# 1

# Critical Research at Columbia: Lazarsfeld's and Merton's "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action"

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To see "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948) for what it is, we need to be clear about what it is not. It is not an expression of "the dominant paradigm" in media sociology, not an example of "administrative research," and most certainly not an argument that media are weak or insignificant social forces. It is sometimes viewed as a classic essay in the limited effects tradition of media research, but that is at most a partial truth. Key sections of the piece are not about "effects" at all, much less "limited effects," as that model has been interpreted by its critics.

Over fifty years have passed since Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton published their classic piece, one of the most frequently cited and anthologized in communication studies, but the full qualities and contributions of the essay are revealed only when we clear away the underbrush of received wisdom about Lazarsfeld, Columbia's Bureau of Applied Social Research, and mid-century communication studies in the USA. Contrary to the popular impression of the Bureau's work, "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" (hereafter referred to as "Mass Communication"[1]) is in fundamental ways a historically informed, critical account of mass communication. It



is a nuanced overview of the socio-political functions of mass media in modern society that highlights the role of commercial media in maintaining capitalist hegemony. This was a minor theme of Lazarsfeld's work throughout the 1940s, but it was amplified by Merton, whose strong editorial hand was decisive in creating *the* classic essay of US media studies.

Their essay is significant, both historically and theoretically. Historically, it offers a window into the varied and relatively unsettled world of media studies in the 1940s, when the idea of communication enticed intellectual imaginations across many fields of study. If there was a dominant paradigm of US communication research centered on the social-scientific study of media effects, it was not established before the 1950s, and in 1948 the field was still rich with intellectual possibility. Even at Columbia there was important diversity, something both critics and defenders of that tradition have often overlooked. Lazarsfeld has become a synecdoche for the Bureau, coming to stand in for all Bureau research, but Merton was a key player as well. The two men had important intellectual differences, which are evident in "Mass Communication." As we show, the essay moves between conceptual vocabularies of social roles and media effects, blends positivistic caution with grander historical and conceptual sweep, and gives lie to many of the generalizations that have been made about mid-century media studies in the USA.

Rereading "Mass Communication" does more than shake loose the calcified histories of media studies. It also pays handsome theoretical dividends that can be tendered in a variety of contemporary currencies. The essay contains an abundance of insights that remain stunningly alive today: from the hegemonic and narcotizing power of media to their ability to maintain social norms and shape popular taste; from media's role in conferring status and orienting public attention to the idea that mass communication is most effective when it supplements other modes of communication and channels existing beliefs and values. These are themes pursued and hypotheses confirmed by media scholars of many theoretical stripes working in dramatically different technological and social environments than Lazarsfeld's and Merton's. With great subtlety and insight, these two authors carefully identified the specific conditions under which media might have strong effects, drew attention to the ideological force of commercial media systems, conceptualized cultural and political roles of everyday news and investigative reporting, and discussed the drive to maximize audience size and its relation to forms of media entertainment. And they did these things with style and grace of prose. The article is a classic because it is still good to think with, and still a pleasure to read.

## The history of an error: the received wisdom

After his death in August 1976, Paul Lazarsfeld became a symbolic lightning rod in media studies. He was seen as the founding father who needed to be either symbolically killed or canonized for siring the "dominant paradigm" of limited media effects. Critics and celebrants both contributed to a collective sense that the limited effects paradigm enjoyed a long and steady reign from the 1940s through at least the 1960s. This was a misleading narrative, and one that needs to be corrected to get a clearer bead on Lazarsfeld's and Merton's piece.

Beginning with Todd Gitlin's influential 1978 essay, Lazarsfeld, "administrative research," and objectivist social science became favored targets for defenders of critical and cultural studies seeking to stake out firmer ground for themselves in the field of media studies. Gitlin asserted that "The dominant paradigm in the field since World War II has been, clearly, the cluster of ideas, methods, and findings associated with Paul F. Lazarsfeld and his school: the search for specific, measurable, short-term, individual, attitudinal and behavioral 'effects' of media content, and the conclusion that media are not very important in the formation of public opinion" (p. 207). The dominant paradigm purportedly "drained the power of the media to define normal and abnormal social and political activity, to say what is politically real and legitimate and what is not" (p. 205) and ignored "the corporate structure of ownership and control . . . [and] the corporate criteria for media content that follow from it" (p. 225). Gitlin concluded that Lazarsfeld and "the mainstream of American media sociology [have] done [their] share to consolidate and legitimize the cornucopian regime of mid-century capitalism" (p. 245).

In the early 1980s, others also weighed in on the "dominant paradigms" which the field had inherited, typically with some reference to Lazarsfeld. Stuart Hall (1982), for instance, offered sweeping statements (with few citations) about "mainstream" and "critical paradigms" and asserted that "issues of social and political power, of social structure and economic relations, were simply absent" from the mainstream tradition of mid-century US social science (p. 59).[2] Daniel Czitrom, a cultural and intellectual historian influenced by James Carey, also identified a "dominant paradigm" that focused on persuasion and short-term behavioral effects and ignored "issues concerning which social groups controlled the messages communicated through the media" (p. 132), as well as questions about "the relationship between communication and the broader social order" (p. 146). Lazarsfeld was the main culprit. Carey (1982) recast the terms and players of team center and team periphery,[3] but he too contributed to the narrative of objectivist social science long and



unfortunately triumphant in US media studies. Elihu Katz (1987) eventually heard enough and came to his teacher Lazarsfeld's defense. He agreed that Lazarsfeld represented the "dominant paradigm" and center of the field, but insisted that the media effects tradition was far broader, richer, and of more ongoing vitality than the critics' caricatured portraits suggested.

There was a strange convergence in the dominant paradigm talk of both the critics and the defenders. Though Katz resisted the idea that media effects was a monolithic tradition and rightly pointed out that Lazarsfeld had a spacious understanding of media effects that extended far beyond short-term behavioral changes (see Lazarsfeld, 1942, 1948a), like Gitlin, he saw Lazarsfeld as the father, read "effects" as the master frame of media studies, and put persuasion studies and limited effects at the center of Columbia research from 1940 to 1960 (Katz, 1987, pp. S34, S25–6, S37ff; see also Katz 1980, 1989, 1996). This was a variation on the influential but misleading narrative found in the first chapter of Katz's and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* (1955), which asserted that "fundamentally, all of communications research aims at the study of effect." Surveying the field, they wrote, "There are a variety of mass media consequences which surely merit research attention but have not received it." Instead, "the overriding interest of mass media research is in the study of the effectiveness of mass media attempts to influence – usually, to change – opinions and attitudes in the very short run" (pp. 18–19). This was exactly what Gitlin was saying 30 years later about postwar research, and he drew primarily upon *Personal Influence* to illustrate a paradigm he claimed was dominant since Lazarsfeld's et al.'s 1944 election study, *The People's Choice*. This was simply inaccurate.

If there was a dominant paradigm for the field, it was not established before the 1950s. In the 1940s, even within the relatively localized institutional world of Columbia, "effects" was one conceptual vocabulary among several. Short-term persuasion studies were important at the bureau, but there was a variety of other kinds of research, from content and institutional analysis to broader comparative studies of radio and print, to functional analyses of media within larger social systems. If there was an "overriding interest of mass media research" at the Bureau in the 1940s, it was not effects or persuasion studies, but audience analysis – survey research and focused interviews that ascertained audience size and demographics, personality traits of listeners and readers, and the needs they fulfilled by using mass media (see J. S. Barton, 1984, pp. 7–20, 155–64; Lazarsfeld, 1948a, pp. 218–48). It is misleadingly reductive to say that all this research aimed at the study of effect, as both Katz and Gitlin

suggested, and historically inaccurate to reify the administrative–critical divide, as Gitlin and Hall did. To claim that Lazarsfeld and company taught "that media are not very important in the formation of public opinion" (Gitlin, 1978, p. 207), or that "issues . . . of social structure and economic relations were simply absent" from Columbia research (Hall, 1982, p. 59) is to ignore some of the most important Bureau publications of the 1940s, most particularly "Mass Communication."[4]

## Communication research in the 1940s

The 1940s deserve to be set off as a distinct era in media studies. Communication was a concept that resonated with a huge array of intellectuals, from the literary critic and linguist I. A. Richards to Continental philosophers such as Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas and anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Edward Sapir (on the variety, see Cmiel, 1996; Peters, 1993; 1999, pp. 22–9). The USA did not settle into the Cold War until the late 1940s, so communication research in American universities did not yet fully feel its ideological and financial weight, as it would in the next decade (see Simpson, 1994). Even within the institutional center for the social scientific study of media, the Bureau of Applied Social Research, there was not yet a clear paradigm, and the limited effects perspective had not become dominant.

"Mass Communication" was first published in Lyman Bryson's edited collection, *The Communication of Ideas*, a volume that reveals some of the theoretical and methodological diversity of 1940s communication research. Bryson had been a member of the important Rockefeller Communications Group of 1939–40, which gave institutional and intellectual force to the emerging academic field of media study. Part of the Rockefeller Foundation's broader backing of media and communication research in the 1930s and 1940s, the Communications Group composed several documents that influenced academic study in the USA, including one coining the idea that "the job of research in mass communication is to determine who, and with what intentions, said what, to whom, and with what effects" (quoted in Gary, 1996, p. 138). The group came to be dominated by quantitative social scientists, especially Lazarsfeld and Harold Lasswell, but it also included humanists and qualitative researchers such as I. A. Richards, Robert Lynd, and Bryson, who was a specialist in adult education and professor at Columbia's Teacher's College. (On the Rockefeller seminar, see Gary, 1996; Glander, 2000, pp. 41–7; Converse, 1987; Morrison, 1978, 1988, 1998; and Rogers, 1994, pp. 142–5.)



In the winter of 1946–7, Bryson moderated a course on "The Problems of the Communication of Ideas" at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, a series of lectures by a wide range of scholars that issued in the 1948 volume. It was a spiritually and intellectually ecumenical undertaking by the Institute for Religious and Social Studies, a graduate school "conducted with the cooperation of Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant scholars" (Bryson, 1948, p. xii), and it reflected the hold that "communication" was taking across academic fields. The symposium included scholars from anthropology (Margaret Mead contributed two essays on cross-cultural communication), classics, psychology, literature, political science, sociology, education, and law. As Bryson observed in his introduction to the book, "nearly every thoughtful student of human behavior today, no matter what he calls his field, is likely to find something which he will have to call 'communication'" (pp. 1–2).

*The Communication of Ideas* was one of several important collections that vied to shape the emerging field of communication research. With far less intellectual ecumenism, Wilbur Schramm's *Communications in Modern Society* (1948) staked out a place for his new Institute for Communication Research at the University of Illinois and attempted to create a canon for the new field with an appendix of "one hundred titles for further reading on communication in modern society."[5] The next year Schramm published the first volume of his more spacious collection, *Mass Communications*, which reprinted Lazarsfeld's and Merton's "Mass Communication" and helped disseminate the essay to a generation of students.[6] Lazarsfeld and Stanton also resumed their Radio Research series of the early 1940s, now under the title *Communications Research*, and announced confidently, "it is no longer necessary to justify communications research as a special discipline or to outline its general scope" (1949, p. xiii). The field was settling in.

"Mass Communication" was originally Lazarsfeld's lecture to the Bryson seminar. As Lazarsfeld later recalled, the lecture "was, as usual, unprintable," perhaps because it was pieced together from at least two previous speeches.

> I asked Merton to make it suitable for publication. When I got the text back from him, my own ideas were put into fluent English and occasionally enriched by references to classical writers I probably had never heard of. But he had included a four-page section called "Some Social Functions of the Mass Media." It contained Merton's own analytical reflections, and therefore I felt the paper should be published jointly. . . . Each idea in this section was new at the time. (Lazarsfeld, 1975, pp. 52–3)

Merton's contributions were new and distinctive, but the collaboration was characteristic of a long and rich working relationship between the two men.

## Merton and Lazarsfeld at Columbia

Merton and Lazarsfeld came to Columbia in the same year, 1941, and over the next three decades became what one student called the "giant double star" around which its department of sociology orbited (Selvin, 1975, p. 339). The story of their joint hiring has become a minor classic of academic history: a deeply divided department could not agree on a senior appointment and instead made two at lower levels, Merton the theorist and Lazarsfeld the methodologist.[7] Lazarsfeld's importance to media studies is well known, and he has become almost synonymous with mass communication research at Columbia; but this is unfortunate, for it occludes Merton's central role there and the deep and wide influence the two men had on each other.

Rarely at a loss for the right turn of phrase, Merton once confessed, "I have failed miserably in every attempt at even a meager digest of the influence Paul Lazarsfeld and I may have had on each other" (1996, p. 355). Over the years, the two co-authored five articles and edited a book together, but their collaboration ran far deeper. By Merton's estimation, they averaged ten to fifteen hours of conversation a week between 1942 and 1965 (Converse, 1987, p. 503). In the preface to *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Merton made extended acknowledgment of the importance of working "in double harness" at Columbia and being treated to Lazarsfeld's "skeptical curiosity" about functional analysis (1949, p. xiv). Assistance ran both ways. Merton was a virtuoso editor who made copious suggestions on other people's work, and he edited virtually every one of Lazarsfeld's monographs over the three decades of their friendship (Merton, 1998, p. 163; see also Caplovitz, 1977). His editorial contributions to "Mass Communication" were part of a larger scholarly pattern for Merton.

For both men, the 1940s marked their main period of interest in mass communication. When they came to Columbia in 1941, Lazarsfeld was four years into his most productive period in the field, which was largely over by 1950. He had begun the Office of Radio Research at Princeton in 1937, and between then and 1949 published more than 35 articles and books on broadcast and print media. After 1950, his energies were increasingly diverted elsewhere, though he continued to publish scattered monographs and co-authored *Personal Influence* with Katz (see



Neurath, 1979; A. H. Barton, 1982; J. S. Barton, 1984). Merton had not heard of communication research as a field before 1941, though his pioneering work in the historical sociology of science was clearly relevant to the study of communication, and, as an undergraduate at Temple, he had engaged in a content analysis of newspapers without conceptualizing it as such (Merton, 1994). Lazarsfeld was always a collaborator, though, and quickly brought Merton into mass communication research as well. In 1942, Merton became associate director of the Bureau (a post he held until 1971), and though his main interests lay elsewhere, he authored two of the most important mass communication studies of the 1940s: *Mass Persuasion* (1946), his study of Kate Smith's war bond drive, and "Patterns of Influence," his examination of local and cosmopolitan influential persons in Rovere, New Jersey (derived from a 1943 Bureau report and published in 1949). Merton also co-authored three media pieces with Lazarsfeld during the decade, including their classic essay. Like Lazarsfeld, he also turned away from mass communication after 1950.

They were in some ways an unlikely pair, "the original odd couple in the domain of social science," in Merton's words. Though both were (ethnic, agnostic) Jews within the largely Protestant establishment of US higher education, they came from very different cultural milieus: Lazarsfeld from bourgeois Vienna, Merton from the slums of south Philadelphia. Observers saw the two of them as "incorrigibly opposed," but they were also deep friends who sent lines from Rilke's poetry to each other (Merton, 1998, pp. 171, 200–1).[8] As Merton described them, they were "the inveterate creator of research institutes" and "the inveterate loner working chiefly in libraries and [his] study at home"; "the matter-of-fact but methodologically demanding positivist" and the "doubting Thomas . . . [who] had dared satirize the 'enlightened Boojum of Positivism'" in his first published paper in 1934; "the mathematically-minded methodologist" indebted to the Belgian statistician and astronomer Adolphe Quetelet and "the confirmed social theorist" who drew his bearings from Durkheim (Merton, 1996 [1994], p. 494; 1998, pp. 169–78; see also Hunt, 1961, pp. 56–7). In Lazarsfeld's words, Merton was "never an 'organization man'" and had initial misgivings about the rather new idea of an "organized research project" like the Bureau conducted. Quickly, though, the two developed a "simple division of labor." "I abstracted a series of methodological publications, and he derived from each empirical report some new theoretical idea," Lazarsfeld wrote (1975, p. 38). The two men worked closely, but Merton also retained a certain distance from the Bureau's more positivist side. He once described mass communication researchers as scholars who rallied around the motto,

"We don't know that what we say is particularly significant, but it is at least true" (Merton, 1968 [1949], p. 200).

The two men brought productive intellectual differences as well as elective affinities to their joint study of communication. Lazarsfeld had been overseeing empirical investigations of mass communication for nearly a decade and brought a positivist's caution against making grand and unsupported knowledge claims. Merton was "an excellent specimen of a concept maker" (Hunt, 1961, p. 60) who "had an alliance with empiricists that tended to give them concepts to label their findings" (Collins, 1977, p. 152). Throughout his career he showed a knack for coining concepts: unanticipated consequence, self-fulfilling prophecy, role model, manifest and latent functions all originated with Merton or gained new force from his pen. Lazarsfeld was disposed to use survey methods to determine the effects of media and other inputs on aggregated individual actions (see Coleman, 1980, pp. 163–5; Merton, 1998, pp. 173–5). Merton meanwhile drew upon social and intellectual history to develop functionalist and structural "theories of the middle range" informed by a Durkheimian sense of collective life. As a result, he was more likely than Lazarsfeld to situate media within broader social systems and historical contexts, and to do so with fluid, graceful prose and crisp analytic concepts.

Contrary to one-dimensional portraits of Columbia, both Lazarsfeld and Merton had sympathies for critical-Marxian research and social theory. Far from drawing a line in the sand, Lazarsfeld's "Administrative and Critical Communications Research" attempted to present German critical sociology sympathetically to an English-speaking audience and argued that empirically oriented US research would be vitalized by attending to "problems of control" and other questions of critical research (1941a, pp. 165–7; see also 1969, p. 325; and Morrison, 1988). Critical themes were evident in an important 1942 piece, where Lazarsfeld wrote that "by and large, radio has so far been a conservative force in American life." He also noted, in an analysis that Adorno or Lowenthal could have written, that on soap operas "All problems are of an individualistic nature. It is not social forces but the virtues and vices of the central characters that move the events along. People lose their jobs not for economic reasons but because their fellow men lie or are envious" (Lazarsfeld, 1942, p. 66; see also 1948b, 1948c). This was a minor but persistent thread in Lazarsfeld's work in the 1940s. Merton, meanwhile, was in the 1940s one of the world's experts on Marx. In 1942 the Frankfurt school's Franz Neumann recommended him to Oxford University Press "as the best possible person to review a manuscript on the economics of Karl Marx." This turned out to be Paul M. Sweezy's classic, *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, which Merton called "a painstaking, brilliant, exposition of Marxian economics unequalled by anything else in the literature, so far as I know." He also offered nine single-spaced pages of comments on the book (Caplovitz, 1977, pp. 146–7).



It was Merton the reviewer-editor who made "Mass Communication" a minor masterpiece. As an editor, he "has a knack for sharpening or highlighting the prose by finding a more expressive word or phrase than the word you chose" (Caplovitz, 1977, p. 145), and he did this for Lazarsfeld, putting his "unprintable" lecture "into fluent English" enriched by broadening references and resonant new concepts. As Merton reads manuscripts, "the author's arguments or problems trigger his own thought processes, and he offers to his client, free of charge, brilliant reformulations of and additions to the arguments that reflect falsely on the brilliance of the author" (Caplovitz, 1977, p. 145). When he read Lazarsfeld's lecture, the "excellent specimen of a concept maker" created a wholly new section that turned out to be the essay's richest theoretically. Finally, Merton, the leading expert on Marx, sharpened and amplified critical-historical themes that had long been minor chords in Lazarsfeld's scholarship. In collaboration, the two men created a beautifully written, conceptually elegant, and historically informed overview of the mass media's roles and social effects in the mid-twentieth century.

## The article's themes

Like the Bryson volume as a whole, Lazarsfeld's and Merton's essay displayed significant breadth of vision and was no singular argument about limited media effects. To read the essay freshly today is to find a far richer view of mass media in society than has often been associated with Bureau work. The essay begins by summarizing public concerns about mass media in modern society, then goes on to address three areas: the social functions of mass communication, especially in a commercial media system like that of the USA; the impact of mass media upon popular taste; and the conditions under which "propaganda for social objectives" can be effective. Only the last of these three areas, roughly a quarter of the manuscript, is devoted to the sorts of explicit persuasion campaigns that became associated with the limited effects understanding of media. The essay centrally addresses critical institutional questions about commercial mass media and their hegemonic force, as well as broad-angle sociological questions about popular taste

in historical perspective. In addition, it offers a far more nuanced position regarding the conditions for limited media effects than critics have typically acknowledged.

Lazarsfeld and Merton begin their essay by acknowledging the historicity of the study of communication. In an opening line that any historical materialist would be happy to have written, they proclaim: "Problems engaging the attention of men change, and they change not at random but largely in accord with the altering demands of society and economy." A generation ago, a group like that assembled for the Bryson symposium would have been discussing child labor, women's suffrage, or old age pensions, but now public interest had shifted to "problems of the media of mass communication" (p. 95). They go on to identify "three organically related elements" of contemporary concern with mass media, which roughly line up with the three terms in the title of the essay: (i) fear of "the ubiquity and potential power" of mass communication as such, which they call "an almost magical belief"; (ii) "a more realistic" fear about "changing types of social control exercised by powerful interest groups in society" through advertising and public relations, and the possibility that they might lead to "the unconditional surrender of critical faculties and an unthinking conformism"; and (iii) the fear that "these technically advanced instruments of mass communication constitute a major avenue for the deterioration of esthetic tastes and popular cultural standards" (pp. 96, 97). The remainder of the essay is "a review of the current state of actual knowledge concerning the social role of the mass media of communication and their effects upon the contemporary American community" – an "ungrateful task," they observe, "for certified knowledge of this kind is impressively slight." This positivist caution yields to acute, far-reaching critical insights, however, which make the essay the living theoretical resource it is today.

The introductory section actually frames the issues three times and in two distinct ways, an index of conceptual differences at Columbia as well as a reflection on the essay's composite quality (Merton's contributions added to two speeches by Lazarsfeld). The first (pp. 95–6) frames the "three great concerns" about mass media through a vocabulary of social control, social role, and social structure, while the second (p. 97) and third (p. 98) conceptualize them as worries about "'the effects' of mass media upon society." "Social roles" was characteristic of Merton, on the verge of publishing the first edition of his *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949), while "effects" was Lazarsfeld's preferred language. Though "effects" appeared in places, Merton's social structure/social function idiom dominated the ensuing arguments in the essay. The slippage between the two vocabularies should be read as an index of



both the intellectual differences between Merton and Lazarsfeld and the conceptually unsettled quality of 1940s communication research.[9]

Their succeeding discussion of mass media as such moves in two different directions. On the one hand, they are dismissive of "grossly speculative" claims equating the power of radio to that of the atomic bomb or concluding that media have an enormous impact simply because they are distributed to millions of people. "We cannot resort to experiment by comparing contemporary American society with and without mass media," they caution, so one needs to tread carefully when drawing conclusions about media's impact. "To know the number of hours people keep the radio turned on gives no indication of the effect upon them of what they hear" (pp. 98, 99). This was a position that Lazarsfeld had maintained for some time, and it was one that Merton had sympathy for as well. It was a rejection of technological determinism and ungrounded speculation, and it was part of what would later become the limited effects paradigm.

But then comes the section that Merton added, "Some Social Functions of the Mass Media," which "temporarily abstract[s] from the social structure in which the media find their place." Here Merton discards the "effects" vocabulary and argues instead that "mass media undoubtedly serve many social functions which might become the object of sustained research" (p. 101). He names and discusses three: the status conferral function, the enforcement of social norms, and the narcotizing dysfunction. Status conferral names the fact that media enhance the social standing of the policies, persons, and groups they cover – regardless of whether this coverage is favorable or not. Enforcement of social norms refers to media's ability to close "the gap between 'private attitudes' and 'public morality,'" to reaffirm mainstream moral standards by calling attention to deviations from the norm, and thus, through publicity, to exert pressure toward social conformism (p. 103). The narcotizing dysfunction then labels the way in which media keep "large masses of the population politically apathetic and inert" by supplying them with vast quantities of a product that elicits "only a superficial concern with the problems of society" (p. 105). The reader or listener "comes to mistake knowing about problems of the day for doing something about them." In another line that would make a Marxist mother proud, Merton writes: "In this peculiar respect, mass communications may be included among the most respectable and efficient of social narcotics. They may be so fully effective as to keep the addict from recognizing his own malady" (p. 106).

From this point, the essay turns to a consideration of the commercial ownership of US media and its role in what today we would call capitalist

hegemony and the structured silencing of system-challenging critique. As we noted earlier, Lazarsfeld had touched on these themes in his important but overlooked 1942 article, "The Effects of Radio on Public Opinion." That article cites Adorno and Herta Herzog, argues that American commercial media maintain the status quo instead of contributing to positive social change, and makes moderate criticism of a commercial model of broadcasting from a liberal/social democratic perspective.[10] The point gains sharper critical edges, though, in the Lazarsfeld and Merton essay. These themes are foreign to the collective portrait of Bureau research, so we quote at some length:

> Since the mass media are supported by great business concerns geared into the current social and economic system, the media contribute to the maintenance of that system. . . . To the extent that the media of mass communication have had an influence upon their audiences, it has stemmed not only from what is said, but more significantly from what is not said. For these media not only continue to affirm the status quo but, in the same measure, they fail to raise essential questions about the structure of society. . . . This is not to ignore the occasionally critical journal article or radio program. But these exceptions are so few that they are lost in the overwhelming flood of conformist materials. . . . Since our commercially sponsored mass media promote a largely unthinking allegiance to our social structure, they cannot be relied upon to work for changes, even minor changes, in that structure. (Lazarsfeld 1942, pp. 107–8)

Here were the essential components of a critical theory of mass communication and socio-political hegemony, and it should caution us about reifying the "critical" versus "administrative" dichotomy.

After these broad-angle considerations of media within capitalist and other social systems, Lazarsfeld and Merton move to a briefer discussion of media and popular taste. This was a rarer theme for Bureau researchers, though it did attract the attention of Lazarsfeld and others in the immediate postwar period.[11] This is the most dated part of the essay, a mildly elitist and sexist consideration of the "seeming decline of popular taste" instantiated by mass-communicated entertainment, and the possibilities for improving aesthetic standards. "There can be no doubt that the women who are daily entranced for three or four hours by some twelve consecutive 'soap operas,' all cut to the same dismal pattern, exhibit an appalling lack of esthetic judgment," they write. "Nor is this impression altered by the contents of pulp and slick magazines, or by the depressing abundance of formula motion pictures" (pp. 108–9). These were sentiments shared by Adorno and other mid-century theorists as well, but Lazarsfeld and Merton reject any facile version of mass culture



criticism. They reject a narrative of historical decline, refuse to conclude that tastes have deteriorated, and insist that the issue is more complex. "If esthetic tastes are to be considered in their social setting, we must recognize that the effective audience for the arts has become historically transformed," they argue. "Mass audiences probably include a larger number of persons with cultivated esthetic standards, but these are swallowed up by the large masses who constitute the new and untutored audience for the arts" (pp. 109, 110). They suggest that mass media may have had an impact on the standards of artistic production, but here too they are cautious. "Literary hacks have existed in every age," they point out, "but it would be important to learn if the electrification of the arts supplies power for a significantly greater proportion of dim literary lights" (pp. 110–11).

Only in the final section of the essay do Lazarsfeld and Merton address persuasion campaigns, or what they call "propaganda for social objectives." The study of such campaigns is often linked to Lazarsfeld's interests in marketing, but it was long a Bureau focus disconnected from commercialized activity and applied to processes of audience building in educational broadcasting (Lazarsfeld 1941b), wartime propaganda (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1943; Merton, 1946, esp. pp. 171–2), election campaigns (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), and racial tolerance efforts (Lazarsfeld, 1947). This section of the essay draws upon all these studies, but in particular reworks three "conditions of effect" that Lazarsfeld identified in "Effects of Radio on Public Opinion" (1942, pp. 70–5). Perhaps owing to the "concept maker" Merton, these conditions in 1948 gain crisp new theoretical labels: *monopolization*, *canalization*, and *supplementation*.

Far from arguing that the media have little or no effect on the formation of public opinion, as critics of the limited effects paradigm sometimes assert, Lazarsfeld and Merton identify the specific conditions under which media could have powerful effects. *Monopolization* refers to situations in which "there is little or no opposition in the mass media to the diffusion of values, policies, or public images" – in other words, "in the absence of counterpropaganda" (p. 113; see also Lazarsfeld, 1942, pp. 74–6; Merton, 1946, pp. 171–2). *Canalization* means that propaganda is most successful when it channels pre-existing attitudes and values, and is far less likely to create "significantly new behavior patterns" or bring about radical conversions (p. 114; cf. Lazarsfeld, 1942, pp. 70–3; 1947, pp. 18ff). *Supplementation* is shorthand for the notion that media are most effective "when they operate in conjunction with face-to-face contacts" (p. 117; cf. Lazarsfeld, 1942, pp. 73–4; 1947, pp. 21–3).[12]

The essay then ends in a way that critics of limited effects might find surprising. On the one hand, because "these three conditions are rarely

satisfied conjointly in propaganda for social objectives," Lazarsfeld and Merton conclude that "media do not exhibit the degree of social power commonly attributed to them." This is where the critics stop reading. But the last two paragraphs of the article are worth quoting from in detail:

> By the same token, and in view of the present organization of business ownership and control of the mass media, they have served to cement the structure of our society. Organized business does approach a virtual "psychological monopoly" of the mass media. . . . Moreover, the world of commerce is primarily concerned with canalizing rather than radically changing basic attitudes; it seeks only to create preferences for one rather than another brand of product. Face to face contacts with those who have been socialized in our culture serve primarily to reinforce the prevailing culture patterns. Thus, the very conditions which make for the maximum effectiveness of the mass media of communication operate toward the maintenance of the going social and cultural structure rather than toward its change. (pp. 117–18)

Commercial forces hold a virtual monopoly of mass media and uphold consumerist practices of brand selection. These forces are supplemented and reinforced in face-to-face life, where there is little organized opposition to them. Media maintain the status quo and uphold the dominant structures of capitalism and consumerism. And this is how the essay ends.[13]

## The continuing relevance of Lazarsfeld and Merton

The power of a theoretical essay can be measured by the ongoing vitality of its ideas, and Merton's and Lazarsfeld's is exemplary. The essay can be read as a conceptual font for a range of contemporary media theories and schools of thought. The "three conditions" postulate – monopolization, canalization, and supplementation – is of continuing relevance to media effects studies operating in disparate social and technological contexts. Merton's social functions of media can be read as precursors to agenda-setting theory, the third-person effect, the ritual view of communication, and theories of media and hegemony.

### *The three conditions*

The continuing relevance of the three conditions postulate is well illustrated by looking at modern election campaigns. Monopolization continues



to occur in a variety of ways, arising not just from a concentration of ownership, but also from a strongly socialized and tightly knit journalistic elite (Hart, 1994) that lacks any fundamental variety of opinion or attitude. Politicians often argue that the news media form a solid front against them, following unknowingly the monopolization idea. Politicians themselves can contribute to this process by effectively monopolizing rhetorical appeals that make it difficult for their opponents even to weigh in on particular issues. Ronald Reagan's war on crime, for instance, largely eliminated crime from his opponents' public agendas. In Israel, the political right has long mobilized the rhetoric of nationalism, while the left has monopolized the rhetoric of peace. Noelle-Neumann's (1984) spiral of silence theory likewise offers a sophisticated present-day account of monopolization in which media end up contributing to the convergence of public opinion and the absence of counter-propaganda.

Lazarsfeld's and Merton's third condition for successful propaganda addresses the combined impact of personal and mass communication. As they noted of radio broadcasts followed by face-to-face discussions, "this complex of reciprocal reinforcement by mass media and personal relations proved spectacularly successful" (p. 115). Fifty years later, in a media environment enriched by computer-mediated communication, television, satellites, and cables, the validity of the supplementation hypothesis is still being demonstrated. The active role played by face-to-face interactions is evident in many modern election campaigns. This can take the form of small-scale social gatherings such as "meet-the-candidate" evenings held in the homes of party activists and supporters, petition signings, or group letter-writing campaigns. Many modern parties also employ hegemonic institutions described by Lazarsfeld and Merton as "organized centers of local indoctrination" – religious and community centers and universities, for instance. The tactics may be new, but the motivating insight is old.

### *Social functions of media*

In 1948 Merton could write that the narcotizing dysfunction – media's way of keeping "large masses of the population politically apathetic and inert" – was "a social consequence of the mass media [that] has gone largely unnoticed" (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948, p. 105). Few today would say that the mass media's apparently detrimental effects on political life have gone unnoticed. Many scholars, most notably Robert Putnam (1995a, 1995b, 2000), have attempted to show that the US electorate has, in fact, been narcotized – or at least discouraged from getting actively

involved in politics – by the mass media, especially television. But for Putnam, it is television entertainment that is the problem. "Watching the news is not harmful to your civic health," he confidently asserts (2000, p. 221). Merton, on the other hand, is suggesting something different: that conscientious use of news media may ironically be part of the problem, for citizens can come to equate being informed with being active. By saturating people with information, news media can help render the public politically inert. The concept of the narcotizing dysfunction is subtler than most recent worries about civic engagement: Merton has a sense for the ironic.

Merton's notions of status conferral and the enforcement of social norms are two of the more suggestive ideas to come out of the essay. In those two concepts, as well as his other contributions to Lazarsfeld's original manuscript, Merton put forth core notions for a socio-cultural theory of media that he never fully worked out, pointing to media's contributions to the moral-political life of a society, their role in maintaining and altering norms, practices, and socio-political institutions, or what Hegel termed *Sittlichkeit* (see Simonson, 1996, pp. 325ff). His comments anticipate many theoretical arguments that have been made since. From a theoretical perspective, "agenda-setting" is an extended footnote on status conferral. McCombs's and Shaw's (1972) metaphor gave Merton's concept a quasi-deliberative ring that has captured the imagination of social scientists (see McCombs and Shaw, 1993); but, as an idea, it offers little that Merton had not recognized in 1948. Status conferral also offers a way to think about media and public confidence (Simonson, 1999). Contrary to the belief that the media are most likely to promote cynicism, status conferral can also be understood as a process of charismatic transfer of positive social value.

Merton's discussion of the enforcement of social norms, meanwhile, should be placed in intellectual genealogies of studies of investigative journalism, the third-person effect, pluralistic ignorance, and ritual views of communication. It offers a nuanced account of the various mechanisms through which media "crusades" and publicized wrongdoing might prove efficacious (by alarming the culprits, by affecting the public directly, by strengthening the hand of reformers within the targeted organization, or by enhancing the prestige of the mass medium itself), a central concern of recent studies by Protess et al. (1991) and by Ettema and Glasser (1998). One of these mechanisms – "the directors of corruption may fear the crusade only because of the effect they anticipate it will have upon the electorate" (p. 104) – is essentially the third-person effect hypothesis (see Davison, 1983). As Katz (1981) has argued, Merton's enforcement of social norms also helps to explain both pluralistic ignorance and



Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence. Finally, when Merton writes that media can "call forth public reaffirmation" and application of social norms (p. 103), we might hear aspects of Carey's ritual view of communication (1988, pp. 18ff). In fact, we could add Merton to Carey's genealogy of North American intellectual resources for a cultural approach to communication, putting him alongside better-incorporated figures like John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Kenneth Burke (Carey, 1988, pp. 23, 96–7; see also Simonson, 2000). More broadly, we could place Merton's brief original section of the article in a longer line of thought that runs from Durkheim and Charles Horton Cooley to Carey and Dayan and Katz (1992) and explores the role of communication in constituting and maintaining the moral-political life of groups.

## Conclusion

It is a challenge to read old texts with fresh eyes. As Walter Lippmann observed many years ago, "for the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see" (1922, p. 54). Before we sat down to write this article, we were guided by discourse about Lazarsfeld and media effects circulated by critics and defenders since the 1970s. Though we had read and taught "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action" a number of times, we still tended to group it with the limited effects model that has come to be associated with Lazarsfeld, Katz, Joseph Klapper, and mid-century communication research at Columbia. We believed that critiques of that model often misinterpreted or caricatured what "limited effects" actually meant, but we still tended to think about "Mass Communication" as one of the classic statements of the position. Given the received wisdom about Lazarsfeld and his research, this was, as they say, the preferred reading of the text. We were only partly right.

The last six pages of their essay are in fact a classic statement of the limited effects paradigm, but one must be precise about what that means. Limited effects does not mean "no effects." It does not mean "weak effects." As a careful reading of the final pages reveals, limited effects means that there are limited conditions under which "propaganda for social objectives" might actually have quite powerful persuasive effects. In most cases, there are social and psychological mechanisms that defend audiences from being automatically influenced by mass media, thus minimizing the possibility of direct, immediate, and uniform effects. As Lazarsfeld and Merton argued, media are most influential when their messages are supplemented by other modes of communicative contact,

when they are not significantly challenged by other broad-circulation media, and when they draw upon and channel existing values, beliefs, and structures of feeling. These conditions are sometimes met: in some authoritarian regimes, in some media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992), and, as Lazarsfeld and Merton very clearly point out, in a commercially oriented media system where mass-communicated capitalism goes relatively unchallenged in mediated or face-to-face life.

Much of the article, though, is about the social functions and dysfunctions of mass communication and the differential consequences for those variously located in the social structure. It is not about "media effects," and it is here that the essay most strongly departs from the qualities typically associated with the limited effects model – an "administrative" focus on explicit media campaigns and the short-run, behavioral changes they might bring about. In point of fact, throughout the 1940s Lazarsfeld had a spacious understanding of media effects – they could be either short- or long-term, caused by messages as well as institutional structures, result in ways of thinking as well as ways of acting, and issue in preserving the status quo as much as changing it (see Lazarsfeld, 1942, 1948a; and Katz, 1987, pp. S35–7). He was sympathetic to critical issues of media control, and could write broadly about media in "the total environment of a country" (Lazarsfeld, 1949, p. 3). At the same time, Lazarsfeld was always drawn to the positivistic analysis of aggregated decision making and to questions of measurable change brought about by identifiable causes, topics he pursued in election and marketing research. Lazarsfeld was both hedgehog and fox (Merton, 1998, pp. 173ff); he had wide-ranging interdisciplinary interests and often conceptualized media effects in broad terms, but the study of short-term behavioral changes lay at the core of his own research.

This is where Merton came in: elegant writer, virtuoso editor of other people's work, and "excellent specimen of a concept maker." He created a widely anthologized, classic essay from Lazarsfeld's original, composite speech, an essay that in the end was more "critical" than "administrative," more about media's socio-historical roles, functions, and dysfunctions than its effects. While Lazarsfeld was drawn to the study of aggregated individual actions, Merton approached the social order in less atomistic ways, and consequently had a different lens through which to view mass media in society. Lazarsfeld was a polymath, but he didn't have the broad theoretical and historical range of Merton, who combined pioneering work in the historical sociology of science with social theory that drew richly upon Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, among many others. Though Merton was in many ways a liberal, he was also in the 1940s an expert on Marx, and he brought critical-theoretical insights to



bear in "Mass Communication." As detailed above, if we can get past the stereotyped wisdom about Bureau research, we can read the essay for what it is: a nuanced account of the socio-political roles of mass media in modern society and the part played by commercial media in maintaining capitalist hegemony.

As we also argued, Lazarsfeld's and Merton's essay is a window into the ecumenical and relatively open-ended world of media studies in the immediate postwar period. Neither a dominant conceptual paradigm nor a dominant method of study had yet established itself, and the field was rich in intellectual possibility. "Mass Communication" offered a number of starting points for research, which have borne considerable fruit over a wide variety of media and social environments in the past five decades. From their three conditions for powerful media effects to their three social roles played by the media in modern societies, Lazarsfeld's and Merton's ideas have been successfully applied and tested in conditions far different from those in the USA in 1948. Moreover, their ideas have found unanticipated resonances in quite distinct modes of present-day research, from media effects to critical and cultural studies of communication.

But if there is a richness suggested by this classic essay, there is also a sense of loss tied to it. For the most part, the intellectual breadth of the Bryson volume was not realized in US media studies after 1948. Some of that has changed in the last two decades, but it is balanced by the subdisciplinary parochialism that characterizes the professionalized field of study. There are also questions about what Lazarsfeld and Merton might have done after the 1940s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Lazarsfeld wrote sparingly about media, though Elihu Katz and others extended his trajectory and maintained his legacy. Merton, on the other hand, was effectively out of the business of media study after 1949. To be sure, he had never been as deeply involved as Lazarsfeld, but Merton's publications were some of the very best things written on media in the 1940s. Given the richness and clarity of "Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action," one is left to wonder what the two might have produced had they continued to collaborate in media theory and research. The field would surely have been richer intellectually.

## Notes

1 Not to be confused with Wilbur Schramm's *Mass Communications* (1949).
2 As we show below, this characterization is dead wrong if applied to Lazarsfeld's and Merton's classic piece. The administrative/mainstream

versus critical/Marxian dichotomy that both Gitlin and Hall used is a distinction that Lazarsfeld himself made (drawing upon Horkheimer's idea of traditional and critical theory), but Gitlin and Hall essentialize a distinction that Lazarsfeld imagined more fluidly; his 1941 essay, "Administrative and Critical Communications Research," argues that each type would benefit by borrowing from the other. This clearly happened in the 1940s; "Mass Communication" is one good example, Leo Lowenthal's "Biographies in Popular Magazines" (1944) another.

3 The teams shifted from administrative versus critical research to objectivist versus expressivist, and their captains became Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, not Lazarsfeld and Adorno, but the structure of the argument remained the same: social-scientific insiders against critical-cultural outsiders.

4 Gitlin makes just one reference to Lazarsfeld's and Merton's article, an unrepresentative quote from the introductory section of the essay (Gitlin, 1978, p. 222).

5 For another example of an early suggested reading list in media studies, see Waples, 1942, pp. 185–9.

6 Lazarsfeld's and Merton's essay also appeared in the widely circulated collection by Rosenberg and White, *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (1957). Through the 1960s, new editions of both books included the article.

7 The story began with a *New Yorker* profile (Hunt, 1961, esp. pp. 59–61) and has been reproduced many times (e.g. Rogers, 1994, pp. 244ff). For useful accounts of Merton and Lazarsfeld at Columbia, see Merton, 1994, 1998; Lazarsfeld, 1975, pp. 35–7; Sills, 1996, pp. 111–14; Bierstedt, 1980, pp. 88ff; Coleman, 1972, pp. 400–1; and Converse, 1987, pp. 267ff). At the time of their hiring, Robert S. Lynd supported Lazarsfeld, while Robert M. MacIver championed Merton.

8 The Rilke-quoting Lazarsfeld doesn't appear in the collective portrait painted by Gitlin and others, which emphasizes the methodologist, mathematician, "institution man," "abstract empiricist," and fallen socialist turned administrative researcher intent on marketing questions. For a far different picture of Lazarsfeld – as charming conversationalist with wide-ranging curiosity who read esoteric history journals and detective novels and loved Paris more than any other city – see the recollections of his son-in-law, the historian Bernard Bailyn (1979). Far from being a single-minded methodologist, Lazarsfeld had complex intellectual interests that gave him something of an academic identity crisis. In 1939 Robert Lynd wrote of him, "Every researcher has an Achilles' heel. His is his intellectual curiosity about everything interesting" (quoted in Morrison, 1978, p. 356; see also Jahoda, 1979; Merton, 1979; and DiRenzo, 1981).

9 One might object to our contrast between social roles and effects. Following Lazarsfeld's own spacious understanding of the term (1948a), Katz (1987, 1989) has attempted to conceptualize all of media studies via the "effects" vocabulary. If one follows this strategy, then the social roles of media identified in Lazarsfeld's and Merton's essay are simply another way of talking about what are at base media's effects. We would answer that vocabularies make a difference in constituting fields of study. Historically, to avoid anachronism, we must remain attentive to idioms in use. Theoretically, to maintain intellectual richness, we must preserve distinct languages of inquiry instead of collapsing them into one master idiom. "Effects" differs from "roles" insofar as "effects" foregrounds questions of causality instantiated by media, while "roles" conceptualizes media as players within a broader totality of social processes. These are not mutually exclusive perspectives, but there is a difference of emphasis.



10 Lazarsfeld argued that American commercial media "accentuate . . . [and] bring into sharp relief certain tendencies in our industrial society" (1942, p. 71). Rather cautiously, he wrote that the commercial model was "useful for entertainment programs only" and could limit "opening up radio more widely to public discussion and . . . using it more systematically to communicate the new social ideas which the immediate public interest so evidently requires" (pp. 77, 76). Lazarsfeld rarely made explicit political pronouncements in his scholarship, but here was a halting expression of his positive political vision in the 1940s.

11 In 1946, Joseph Klapper was working on an unusual project for the Bureau entitled "Literary Criticism Analysis," which issued in an unpublished 1947 report, "Aesthetic Standards and the Criticism of Mass Media" (J. S. Barton, 1984, pp. 16, 160). Lazarsfeld also addressed the question of criticism and taste in two other 1947 speeches that incorporated excerpts from Lazarsfeld and Merton (Lazarsfeld 1948b, 1948c), and returned to the subject in one of his later pieces (Lazarsfeld, 1961). Some of the Bureau's mid-1940s work on media and public taste appears, as well, in the memorandum composed in response to a request by the Public Library Inquiry of the Social Science Research Council in 1948, distributed in mimeograph form as *The Effects of Mass Media* (Klapper, 1949, esp. memorandum 1, "The Impact of Mass Media upon Public Taste," and Introduction, pp. 8–9).

12 Merton was applying the idea of supplementation in a different way during this period. In a study of a biracial Pittsburgh community that Lazarsfeld (1947) quoted from, Merton wrote that "single institutions, such as community housing, have only a limited effectiveness in producing tolerance. Only when it is further supported by other institutions does it achieve its full potential for tolerance" (Lazarsfeld, 1947, p. 21). This commitment to tolerance and the social institutions that foster it is another reminder of the liberal/social democratic politics of Lazarsfeld and Merton, and the critical component of it.

13 Compare Katz (1981), who wrote that "Lazarsfeld and Merton noted that monopolization of the media does, indeed, produce more powerful effects, but they do not associate media monopolization with Western democracy" (p. 30).

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# 2

# Herzog's "On Borrowed Experience": Its Place in the Debate over the Active Audience

Tamar Liebes

## Herzog misconceived?

In the tradition of uses and gratifications, Herta Herzog's study on listeners to daytime soaps on radio is regarded as a pioneer. "On Borrowed Experience" (1941) is an example of early research based on listening to listeners (that is, asking *them* to report on what they are getting out of media), one which attributes greater power to audiences than did earlier research. The question is whether Herzog's study is correctly remembered. Should it be considered a classic in the gratifications tradition? Does it contribute to the image of audiences as empowered consumers, aware of their needs, who make considered choices vis-à-vis both the media and their social environment (McQuail and Gurevitch, 1974)? I argue here that the story is more complex.

Gratifications research substitutes "active" receivers, who cannot be told by media what to think, what to believe, or how to behave (Katz, 1989), for the atomized, alienated audiences of mass society, easy prey for brainwashing by media campaigns. No longer victims of media, the receivers themselves are now at the wheel, making use of media as a social utility, a "tool kit from which to choose," and a resource to think with, according to their needs (Swidler, 1986). In this view, media audiences are self-aware consumers who use media in a goal-oriented manner