LAZARSFELD'S MAP OF MEDIA EFFECTS

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ABSTRACT

It is a distortion to allege that Paul Lazarsfeld's view of the media focused narrowly on campaigns' and their limited influence. Apart from the creative impulse of this work, which led to the incorporation of audience selectivity and interpersonal relations into the design of effects research, the fact is that most of his work on the media—and certainly his conception of their functions and effects—extends far beyond short-run changes of opinion and attitude. Moreover, his concept of 'reinforcement' is a major link to the central argument of critical theory that the media reinforce the status quo. Re-reading a paper of 1948 reveals Lazarsfeld's 'map' of media effects, which can serve as an agenda for media research—even today. A suggestion is made for adding additional dimensions to his map.

I often ask fellow sociologists why sociology abandoned communications research after its auspicious American beginnings at the University of Chicago in the 1930s.[1] The most telling answer I have had so far comes from Kurt and Gladys Lang. They say, bluntly, 'it's your fault,' by which they mean that the Columbia University tradition initiated by Paul Lazarsfeld and his Bureau of Applied Social Research mistakenly spent itself on questioning the ability of mass-mediated messages to change opinions, attitudes, and actions in the short-run. This tradition of work—so different from the Chicago interest in the media as agents of national and communal integration—has repeatedly shown that the media are far less powerful than had been expected. Summarized by Joseph Klapper (1960), the findings of these studies point to the intervention of selectivity (in exposure, perception, and retention) and of interpersonal influence (as networks of transmission and as social control) as explanations of the 'limited

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References to Lazarsfeld's major works, including those he co-authored, are not listed at the end of this article. They can be found in the selected biography published in this issue of IJPOR, pp. 322–5.

[1] Chicago sociologists Blumer, Wirth, Mead, Dewey, Park, Lasswell and others were following European leads of Gabriel Tarde, Max Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies. See Kurt Lang (1996) for discussion of the European roots,' and for the blame he places on works such as Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) for the narrow turn taken by effects studies.

effects' of the media. 'Reinforcement' of existing opinion, it was concluded, was a more likely result of mass communication than 'conversion.'[2]

According to the Langs, this work disillusioned those researchers who thought of the media as 'powerful' and led to a flight from the field. That there was such a flight was documented by William McPhee (1953). That the Columbia 'paradigm' along with the rest of mass communication research had expended itself was announced by Bernard Berelson (1959) in his well-known requiem. That the Columbia tradition and Lazarsfeld personally were guilty of white-washing the true effects of the media is claimed by Gitlin (1978) in a paper that echoed this widespread discontent.

The present paper is not a defense of 'limited effects,' even if these studies have spurred creativity in spite of, and because of, their provocative findings.[3] Those who have continued in the study of persuasion have, on the whole, reiterated the Lazarsfeld findings of limited effects, while contributing to the further specification of the conditions under which the media may indeed affect change in people.[4] This work continues to be important—academically, politically, and commercially (even though politicians and marketers selectively avoid its conclusions). Lazarsfeldians have taken selectivity and interpersonal relations as points of departure in expanding persuasion studies into the diffusion of innovation (Katz 1996, Weimann 1995) or the study of media uses and gratifications (Rosengren et al. 1985). But it was also incumbent on those who were outraged by the findings of 'limited effects' to propose theories of media 'power.' Some did (e.g. Noelle-Neumann 1973), while others stopped short of providing the methodological tools that might 'test' their theories, or even spurning the need to do so.[5] These theories range from the technological (the media teach how to think and how to organize), to the critical (the media preach false consciousness of reality), to the sociological (the media provide the shared experience of culture).[6] Still others denounce the study of effects altogether, without really meaning it, however.

This paper, then, is not a defense of limited effects, or an effort to reconcile

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[2] In an unpublished paper, Kevin Hoyes argues that Lazarsfeld was correct in trying to limit the use of 'effect,' and certainly 'powerful effect,' to actual change in opinion, attitude and behavior. Hoyes (unpublished) spells out the political implications—i.e. the call for regulation—which accompanies efforts to attribute power to a wide variety of other 'effects' a rather different view, acknowledging, for example, that reinforcement can be a powerful effect, when it applies to the status quo. I am grateful to Dr Hoyes for permission to cite his interesting paper.

[3] But not so much in sociology, rather in the burgeoning field of studies of mass media in the context of departments and schools of communication.

[4] McGuire's (1986) influential review further underlines the conclusion that media effects are limited, along with the effects of education and psychotherapy. Recent work by Zaller (1996) and indeed by McGuire himself propose revisions of this conclusion, pointing to the importance of taking account of the pre-requisites of effect such as media reach, and audience susceptibility.

[5] Hoyes, (unpublished) elaborates these points.

[6] For reviews of these theories, see Katz (1980).

the Lazarsfeld tradition with those of its challengers. Nor will it dwell on the fact that Lazarsfeld's Bureau was engaged with the behavior of audiences and the content of programs far beyond what the stereotyped criticism allows. It is a 'defense' of Paul Lazarsfeld—not that he needs it—only in the sense that it will show that Lazarsfeld's conception of media effects was not at all limited. Indeed, his map of the field of media studies can serve, even today, as a guide to the panorama of effects worthy of study. I want to unwrap this map to reveal how broadly he conceived the field, and to identify the space he allocated to persuasive campaigns. He proposed a full agenda for communications research, even if he did not choose to act on all of its aspects.

Two papers from 1948 tell most of the story. One is canonic; no student of media can do without it. It is the collaborative Lazarsfeld and Merton 'Mass Media, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action,' which appeared as part of a symposium edited by Lyman Bryson (1948) that has been repeatedly reprinted. The other is equally canonic but almost unknown.[7] It is Lazarsfeld's contribution to a volume of *Current Trends in Social Psychology*, edited by Wayne Dennis (1948), and entitled 'Communication Research and the Social Psychologist.' In what follows, I will briefly recall the thrust of the first paper, and dwell at length on the second. In conclusion, I will propose several amendments to Lazarsfeld's map.

THE LAZARSFELD–MERTON PAPER

The surprise of the Lazarsfeld–Merton paper[8]—disappointing for anyone who expects a rehash, or preview, of 'limited effects'—is that it sounds much more like critical theory than so-called 'administrative' research. Like its more programmatic contemporary, it is a far-ranging overview of the sociology of mass communication; it proposes to treat the media as a social institution, complete with functions, norms, organizations, roles, etc. in interaction with political, economic, cultural, etc. institutions. It is precisely what was 'lost' when sociology later abandoned mass communications, or relegated it to the catch-all of 'collective behavior,' as if the audience were all that mattered.

From the outset, the paper makes explicit the authors' awareness of—and concern over—the commercial pattern of media ownership characteristic of the United States. Implicitly, it invites the kind of comparative study with European systems which Gitlin piously calls for, but does not undertake. In this broader context, Lazarsfeld and Merton invite attention to three

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[7] For a controversial discussion of canonic texts in media studies, see Katz *et al.* (forthcoming).

[8] For an extended and updated look at this classic, see Simonson and Weimann (forthcoming). Some of the ideas in these paragraphs arise from this paper and discussions of it with the authors.

functions of the media which have earned the paper its celebrity.[9] They are (1) conformity; (2) status conferral; and (3) narcotizing. With all due respect, I prefer to group them under the contentious term 'effects.' Under the heading of conformity, the authors point to the affirmation of extant social structure that characterizes the all-but unchallenged stream of conformist messages. Following Durkheim, they spell out the ways in which conformity is symbolically rewarded, and deviance symbolically punished in broadcast fiction. They state explicitly what would come to be one of the strongest arguments of critical theory, namely, that the media not only uphold the status quo, but *omit* mention of alternative ways of thinking and behaving. Overlooking the important difference between the two, note the link between Lazarsfeld's 'reinforcement,' and critical theory's view of the media as agents of social reproduction.

The role of the media in 'conferring status' follows obviously from its function as an agent of conformity. This theme is extended to what would later be called 'agenda setting,' which refers to issues and ideas, along with persons. This is the point at which the authors (unwittingly?) detour from their conformity argument to point out that the media also confer status on persons and policies who are depicted *unfavorably*, raising the question of whether negative renown is as bad as it sounds ('as long as they spell my name right').

The third of the three (dys)functions ('effects' in my terms) is that of narcotizing, which alludes to the paradox that heavy involvement in the news may have depolitizing consequences. In this, the most original of the three, the authors argue that depolitization may result not only from escapist entertainment but from the delusion that good citizenship means informed citizenship rather than civic participation.

A fourth effect has to do with the role of the media in the debasement of taste, a concern of critics of the media on the right as well as the left, and an echo of the long-standing debates. While this section echoes elitist concern, it also leaves room for the technological optimism that the media might provide aesthetic tutelage to some part of the audience.

Only at the end of the essay do Lazarsfeld and Merton dwell on the conditions under which a mass media campaign may prove successful. These are the famous conditions of (1) monopolization; (2) canalization; and (3) supplementation which relate, respectively, to variables of ownership and control, to rhetorical manipulation of pre-existing audience values, and to the social networks in which the individual is embedded.

In deconstructing this essay, Simonson and Weimann (forthcoming) allocate

[9] Simonson and Weimann (forthcoming) insist on Merton's distinction between 'functions' and 'effects.' I do not, at least in this case.

credit for its several parts and suggest that Merton was more responsible for the sociology and Lazarsfeld for the social psychology. Lazarsfeld intimates as much, himself. It is also true—and thus unlike Lazarsfeld—that the three functions were not operationalized for empirical study, although the paper certainly paves the way for others to do so. Yet, anybody who has had the privilege of looking in on the collaboration between these two men, or even reading about it, will know how symbiotic was their relationship and their joint publications.

LAZARSFELD'S MAP: THE OTHER PAPER

The proof of Lazarsfeld's broad interest in these effects and others is fully documented in the other 1948 paper, authored solely by Lazarsfeld.[10] Explaining what communications research can contribute to social psychology and vice versa, Lazarsfeld catalogues a series of concerns ranging from the system of control over content, the uses of content analysis, the methodology of audience research, and the problems of studying effect. While the body of the paper lingers on audience research, content analysis, and effect, I believe—and I think Lazarsfeld implies—that much of audience research and content analysis (not all) are attempts to *infer* effect from the reach of the message and its rhetoric. I will not belabor this point, since my object, as stated above, is to unveil Lazarsfeld's 'map' of media effects, or, more precisely, his view of the domain of media research.

The coordinates of this map are (1) the aspect of the medium being studied, such as a particular item (a radio program or newspaper article), a genre (soap opera, for example), the organizational structure of the medium (e.g. commercial vs. public broadcasting), or the technology of the medium (print vs. broadcast, for example); and (2) the nature of the response, whether immediate, short-run, long-run, or institutional. Cross-tabulating these two dimensions yields a 16-fold table, and no one can doubt that this is pure Lazarsfeld. The table is reproduced here (Table 1).

Warning that effects don't stand still—however neatly they may lend themselves to classification—Lazarsfeld prefaces his discussion by noting 'what a complexity of problems the simple term effect produces. Mass media can affect knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and behavior of individuals. These effects can be immediate or delayed, of short duration or long-lasting. Effects upon individuals might slowly become transformed into institutional changes. They can come about in simple reactions or in complicated chains as when institutional

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[10] While both papers were published in 1948, the Lazarsfeld paper in Dennis includes reference to the collaborative paper in Bryson, albeit under a tentative title.

TABLE 1 **Lazarsfeld's (1948) 'map' of media effects**

Kind of communication studies	Kind of effect			
	Immediate response	Short-term	Long-term	Institutional changes
Single unit	11	12	13	14
General type	21	22	23	24
Economic and social structure of medium	31	32	33	34
General technological nature of medium	41	24	43	44

changes produced by the media in turn affect individuals.' To illustrate, referring to box 14 in the Table, Lazarsfeld urges communication research to help provide process to the 'folklore' of the social-historian as to the influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or the *Communist Manifesto*, or the role of the Hearst newspapers in fomenting the Spanish American War. Warming up to this classificatory exuberance, Lazarsfeld groups together in box 24 (institutional effects of a genre) questions such as the effect on parliament of the live broadcasting of parliamentary debates, the effect on education of introducing film into the classroom, the role of the writings of the philosophers on the revolution in France. Not exactly 'limited effects.'

Continuing further in the institutional domain, Lazarsfeld speculates on the consequences, pro and con, of the systems of US private broadcasting and British public broadcasting, noting, 'interestingly enough, (that) there does not exist a systematic comparison of the two ... systems, let alone a systematic appraisal of their effect on the community.' Donning his critical hat, 1948-style, he pronounces that 'The only thing one can say is that, at the moment, the mass media tend to reinforce the status quo rather than influence change in the institutions of this country.' But this is not just ideological sloganizing: to illustrate, he emphasizes the process whereby Hollywood control of the movie theaters shuts out experimental films and capitulates to self-censorship. Nor is he certain that the populism of private control is always reactionary, citing the role of the so-called 'Penny Press' in the era of Jacksonian Democracy.

Lazarsfeld explains why long-run and institutional effects are so difficult to study. 'Lack of funds and [lack of] well-integrated research plans force most students to studies which can be finished quickly. By such short-term investigations we will never be able to trace the way in which, over a lifetime, the mass media accentuate for some people parts of the social world and conceal from the others.' As exceptions, he cites work from his own shop on the effect

of radio on the socialization of musical taste (Suchman 1941), or on the life of the farmer (Robinson 1941) (box 23). Going further (box 33), he discusses the craving for 'sincerity' in an age of advertising and propaganda, citing Merton, Fiske, and Curtis's (1946) study of Kate Smith's War Bond Drive. Also here we find reference to the argument that 'Most newspapers in search of large markets will stress insignificant human interest stories rather than major public issues.' That connects to the Chicago tradition and the work of Helen McGill Hughes (1940). 'While the newspapers undoubtedly are not responsible for the fact that many people are only interested in their immediate surroundings, they (the newspapers) might well reinforce this tendency,' hovering at the hair's-breadth that separates gratification studies from critical studies. In boxes 43 and 32, he goes on to juggle Adorno's (1941) critical appraisal of the technological effects of broadcasting classical music (the listener puts more emphasis on melodic structure), even while increasing the general interest in music. Similarly, he speculates that both cinema and the magazine story have shortened our attention span and reduced contemplation. 'Industrial civilization which led to the development of the mass media has developed new ways of life. The mass media would be at the same time products and intervening agents in this development.'

The surprise—even for those, including myself, who believe that the early conceptualization of media effects was too much invested in the imagery of 'conversion,' is that this paper de-emphasizes such effects. While not belittling their importance, the paper implies that such studies are often proprietary, and not available to the academic community (a complaint still heard today). It also regrets the inadequacy of experimental design, which might have been the ideal method for studying 'campaigns,' for dealing with real-world selectivity, which puts those most likely to be influenced outside the reach of the communicator, and thus outside of the generalizability of the experiment. When Lazarsfeld does directly address short-run and immediate-response, he feels much more comfortable explaining how audiences mis-read and mis-trust the communicator and his message, as in the Bureau studies of anti-prejudice campaigns, and campaigns to further health education and preventive medicine. While these go to the heart of 'limited effect' communication, they are essentially the-oretically-oriented qualitative analyses. This is the sense in which the findings of 'limited effects' spurred the search for relevant theory, and the point at which Lazarsfeld concludes his essay.

With anything but positivistic bravura, Lazarsfeld shows himself groping for both theory and method. He says he is leaning towards the revival of an 'introspective' technique—short of the depth and individualism of psycho-analysis—that will give insight into the process of decoding persuasive messages, hinting that Merton's focused interview is a step in the right direction. He

would have enjoyed playing with the theories of cognitive consistency. But, in any case, this refers to only two of the sixteen boxes, and illustrates the complexity and interest of 'limited effects.' The other boxes—all fourteen of them—are no less challenging, theoretically, methodologically, and politically—but they are *not* about short-run changes of opinion and attitude.

In earlier readings, I had concentrated on the 'map,' and its evidence of the scope and system underlying Lazarsfeld's conception of the hardly-defined field of communications research. On this reading, however, three further things seem salient. The first is the masterful review of relevant research and ideas for research, assembled from a dazzling variety of sources; it is easy to imagine this essay as the definitive entry on 'communication research' in a major encyclopedia of the time. The second surprise of this re-reading is to find Lazarsfeld's own *work* in so many different boxes. Like others, I repeat, I count myself a critic of the too-narrow conception of media effects which launched the field, or, to overstate the case, which accompanied the move from Chicago to Columbia (and back). This essay, along with its jointly-authored companion, makes clear that Lazarsfeld not only *saw* the larger picture, not only that he would never have agreed to equate campaign effects with the panoply of media effects, but that Paul Lazarsfeld and company did pioneering *work* in so many of the boxes. The third point to emerge from this reading has to do with Lazarsfeld's allusion to the processes that may make for connective links among the boxes, i.e. to the likely relevance of short-run changes of opinion, attitude, and behaviour to long-term institutional change.

AN AFTERWORD

Fifty-three years later, I would make the following amendments to Lazarsfeld's map. First, I would not limit effect to change—he doesn't either, but it sometimes sounds that way; *non-change*, as shown above, may also result from mass communication. Indeed, non-change is *the* powerful effect of critical theory, and, as shown above, it is an inversion of the Lazarsfeldian concept of reinforcement.

Secondly, I would make explicit that the individual is not the only social unit affected by mass communication. If the newspaper contributed to the emergence of national states or if the telegraph contributed to their economic integration, the nation ought to be identified as the unit affected. If the knowledge gap exacerbates social stratification, the social structure should be identified as the unit. Some of these effects may be mediated by individuals, of course, just as Lazarsfeld suggested.

Finally, to Lazarsfeld's attributes of the media (single item, genre, social/economic organization, and technology), I would add the social context of

reception. Thus, when parents watch *Sesame Street* with their children, or if the string quartet plays in a concert hall or in the bedroom, the effects may be quite different, as Freidson (1953) suggested long ago.

In sum, my 'mapping sentence' consists of five facets: (1) the nature of effect—change or reinforcement; (2) the object of effect—opinion, social structure; (3) the unit affected—individual, group, nation, etc.; (4) the time-frame of the response—short run, long run; (5) the active ingredient, or attribute, of the medium—content, technology, ownership, and situation of contact. Facets (4) and (5) coincide with Lazarsfeld's; the other facets are implied by Lazarfeld and specified by me.

And so it goes with canonic texts: they don't even fade away.

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