸

The next year, in 1944, Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet published *The People’s Choice*, the 1940 community study. An instant classic of voting research, the book largely ignored the overseas war, as did the Ohio electorate the authors canvassed. The main finding was that few voters changed their minds, with media-influenced conversion an especially rare occurrence. In keeping with other Bureau results, the chief effects of mass media were to reinforce citizens’ already held beliefs. *The People’s Choice* concluded with a speculative last chapter, “The Nature of Personal Influence,” which

²⁶ Lazarsfeld and Stanton, *Radio Research 1941*.

²⁷ Lazarsfeld and Stanton, *Radio Research 1942–1943*, v.

²⁸ Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Studies in Radio,” 67.

proposed the two-step flow idea earlier floated, in starkly morale-building terms, in the private 1940 Rockefeller report. In the published book, the authors stress the relative efficacy of face-to-face persuasion: “In the last analysis, more than anything else people can move other people.”²⁹ This was, of course, much the same personal-influence lesson delivered to educational broadcasters in the late 1930s.

As the war wound down, Lazarsfeld and the Bureau, in effect, de-mobilized. In the early postwar years, the Columbia researchers secured over two dozen commissions, many from media-firm and other commercial clients like CBS, Ex Lax, and General Mills.³⁰ The two high-profile sequels to *The People’s Choice*, *Personal Influence* (1945 study) and *Voting* (1948 study), were themselves supported by corporate funders.³¹ The early postwar Bureau’s reams of bound reports, looseleaf memos, and mimeographed questionnaires testify to a deference to clients’ topical agendas. At the same time, and in keeping with Lazarsfeld’s practice all the way back to Vienna, the Bureau routinely re-fashioned commissioned work into published books and articles centered on scholarly themes, many focused on methodology or decision-making.

The Bureau’s tradition of persuasion study informed some of these studies, notably the two *People’s Choice* sequels—both published, after long gestations, in the mid-1950s.³² A significant share of the BASR’s early postwar communication research was, however, devoted to social problems and cultural uplift—a revival in kind of Lazarsfeld’s 1930s radio work. There were two main areas, both social-problem domains, that would assume special prominence, if only for a few short years.

The first was the problem of war itself, paired with the resolve to establish conditions for lasting peace. For the Bureau, this meant an early postwar focus on international broadcasting in support of what would become the United Nations. The second domain was prejudice, which the Bureau targeted in a series of studies commissioned by the American Jewish Committee (AJC). In both areas, the Bureau strategy was to deploy its core finding, by then well-established, that media persuasion only works under specific conditions, among them the roll-out of companion face-to-face campaigns. This was the conjecture-cum-lesson of *Radio and the Printed Page*, a finding subsequently refined and confirmed in war service. Now it was time to apply the lessons on behalf of peace and tolerance.

29 Lazarsfeld et al., *The People’s Choice*, 35, 36, 71, chap. 16.

30 Barton, *Guide to the Bureau*, 13–18.

31 Berelson et al., *Voting*, xv–xvi; Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*, xiv.

32 Berelson et al., *Voting*; Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*.

Communicating Peace

Like many other social scientists looking to the postwar future, Lazarsfeld was invested in the question of peace. In papers and talks in the war's waning days and its immediate aftermath, he explored how mass media might contribute to the maintenance of a stable international order. He contributed a paper to an early 1945 volume on *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, edited by anthropologist Ralph Linton. Lazarsfeld's chapter, co-authored with a Bureau doctoral student, argues strenuously for a public relations campaign for a "world organization of nations"—to use communications, in other words, to "help us cope with the dangers communications have aggravated." In uncharacteristically urgent prose, Lazarsfeld marshaled the Bureau's war-honed propaganda lessons to win support for what would become, later in 1945, the United Nations.³³

The prevention of armed conflict, Lazarsfeld wrote, is "increasingly imperative for human survival." The resilience of the postwar peace will depend on the legitimacy and efficacy of a "concrete international authority." For any such agency to win "new identifications and supranational loyalties," a massive, but carefully planned, propaganda campaign will be required. The paper outlines a "positive program of action" by allied nonprofits, national governments, and—once it is launched—the new agency itself.³⁴

Lazarsfeld assigned to communication researchers an important role in the ongoing campaign. "What help can we expect from the social scientists?" he asked. "The answer lies in a discipline of communication research which has developed only recently..."³⁵ In what was already a staple of the Bureau's media research, Lazarsfeld stressed the tendency of audiences to read and listen to media aligned with their values—and to rationalize those few belief-challenging messages that seep through. "Those who choose to listen or read, do so because they expect satisfactions, and those who would be heard must shape their messages accordingly." In a variation on his much better-known statement about the methodological equivalence of voting and buying soap, Lazarsfeld here insisted that the audience-tailoring lesson applies as much to those "who would promote international cooperation" as to those who "advertise to sell toothpaste."³⁶

"[S]ystematic communications research," Lazarsfeld continued, would help the propagandist reduce his reliance on the "realms of instinct and guess work." The major aim would be to help would-be persuaders avoid messages that fall flat or even backfire—mainly by talking to audiences. In this effort Lazarsfeld proposed to bring to bear a barrage of new and established methods

33 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, "Communications Research," 465.

34 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, "Communications Research," 465, 466.

35 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, "Communications Research," 471–72.

36 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, "Communications Research," 473.

to aid the propaganda effort, including large-scale opinion surveys, panel studies, and the “focused interview” technique that Merton and others at the Bureau had recently developed. One benefit would be to help specify where, and whether, particular messages should resonate. “It would not promote international good will,” he wrote, “if we were to tell an American audience south of the Mason-Dixon line how well all the races in parts of the French Empire get along together.”³⁷

In familiar form, Lazarsfeld touted the benefits of face-to-face appeals as a supplement to mass media messaging. Citing *The People’s Choice*, he wrote that “by far the most important kind of communication was personal contact.” Most of the women and a “surprisingly great number” of men had, in the election study, reported that their voting preferences were formed “under the influence of a particular person (or persons)” in their social circles. The finding, Lazarsfeld added, has “obvious implications” for a campaign to boost support for an international authority. If promoters of a new agency accept his advice to inform their campaigns with rigorous research, then—Lazarsfeld wrote in the paper’s last line—“science will have become the tool of social progress.”³⁸

Lazarsfeld contributed a second paper, this one on radio and international cooperation, to a special issue on “Psychology in World Reconstruction” the next year. By then the United Nations had been established, so Lazarsfeld’s reflections centered on how radio broadcasts might contribute to the new agency’s legitimacy and mission. His main points were similar: Mass messaging is prone to fall flat or even backfire without careful attention to audience conditions, which can be measured using the new tools of communication research. Propaganda appeals, informed by a “series of investigations,” must be matched to “the existing attitude structure.” One tempting goal, for example, is to promote good will among the world’s peoples, as an abstract, peace-promoting value. If such “good will propaganda” is to be deployed, however, broadcasters need to know much more about who would listen, and how they would receive such messages. Focused interviews and the panel technique, among other methods, could provide informed answers. If the goal is to enhance the prestige of the United Nations—and to avoid “unanticipated and dangerous boomerang effects”—then a fully-fledged research program should be developed immediately.³⁹

The aim, in these early postwar papers, was to harness the Bureau’s findings to help ensure that mediated efforts to secure international cooperation could succeed. Lazarsfeld applied the same basic principles and findings—and issued similar pleas for rigorous audience research—in a second problem domain,

37 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, “Communications Research,” 495, 488–89.

38 Lazarsfeld and Knupfer, “Communications Research,” 489–90, 495.

39 Lazarsfeld, “Radio and International Cooperation,” 52–53, 56.

prejudice. As in the case of peace broadcasting, his overall message was sober but not hopeless: Carefully designed and tested anti-bigotry campaigns, matched to audiences, could help promote tolerant attitudes.

Communicating Tolerance

A problem of special interest for applied social science, in the immediate postwar period, was prejudice. The specter of Hitler's eliminationist anti-Semitism motivated funders and scholars to address how social science might temper domestic bigotries.⁴⁰ For self-described communication researchers like Lazarsfeld, the prospect was to redirect war-proven knowledge about propaganda to home-front anti-discrimination campaigns. Lazarsfeld and the Bureau contributed to a small postwar literature on "tolerance propaganda," with the aim to provide practical advice for would-be anti-prejudice campaigners.

Most of the Bureau's anti-bigotry research was underwritten by the American Jewish Committee (AJC), as part of its ongoing sponsorship of anti-Semitism research.⁴¹ In a 1945 study of an AJC-sponsored comic book *There Are No Master Races*, for example, 350 subjects were interviewed in small groups, after reading the comic. Bureau researchers also analyzed the comic book itself. The main finding was that the comic book didn't change attitudes for the better—and even reinforced, in some cases, pre-existing bigotry.⁴² A second group of studies, conducted in 1946, measured the effects of an AJC-funded comic strip, *Mr. Biggott*, with similarly disappointing results.⁴³

Lazarsfeld referred to both Bureau studies in an invited 1947 contribution to the *Journal of Social Issues*, the recently launched organ of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). The *Mr. Biggott* study showed that a large proportion of respondents misunderstood the comic strip's

40 See, for example, Fleck, *A Transatlantic History*, chap. 6; Wheatland, *Frankfurt School in Exile*, chap. 6; Gordon, *From Power to Prejudice*, chap. 1.

41 For overviews of the AJC's broader anti-prejudice research in the first postwar decade, see Fleck, *A Transatlantic History*, chap. 6; Sanua, *Let Us Prove Strong*, chap. 2; Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice*, chap. 1.

42 Both reports were written by Goodwin Watson, an educational psychologist then working at the BASR. Watson, "A Critical Analysis of the Pictures"; and Watson, "The Effects of 'There Are No Master Races.'" See Barton, *Guide to the Bureau*, 13. Extensive study materials, including interview transcripts, budgets, memos, correspondence, and interview procedures, are held in the BASR archives. As with many Bureau projects, the studies arrived late and over budget with—in this case—acrimony between Watson and Lazarsfeld. As Lazarsfeld wrote to the AJC: "You had to wait twice as long for [the studies] to be finished and our office had to spend 50% more money on the studies than was allocated. So, to a certain extent at least, your deprivations cancel mine." Lazarsfeld to John Slawson, March 21, 1945, Fol. MISC. MEMORANDA B0212, Box 7, BASR; see also Lazarsfeld to Watson, November 13, 1945, Fol. MISC. MEMORANDA B0212, Box 7, BASR.

43 The two interview studies were conducted by Patricia Kendall, a Bureau researcher and Lazarsfeld's third wife. Kendall, "Personification of Prejudice"; Kendall, "Women Meet Mr. Biggott." See Barton, *Guide to the Bureau*, 15–16. Like the *There are No Master* studies, the *Mr. Biggott* project was plagued by cost overruns, budget disputes, and unwieldy draft reports. See Lazarsfeld to Samuel H. Flowerman, December 12, 1945, Fol. AJC - Correspondents re Biggott Study, Box 11, BASR.

message, while others—often the already bigoted—turned the anti-prejudice meaning “upside down to protect their own prejudices.” Here was the wartime “boomerang effect,” re-deployed by Lazarsfeld and the Bureau to advise anti-discrimination campaigners.⁴⁴

Lazarsfeld outlined the limited but real efficacy of well-designed “tolerance propaganda” campaigns. Drawing on a decade’s worth of Bureau research, he observed that overt appeals, aiming for attitude conversion, rarely work. The organizations spending money to promote “friendly relations between racial groups” must confront the reality of psychological resistance—the tendency for what Lazarsfeld here labeled the “evasion of propaganda.” Attitude conversions are “rarely if ever brought about in a person just because he listens to a radio program or reads a pamphlet.” Bigotry in particular is “deeply imbedded” in individuals’ personality development.⁴⁵

For tolerance promotion to work at all, targeted media appeals should supplement the main device: in-person, on-the-ground organizing. Citing *The People’s Choice*, Lazarsfeld argued that “face-to-face contacts” are “especially advantageous as a propaganda device.” The task of a media campaign is to support the core “personal influence” campaign, by reinforcing the anti-bigotry message where influencers are already in the community. The takeaway, here as in the Bureau’s past work, is that media-only initiatives are likely to be costly failures.⁴⁶ When it comes to the “slow reconstruction of attitudes,” mass media are helpful auxiliaries, at best.⁴⁷

Lazarsfeld’s skepticism, supported by the Bureau’s accumulated findings, was influential in the early postwar years, especially at the AJC. “Mass protolerance propaganda,” wrote the AJC’s research director in 1947, is “doomed to ineffectiveness,” except in specific, “favorable” conditions.⁴⁸ In a well-known 1948 paper with Merton, Lazarsfeld elaborated on three such conditions that make for successful media persuasion. “Propaganda for social objectives”—Lazarsfeld and Merton mention race, education, and positive attitudes toward labor unions—only tends to work if one or more of the three conditions exists. The first is *monopolization*: when there are no countervailing messages in the mass media to neutralize the pro-social appeals. The second Lazarsfeld and Merton called *canalization*—persuasion intended to reinforce pre-existing attitudes. The third and final condition is face-to-face *supplementation*, the

44 Lazarsfeld, “Some Remarks,” 19.

45 Lazarsfeld, “Some Remarks,” 17–18.

46 In a draft version of the paper, delivered as a statement to the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, Lazarsfeld was more optimistic about the personal-media pairing: “Many studies have shown what might be called a ‘clinging effect’ between mass media and personal contacts . . . The effect will be many times stronger than if he is reached only by people or only by mass propaganda.” Lazarsfeld, “Tolerance Propaganda and Mass Media of Communication,” n.d., Fol. PRELIMINARY ANTI DEFAMATION LEAGUE STUDY B0241, Box 11, BASR, 10.

47 Lazarsfeld, “Some Remarks,” 22–23.

48 Flowerman, “Mass Propaganda,” 429, 434. See also Flowerman and Jahoda, “Can Prejudice”; Cooper and Jahoda, “Evasion of Propaganda.”

“reciprocal reinforcement by mass media and personal relations.” If the “current propaganda [...] aimed at abolishing deepseated [*sic*] ethnic and racial prejudice [...] have had little effectiveness,” the explanation is that campaigners (1) have no such message monopoly; (2) they seek to change rather than reinforce existing attitudes; and (3) they rarely employ expensive on-the-ground staff. Propaganda for social objectives, if it’s going to work, must take sober stock of the challenges.⁴⁹

Lazarsfeld and Merton had given their paper in a 1946–1947 lecture series organized by Lyman Bryson. Bryson, an educational broadcaster affiliated with CBS and Columbia’s Teachers College, published the talks in the 1948 collection *The Communication of Ideas*. The volume was framed around appeals to “world community” and peace. “We are one world,” Bryson wrote in his introduction, “in the sense that a huddle of ship-wrecked people may be in a boat.” In the high-stakes aftermath of the worldwide bloodbath, Bryson invested communication itself with restorative hope. A ramped-up cultural exchange — “communication for world community” — is a world-saving imperative, an answer to “our most urgent problem, immediate peace.” The infrastructure of mass media that encircles the globe, Bryson concluded, must be re-oriented to “good purposes.”⁵⁰

By 1948, when Bryson’s collection appeared, internationalist appeals to perpetual peace were not heard, however, nor were they welcome. The contest with the Soviets for Europe and the world had, in the interval, escalated with stunning, headline-proclaimed haste. The Bureau and its propaganda knowledge were soon called back to war service. The team re-packaged its core findings—affirming, once more, the Bureau’s plasticity of application that, in different molds, encased its stable theory.

Cold War Embers

By 1948, the Bureau’s peace and tolerance interval was coming to an end. The dramatic escalation of Cold War tensions in 1947 and 1948 meant that the Bureau, too, returned to a war footing. The Bureau’s client and funding profile, by the turn of the decade, was dominated by agencies of the new national security state and allied foundations.⁵¹ Lazarsfeld’s own published work reflected the shift too.

There was, still, the intellectual continuity. Media persuasion, the Bureau tradition concluded, only works under specific conditions—with success dependent, above all, on the character of the audience. The addition of small-group, in-person appeals, in the Bureau’s major corollary, could boost

49 Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Mass Communication, Popular Taste,” 112–17.

50 Bryson, “Problems of Communication,” viii, 8, 4–5, 6.

51 Simpson, *Science of Coercion*, 55–56.

a campaign's chances. This core bundle of findings, re-packaged as advice to would-be propagandists, had been delivered to Rockefeller's educational broadcasters, to the OWI and Army's Research Branch, to the boosters of the new UN, and to the AJC. With the coup in Czechoslovakia, the Berlin airlift, and the "fall" of China, the advice—and the research to support it—was proffered again, with the new Soviet enemy in mind.

In the late 1940s, then, Lazarsfeld and his Bureau colleagues were suspended between two postwar visions for social science. A future of bipolar conflict was already, by 1947, the organizing assumption of U.S. foreign policy, with the plain prospect that scholars would be mobilized again. Yet the postwar social-problems orientation—the conviction that communication research might help remedy intractable social evils—had generated considerable momentum. The result, for publications and reports prepared in 1947 and 1948, was tonal dissonance. In their 1948 preface to the second edition of *People's Choice*, the Bureau's 1944 voting study, Lazarsfeld and his co-authors cite social-scientists' war-won prestige as a warrant for domestic-facing applications of their new methods: "to correct ethnic attitudes, or modify consumer wants, or improve international understanding." In the same breath, they refer to the "possibility of a third world war, despite universal desires for peace."⁵²

The split-personality character of the Bureau's research program came across, too, in the third and final installment of Lazarsfeld and Stanton's *Radio Research* series, *Communications Research 1948–1949*. Their introduction expressed little of the social-problems ambition that, however qualified, had marked Bureau studies in the early postwar years. The emphasis, instead, was on methodological refinement. They cautioned that nothing could be "more detrimental than to sacrifice the careful development of appropriate research methods on the altar of quick findings." One index of this tonal deflation was the chapter devoted to the AJC-sponsored *Mr. Biggott* study. The chapter positions the AJC-sponsored research as an illustration of a broader methodological virtue, the careful analysis of "deviant cases" ("the exception refines the rule"). The *Mr. Biggott* study had been leached of its original aim, to inform tolerance propaganda, to feed instead the methodological genera of the deviant case.⁵³

The chapter, and most of the volume's other domestic-facing studies, have the same pallid complexion. Their stated purpose is to provision the stock house of methods. All of which makes the book's last, sprawling chapter—Alex Inkeles' 70-page treatment of Soviet broadcasting—stand out from the others. The chapter was a streamlined version of his just-defended Columbia dissertation, which Lazarsfeld had supervised. In their introduction Lazarsfeld and Stanton single out Inkeles' contribution: "the attention of the reader is

⁵² Lazarsfeld et al., "Preface to the Second Edition," ii, xxviii.

⁵³ Lazarsfeld and Stanton, *Communications Research 1948–1949*, xvi; Kendall and Wolf, "Analysis of Deviant Cases," 158.

particularly invited to the study of broadcasting in Russia,” which they describe as “probably the first comprehensive description of how radio is run behind the Iron Curtain.” Inkeles, in his chapter, registered the shift in collective attention. “At the present time,” he wrote, “virtually all phases of Soviet life are objects of special attention, and certainly the propaganda apparatus does not stand last in this regard.”⁵⁴

The tide had turned. Inkeles—who had analyzed Soviet newspapers for the OSS during World War II—was hired by Harvard’s Russian Research Center, established in early 1948, to continue his Soviet media analysis.⁵⁵ A few months earlier, dozens of social scientists, including Bureau figures, gathered in New York for a RAND conference that prompted the Air Force–affiliated think tank to establish a Social Science Division under Hans Speier. The conference was thick with discussion of the propaganda and morale lessons of World War II, as participants prepared to revive their research-and-advice service to the “psychological warfare” cause.⁵⁶

By 1949, a re-mobilization was in full swing.⁵⁷ One index of the shift was the Bureau’s multi-year contract with the Voice of America (VOA), the revived propaganda broadcaster established during World War II. That year, Bureau veteran (and Frankfurt School figure) Leo Lowenthal was tapped to lead the VOA’s new Program Evaluation Branch. Lowenthal recruited a number of Bureau personnel to the agency and, in 1950, awarded a contract to the Bureau to conduct audience surveys in six Middle Eastern countries. Lazarsfeld, in turn, brought in Stanford’s Daniel Lerner to lead the study, which was published in 1958 as the modernization-theory totem *The Passing of Traditional Society*—without, however, disclosing its origins or funding.⁵⁸

Back in the early 1950s, with the Middle East study underway, Lazarsfeld convinced Lowenthal to establish a Committee on International Communications Research. The committee’s membership was chock full of wartime veterans and other figures prominent in early Cold War communication research, many of them with Bureau connections. An extraordinary special issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly*—the interdisciplinary field’s crossroads since the late 1930s—was published based on the committee’s meetings, edited by Lowenthal. The issue contained over twenty articles on all aspects of psychological warfare.⁵⁹

Lazarsfeld’s contribution—“The Prognosis for International Communications Research”—bore a title not unlike his 1945 and 1946 broadcast-for-peace essays. But *international communications*, by the early 1950s, had become a

54 Lazarsfeld and Stanton, *Communications Research 1948–1949*, xv; Inkeles, “Domestic Broadcasting,” 289.

55 Kluckhohn, “Russian Research at Harvard.”

56 *Conference of Social Scientists*; Bessner, *Democracy in Exile*, 139–44.

57 Pooley, “Remobilization,” 16–23.

58 See Lowenthal, *Unmastered Past*, chap. 3; Shah, *Production of Modernization*, 82–100; Lerner, *Passing*.

59 Lowenthal, Special Issue; Lowenthal, “Introduction.”

euphemism for overseas psychological warfare. Of the “sudden upsurge of interest in international communications,” Lazarsfeld wrote in 1952, there is “no need to explain at this point where the interest comes from.” The point is to deploy, test, and refine the lessons built up in the domestic context—the importance of personal influence and opinion leaders, in particular. Here was, he added with palpable excitement, an overseas laboratory for an improved science of persuasion, where the conditions for measurable effects are often better. The prospect of mutual benefit—a two-way relationship between “practical policy and social science”—should make for progress in both spheres. Since it is an “exposed area,” international communications research will, Lazarsfeld added, bring scholars closer to “the actors on the social scene.”⁶⁰ Indeed, across dozens of projects and initiatives through to the early 1960s, U.S. communication researchers at the Bureau and elsewhere furnished knowledge for the hearts-and-minds struggle with the Soviet enemy.

Conclusion

From the United Nations to the Voice of America, there is an obvious irony registered in the arc of Lazarsfeld’s international communication research. Pleading for broadcast peace at the close of war he was, five years later, fine-tuning psychological-warfare transmissions—under the patronage, remarkably, of a Marxist in exile. The field’s interval of social relevance was as brief as the world-historical interregnum itself.

How to account for the whiplash? One clue is that Lazarsfeld, and the research operation he founded, operated by contract. Foundations, commercial firms, nonprofits, and government agencies each commissioned studies with their own aims in mind. The Bureau’s *modus operandi* was to service its clients’ private purposes, while also using their projects and resources to pose questions of broader scholarly interest. Thus, Lazarsfeld and his team produced documents on two tracks, the first for the client and the second for scholars and a variety of other audiences. The client base, though always mixed, shifted notably over time. The Rockefeller Foundation was the Bureau’s original benefactor in the late 1930s, replaced by commercial firms and, after Pearl Harbor, by the federal propaganda bureaucracy. The commissions and consultancies then gave way to a mix of commercial and nonprofit contracts, mostly domestic-facing—of which the AJC anti-prejudice work was a prominent example. By the late 1940s, the new national security state was the Bureau’s main patron.

Lazarsfeld was, crucially, a funding pragmatist; his primary commitment was to social science itself, as supported by client commissions. The steep, labor-intensive cost of data analysis and fieldwork required outside funds;

⁶⁰ Lazarsfeld, “Prognosis for International,” 483, 490.

Lazarsfeld made a virtue out of that necessity. Educational radio, electoral democracy, international peace, tolerance propaganda, anti-Soviet psy-ops, even toothpaste sales were each funded contexts for the real work of social scientific understanding. Of course Lazarsfeld's worldly commitments mattered for specific projects, and he battled the barbarisms of the right and left with conviction. But Lazarsfeld's dominant mode was topical agnosticism. He deployed his considerable talent for fundraising with the aim to support his main preoccupations in methodology and the psychology of decision-making.

The agnosticism point helps to explain the odd blend of roving application and thematic consistency that this paper documents. There was, as I have shown, real continuity in the Bureau's communication research program. From the late 1930s through to the early 1950s, Lazarsfeld stressed the same social-psychological conditions complicating mass persuasion, alongside the half-recuperative caveat about personal influence. What was pliable was the topical enclosure, dictated in the main by the sponsorship on offer. Thus, the story of the Bureau's media research in the century's middle-third is a variation around a stable theme. Indeed, the seesaw pattern would continue: The Bureau's media-research findings were soon deployed, most famously in *Personal Influence* (1955), to show that (domestic) media influence is happily negligible.⁶¹

The Bureau case offers a broader lesson for historians of applied and/or commissioned knowledge. The attitudes that scholars (or other knowers) bring to bear on their sponsored projects should be investigated, rather than presumed. In the domain explored here—funded team research in the mid-century era of “big social science”⁶²—scholars adopted a variety of stances toward their patrons and projects. To pick out one line of difference: Some social scientists were invested in the topics and questions—and even the values—that motivated their foundation and government sponsors; others, like Lazarsfeld, were relatively indifferent. The question is one of scholar-funder alignment, with consequences for the resulting knowledge produced. It matters, in other words, whether commissioned researchers are, at one end, true believers or, at the other, funding pragmatists. As the Lazarsfeld case shows, moreover, a flexible attitude toward clients' goals can co-exist with researchers' commitments to their own. Getting at this alignment question requires, in turn, grappling with applied knowledge-makers' intellectual self-concepts. What kind of scholar or knower do they imagine themselves to be? Lazarsfeld's scientific worldview was, as we have seen, bifocal: He was a qualified opportunist determined, from the start, to make a scholarly virtue of funding necessity. He converted others' ends into means for his own core goals. The funder topics and agendas were often peripheral; they were, typically, enabling environments for the real work.

61 Katz and Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence*. See Pooley, “Fifteen Pages.”

62 Crowther-Heyck, “Patrons of the Revolution,” 426.

A final, counter-intuitive point is raised by the issue of scholar-funder alignment. Funder influence over a domain of knowledge production may *grow* in rough proportion to the commissioned author(s)' topical indifference. The Bureau case is instructive here again: Its short-run effects framework, predicated on getting persuasion to work, was just one way to approach the study of media and communications. It was, however, conducive to clients—whether the military, advertisers, or anti-prejudice campaigners—invested in attitude change. When Lazarsfeld and other members of the tight-knit, war-woven communications research fraternity moved on, the field's replacement—an institutionalized discipline of communications, housed in journalism schools—inherited a short-run effects paradigm that, for Lazarsfeld, hadn't much mattered.

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