

**Harold Dwight Lasswell  
His Communication with a Future**

**by**

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## **Introduction:**

Harold Dwight Lasswell, a minister's precocious son from Illinois, became not only the father of the modern propaganda science. He was also a Machiavellian figure of international fame and interdisciplinary competence.

His life was devoted to studies of the human condition and communication. His analyses of mass communication and propaganda around the world did not only serve his country in times past. Today, his methods are used to expose and forecast the political power play on the national and international scene when leaders of nations prepare public opinion for action through skillful, artistic communications.

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In national reference books around the world Harold Dwight Lasswell is presented as the "father of the modern propaganda science".

Who was he? Encyclopedias note that he was born in Illinois in 1902 and died in New York City in 1978. He is said to have had a happy childhood as the only surviving child of a Presbyterian minister and his school teacher wife who also counted their son among her students. His father preached from many pulpits and wherever the family settled local politicians came to visit their home. There they freely discussed the political issues of the day, forgetful of a precocious boy who had already studied Kant and Freud when, at the age of sixteen, he entered the University of Chicago. There he soon became an assistant in the Department of Political Science. At the age of twenty-one, he was researching and studying in Europe. Germany, at the time, was a scholarly Mecca but there were other countries he also visited. It was in this post-war Europe he collected material for his classic book Propaganda Technique in the World War (1927), exploring an unknown field by using concepts that war events themselves furnished. This book inspired many successors, but did not prevent the author from taking a critical view of his and his follower's methodology in Language of Politics twenty years later.

Foreign travels for research and teaching became a life-long habit which led him not only to Europe but also

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around the globe, from China to Peru, from India to Japan and to a host of other countries. During the Second World War he served as the Director of War Communication Research in the Library of Congress where he played an active role in U.S. psychological warfare and information services. For the Department of Justice he acted as expert witness in the trials of subversive propagandists where his content analysis findings were declared legal evidence.

His association with the government did not end there. He was among the planners who helped convert the American economy from wartime to peacetime uses. He also served as a consultant to the business world, where, as in his other activities, his practical experiences served his scholarship and resulted in publication of several books. In 1946, he became a professor of Law at Yale where he continued to teach and analyze the values that build up democratic power in society. He challenged his many artist friends by writing and appearing in motion pictures "for class room instruction" as he modestly put it. He loved art and literature. He wrote more than thirty books and about 250 articles, republished in many editions, some of them pirated.

But the question lingers, who was he? He never cared to write his memoirs -- it was against his nature. He was shy and secretive when it came to his feelings and personal life. He had a strong sense of independence and privacy; his carefully selected associates and many friends had better respect that. But he was also a man of contradictions. Behind a sharp and cutting intelligence lived a compassionate person who never forgot that analyzing the human condition was to deal with living human beings, imperfect at their best. This sensitivity came to a fore in his work. Therefore, one might say that his life's story is not so much the recorded facts in encyclopedias but rather the varying perspectives he put on the human condition in his research and his publications.

Lasswell has been called a Machiavelli of the twentieth century. His renaissance mind covered many disciplines

and paved the way for something new. The "human condition", a label which sums up the object of his research, cannot exist without communication. It was therefore logical that the observation of communication and its extreme, propaganda, was a continuous undercurrent of his research which led him to new explorations. New thoughts and daring creativity were bound to bring controversies. But he seemed always to have been confident that he was allied with the future. He was accused of caring more for studies of power than of communication. But here, too, he was ahead of his time. Today's communication, at home and abroad, has turned into a covert struggle for power over minds and decisions in which the strongest vehicle is propaganda.

Scholars from many disciplines have wondered how Lasswell arrived at his new science of communication which had to cope with a form of art, "propaganda," and its communicator, the consummate actor. Their search usually stopped as soon as it led too far away from their own fields, because Lasswell was multi-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. Like the propagandist, he was able to handle many topics. He met the propagandist on his own turf using many disciplines, concepts and scientific tools. Anyone trying to identify the influences these disciplines exercised on his thoughts is soon frustrated. Lasswell's thought is made up of many strands which are integrated into rich scholarly research. Let us trace how he analyzed the propagandist's activity while creating a new science in the process.

"Propaganda" is a dirty word in the United States, a respectable instrument in Rome for the Vatican's global "propaganda fide," and a bitter personal experience in the rest of the world. But the deeper America gets involved in global affairs the more it needs to face up to propaganda both at home and abroad. Modern technology has given communication a global market; United States' supremacy in this technology has made English the global lingua franca of today and the dominant medium in the com-

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munication of propaganda.

The need for propaganda analysis is thus of growing concern to national security and a challenge to communication analysts. Yet, few of these are concerned with the topic, leaving the public vulnerable and exposed. A United States senator, who had dealt with political English as a lingua franca, warned of its distortions and said he hoped for the day when journalists would reveal the road of propaganda just as they now guide their audience to the daily news (Moynihan, 1978). But without proper training such analysis may remain a mere hope -- a hope dashed, for instance, every time an unaware reporter repeats a terrorist's use of a universally recognized legal term "execution" and misapplies it to the murder of an innocent hostage. In times of crises, journalistic guidance of the public is of utmost importance, because people's views of the world are often based on media reports (Lasswell, 1950). And actions in turn are controlled by the perceptions of the mind (Graber, 1976).

So what is propaganda? Lasswell defines information and education as the communication of "know how." Then, propaganda is mass communication intended to create attitudes on controversial public issues and to control public opinion by manipulation (Lasswell, 1950). To this, one can add that propaganda is also the ultimate communicative skill, because it evokes belief even where the facts are lacking (Dovring, 1959).

Propaganda goes on all the time. Now more than ever, since the modern electronic media have entered its service when they link but not unite the different cultures, political and religious systems in the global village. The representatives for these systems and their purposes must be skillful actors and actresses, not to say illusionists, in the political theater to be able to communicate with such a heterogeneous public. They have to incorporate in their message their different publics' familiar value systems (Lasswell, 1939). To influence the public, the meaning of the familiar words must be manipulated. Though the concepts "law and

order" might appear to be clear to us, their meaning changes under different conditions, as for instance for those with different colors of skin in South Africa.

The analyst must realize that the communicator's contact with the mass public is not only a matter of using words and phrases. He must be strongly aware of the inner meaning of these words and phrases in different ideological communities or what has been called "communication realms" or "communication ghettos." (Lasswell, 1949, Doving 1959). The British call this political use of English "trans-English;" a more folksy name for it is "body-snatched English" (Doving 1987). The consequence for the communicator is often gratifying, and the gullible public is just as pleased as James Fenimore Cooper observed in his The Last of the Mohicans: "All perceived that more was meant than was uttered, and each one believed that the hidden meaning was precisely such as his own faculties enabled him to understand, or his own wishes led him to anticipate. In this happy state of things, it is not surprising that the management of Magua prevailed..." Here Lasswell distinguished between intentional and unintentional bias of the communicator. He suggested that unintentional bias was not propaganda, a separation which is difficult to uphold in the light of the practical results of biased communication (Lasswell, 1930).

It is evident that the successful communicator must be a born artist. The many kinds of channels used for persuasion invite this, as do the increased numbers of messages circling the globe. No wonder the highest political offices are frequently occupied by professional actors or their increasingly influential understudies in public relations. Time and again, Lasswell refers to the communicator as an artist, as a mystic and an aesthetic performer (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950). Lasswell's understanding of this came early through his teacher, Charles E. Merriam of Chicago. The young Lasswell, a prodigy well-read in Freud's writings, who was surprised at finding them controversial in some quarters, became one of Merriam's

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most appreciated students.

Charles Merriam was a major factor in the development of the whole field of political science as a separate intellectual discipline. He created a new school of thought. His influence was considerable in wide circles, not the least among Franklin D. Roosevelt's intimate braintrust. He had rich opportunities to work with different elites, observe and share in their communications both among themselves and with the mass public (Karl, 1974). It was there Merriam discovered that the successful politician was a creative artist. This meant that political leaders were sensitive to social and human affairs. Even if a case were lost, the leader could influence people by his personality and save the day (Merriam, 1950).

Merriam's analysis did not stop there. Leaders must also be skilled at expressing themselves in a dramatic way. Using pen or voice, they must be able to invent slogans which work through their power of suggestion. A leader must, in short, have a creative mind (T. Roosevelt, 1925). To be successful, an artist needs to know his audience as does a politician. Obviously, power over communication equals power.

Lasswell had a vision of what he called the "democratic character," a goal both for societies and individuals, at home and abroad: a government with the people where the resources were shared in a balanced way and where the dignity of man had the highest priority. To hold that vision, required strong confidence in the "benevolent potentialities" of human beings (Lasswell, 1951a). Since human relations are not "mechanized" - his word of caution in an age of computer enthusiasm - the creation of equilibrium in those relations is a complex task. Equilibrium is threatened not only by the world's expectations of violence when conflict arises but also by the prejudice against those who are considered different (Lasswell, 1951a). As an example, Lasswell cites Western cultural pressures on women who are expected to remain within the "private circle" of their homes and to devote their life to maintaining affection even

at the risk of crippling their other abilities. The result is that the public sphere loses women's full capacities as citizens. A nation weakens itself through such waste of human resources, and the democratic equilibrium is distorted by such "hyper-specialization" (Lasswell, 1951a).

"Hyper-specialization" paves the way for what Lasswell called the "garrison-police state" where one junta dominates. Though erosion of our freedoms may happen through a revolution, more often than not it is the result of small increments from petty restrictions to attempts at stacking the judicial system with ideological judges. The "garrison state" is a continuous threat as individual and community relations become unbalanced (Lasswell, 1950).

"Who gets what, when and how," the famous Laswellian distribution formula, provides suggestions for democratic societies and their joining a balanced "world commonwealth." All distribution of a community's values and goods is communicated through symbols. They stem from the society's ruling ideology - "its doctrine, its miranda, its myth" to quote Lasswell. The political opposition, like the group in power, relies on symbols to create a "utopia", a vision for the future. Since the public is not expert on all facets of life, politicians relay the facts in a shroud of familiar, emotional symbols. This is a crucial feature of the Lasswell analysis (Drummond, 1956).

Symbols play havoc on the public communication process between people and their leaders, because they tend to satisfy emotion rather than reason in a conflict. No matter how factual the issue itself may be - rights to legal abortion for instance - in a social conflict, the emotional symbols are often repeated ad nauseam to influence people. Political action then depends on satisfying this symbolic discontent. More often than not, however, the tension created is eased by wallowing in symbols rather than taking concrete action. The multitude of street demonstrations is reduced in size as time passes, while the hard-core fighters become polarized and immobilized on controversial issues.

In our increasingly unstable and insecure world, three basic values create a civilized society. According to Lasswell, they are: safety, income and deference. A balance in their distribution among a people makes a community democratic or authoritarian. The study of this balance, the leaders' and people's identifications with these values, their demands for or against them and the negative or positive expectations they evoke, Lasswell terms "configurative analysis." His book Power and Society describes how the three basic values function in a community and develop further into other values, practical guides to action and public influence (Lasswell and Kaplan, 1950).

According to Lasswell, no society is composed of "timeless institutions." Instead, these are the outcome of "manifold events," through which individuals and groups set in motion new social change which in turn affects the nature of political institutions. A society's public communication patterns mirror these stages through the statements of its leaders or its citizen groups. In this process the character and personality of the leader is of key concern. Lasswell describes the "fully developed political type" as a member of his community, who acts on values and motives acquired through education. These motives are then "displaced" onto the public issues a politician deals with and are rationalized as public good or interest. They permeate the politician's interpretations of community symbols and mark his positive or negative expectations of the future (Lasswell 1951 b). Or to quote the State of the Union Message of 1986: "private values must be the heart of our policy."

In talking about land reform, for instance, a politician will reveal his identifications with it, his demands for or against it, and his expectations about it. All this is based on his personal background. A rich landowner and devout religious person may very well use his church's authoritative symbols to justify his private greed. He may deny any reform in the name of God-given rights to private property. On the other hand, a landless peasant may emerge as a

born artist in demanding land reform in the terminology of revolutionary change. Demands for land reform are turned into a call for "power to the people." And the personal experience of poverty and degradation is mirrored in the condemnation of the "exploitation of the people by the capitalists." In this transformation, private motives have become public issues (Dovring, 1965a).

Lasswell suggested that a prolonged study of political individuals and their life stories would provide insights into the patterns of political values they exhibit in their adult lives. This suggestion was not met with enthusiasm by the politicians themselves, unless, of course, the study dealt with people from different persuasions and especially political figures on the international scene (Lasswell, 1963). Prolonged analyses of political personalities, according to Lasswell, are particularly important in a time of terrorism and nuclear threats. The need to know "who done it?" but even more urgent "who is likely to do it?" indicates how perspicacious Lasswell was and how he laid the groundwork for a new discipline, "political psychology," and its study of "motivated" and "unmotivated" bias (Nuclear Times, 1985:6).

Prolonged analysis of attitude development is also useful in studies of communication of the law, which regulates much of everyday life. A judge is a human being like everyone else and his judicial responses are not exempt from cultural conditioning. Lasswell devoted much of his life to educating future lawyers both to an awareness of their own personalities and to the quality of the society which they would help to create. Myres S. McDougal's and Lasswell's writings on the social aspects of the law became an influential part of this teaching (Lasswell and McDougal 1943).

Another group of values relevant to political relations and communications today are those of organized religions. Lasswell complained that political scientists, among others, were too timid to get involved with church-state relations, despite religion's growing influence on policy.

(Lasswell, 1963). Scholars' fear of the ecclesiastical irate may have good grounds (Lasswell, 1927). In this field, as in many others, words are too closely tied to basic attitudes to be looked upon with detachment (Lasswell, 1949). Scholars have instead studied electoral data and Catholic, Jewish or Protestant behavior at the polls. Little attention has been focused on case studies of how ecclesiastical elites have relied on coercive and persuasive strategies to influence both political leaders and the public. The field is consequently left to propagandists. In the age of an Ayatollah or other smaller prophets of various nations, this neglect may have dangerous consequences for national security because, in spite of global communication technologies, peoples around the globe are not of the same time and age; they are not contemporary.

This has practical consequences when the globe's different parts try to communicate or when old earthly concepts of war and peace are extended to other unknowns like outer space. Lasswell called for the "cultivation of creativity" in his diagnosis of the future of political science since science cannot perform its tasks if it limits itself to conventional means. His call is even more relevant when it comes to the analysis of modern communications (Lasswell, 1963). Just as relevant as his call for interdisciplinary competence. No longer can the neglect of research possibilities be excused because of fear as was the case in studies of religion and state. In communication - and here he says he is "unequivocal" - it is bound to happen that the impact of the arts on politics and of politics on the arts will be of extreme concern to scientists who analyze the activity of successful communicators. Modern times give ample illustrations of this. But already two hundred years ago, in eighteenth century Europe, this was recognized by a literary academy which dabbled in politics. Its legend was: "Everybody's vote goes to him who can unite the useful with the entertaining." Today this is asked of mass communication, too. The public wants not only to become informed but also to be entertained at the same time. Newscasts on television

are a prime exhibit of this and are our time's biblia pauperum in their colorful illustrations of simplified headline news. In one of his last works, Lasswell photographed and commented on imposing public buildings showing how architecture and aesthetics radiate political power, and control the public mind through images (Lasswell, 1976).

Time and again Lasswell emphasized the growing influence of this public mind, at home and abroad. In the age of public diplomacy, discussions between leaders have become a conversation with the masses. Propaganda is threatening to undermine this conversation in the present interdependent world. Propaganda tries to manage and control public opinion by repeating certain symbols which refer to "society's key values." Repetition of these key symbols creates both national and international attitudes and exposes undercurrents of political meaning which come to the fore in controversial issues. Human rights is a universal key symbol which both the United States and the Soviet Union claim as their own. But a discussion of the issues of Jewish emigration to Israel immediately indicates how split the meaning of human rights is for the two super-powers.

The analysis of undercurrents has been at the heart of much of Lasswell's analysis of controversial issues. Lasswell exposed this propaganda technique by developing attention surveys of the world's press (Lasswell, 1941). Here the kinds of symbols which were brought to public attention and their frequency and direction were used to predict changes in policies both at home and abroad. His studies of the 1940s showed how special ideologies like communism and fascism, for instance, restricted their symbols for world revolution when the political climate was unfavorable and aggressively expanded their call for revolution when social happenings were collaborating. Democratic values also showed an ebb and flow observable in the appearance and disappearance of their key symbols. In fact, attention surveys were similar to those of the financial and stock markets, registering the ups and downs of busi-

ness activity in relation to political climate. Lasswell's idea that these markets were ruled by psychological as well as political factors was an outgrowth of his early interest in the study of economics, especially the Stockholm School of Economics of the 1920s and 30s (Lasswell, 1965).

After World War II, Lasswell expanded these attention surveys by focusing on a broader issue, the language of politics (Lasswell, 1949). A particularly interesting case study is his analysis of May Day slogans in the Soviet Union which, according to Lasswell, clearly present the Soviet's political nature and intentions. This and other cases are analyzed by "quantitative semantics," a method which explores the fact that quantitative changes create qualitative differences in communication. While the propagandist crowded his message with colorful symbols such as warmonger, workers' class, imperialist, Jewish conspiracy, Lebensraum and capitalist roader, the analyst recorded the many uses of these words in different contexts, to get at the underlying hidden meanings of the message. In such an analysis, the analyst needed to be versed in both his own and the communicator's culture, in order to reveal the alternative uses to which seemingly familiar symbols were being put in the Soviet context, for instance.

A number of researchers continued and expanded the Lasswellian attention surveys of news media during the Cold War period. The 1950s saw studies of several leading newspapers around the world and their manipulation of key symbols such as democracy, internationalism and others. There Harold Lasswell, Daniel Lerner and Ithiel de Sola Pool discovered ideological trends and changes in political vocabularies from the 1890s onward (Lasswell, 1951; Lerner and Pool, 1952; Pool, Lasswell, Lerner, et al: 1951, 1952). It was Lasswell's firm conviction that the study of key symbols would contribute to a fully developed communication science which would ultimately explain the factors which affect response. Such an analysis of key symbols in

mass communication was not a new idea. It had been used in eighteenth century Europe where orthodox ministers and politicians served their Protestant rulers in Germany and Sweden by analyzing religious songs, sermons and books to reveal traces of forbidden Catholic teaching. The government sent out its "truth squads" to monitor the sermons in the churches, the talk in the street, the hymnals illegally smuggled into the country and asked: "who said what to whom in what channel and with what effect?" (Dovring, 1951, Merritt, 1966).

Those preachers who did not pass the inquisition were literally dragged into court for their heresy together with those people among their audience whose talk and behavior showed that they had been "infected." Threatened with this disaster the dissidents made their own lists of key symbols which on the surface were the same as those of the government. So how was it that the dissidents' behavior was not the same as that of the loyal citizens? The evidence from the eighteenth century showed that the difference lay in the use of the symbols: how, when, how many times and in what context. This special use gave the key symbols another meaning and the dissidents another ideology, vocabulary and attitude. This discovery of a cardinal principle in propaganda analysis was rediscovered two hundred years later in Lasswell's analysis of subversive propaganda during World War II (Dovring 1951, 1954/5, 1965 (a), (b), 1973).

In the 1960s, John Kennedy of the United States and Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union met for a talk in Vienna. Just then, times seemed to have changed from the cold war to one of international cooperation. The United States was willing to talk any place and the Soviet Union showed at least a competitive spirit. But it was clear from the outset that English had become the lingua franca of politics and that it did not have the same meaning for the two parties. Kennedy soon found out that "they don't use the English words as we do." And as in the eighteenth century, lists had to be made to interpret familiar English

words used in a new way by the Russians for political purposes. This development should not have been surprising because American success in technology had diminished the world into a global village where conversation using the same words was needed to create contact. Gone were most of the colorful slogans Soviet leaders had used during the revolution which were easy to detect (Vygotsky, 1939). Trans-English and "body-snatched" English had arrived as the global lingua franca (Dovring, 1987). Back in the People's Republic of China, its students of English were ordered to "speak Chinese in foreign languages." That is, they should strive to give the English ordinary words a covert meaning that conveyed Chinese communist ideas making them easier to be swallowed by an unsuspecting international public.

This development indicated that Lasswell's widely used formula: "Who Says What to Whom and With What Effect?" had to be applied more deeply than what he called the "manifest" content of a message. Everybody, from Kennedy in the United States to Castro in Cuba, now used the same balanced communication patterns. They employed ordinary English words to talk about their values, their demands and their expectations, with respect to the economy for instance. On the surface these dialogues seemed to be balanced. Such a pattern of communication had long been used by Western democracies in their communication with their own people. The emphasis was on the factual issue, taxation for instance, and the demands for reforms were closely tied to the facts.

Did this balanced communication pattern and seeming sameness across ideological borders mean that the West had won the battle for the world's minds? Were the old ideologies and attitudes to power dead among America's adversaries? The Soviets expressed concern. They warned their people against the "innocent looking sameness" when socio-economic issues were debated. This bland lingua franca, they said, was just a fence for "Western imperialist influence." Not to mention "Chinese chauvin-

ism" which began to make itself felt at about the same time. A similar concern was voiced by the Soviet dissidents who warned the West not to accept totalitarian standards in their communications with the East (Dovring 1975, Gore 1973).

In spite of these concerns about the similarities in the "manifest" content of a message, the "latent" content covered by the same message showed a different picture. In the undercurrents, old ideas and influences were still being propagandized. Fidel Castro, for instance, talked factually about the Cuban economy and its difficulties. But a configurative analysis of his message revealed that he was more interested in his own power and doctrine and in his hatred of his opponents than in solving economic problems. Similar analysis of world leaders in South America and overseas revealed that the different persuasions, democratic and totalitarian, were still alive, and that their leaders' personalities created special brands of psychological and political power. Behind the Western-style surface patterns of communication there still lurked the old competing ideologies in the global debates. Since the extreme vocabularies were missing, however, the American public was easily fooled (Dovring, 1975).

The use of bland trans-English or bodysnatched English is an effective tool and its influence is felt today in all the media. The more the public becomes aware of this double-talk, the more skillful the communicator must become as an artist and performer in communication. Lasswell foresaw this development of artistic play in public communications and politics and insisted that future analysts would need to find out what lies behind the "the different types who play on the public theater" (Lasswell, 1951 b). Recently a Western politician said about his counterpart in the East that the man from the Soviet had not put on an act when he negotiated. He should know, he said, because he himself had been a professional actor and recognized an actor when he saw one. The Soviet politician, despite all his openness, warned that he was not "a

simpleton," which was a clear invitation to look at the undercurrents of his message. The problem in discovering the undercurrents is that acting and plays differ from one culture to another, as do the latent contents of political communications. This is because all politicians today have to talk to at least two audiences at the same time: the folks back home and world opinion.

Among Lasswell's heritage to communication scholarship is his recognition of "political man's great capacity for playing impostor" both on himself and others and for pointing out that all politicians play roles in the global theater (Lasswell 1930; McDougall 1984). Time and time again he called for the "cultivation of creativity" in his analyses of this political performance and its moving target, the public. He undoubtedly was in communication with the future.

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### About the Author:

Dr. Karin Dovring is a foreign correspondent and an award-winning author and playwright. Her Swedish book "Songs of Zion" made Harold Lasswell invite her to this country as his associate which she remained until his death. For years she commuted between Yale and Rome where her husband served as a United Nations' diplomat. She lectured on propaganda analysis in the Vatican and in universities in this country, Canada and Europe. Her scholarly books include "Road of Propaganda," "Land Reform as a Propaganda Theme," "The Optional Society," "Frontiers of Communication," and forthcoming "Forked Tongue? Body-snatched English in Political Communication."

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