Commentary

Unseeing propaganda: How communication scholars learned to love commercial media

A new disinformation age is upon us—or so it seems. But much of what appears to be unprecedented is not new at all. Concerns about misinformation's effects on democracy are as old as media. The many systemic failures abetting Trump's ascendance—as well as more recent election- and pandemic-related conspiracies—were decades in the making. Yet, our degraded information systems escaped sufficient scrutiny for so long. Why?

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Early depoliticization in the field of communication

In the communication field's earliest days, scholars devoted much attention to systemic problems, including propaganda-related issues. But curiously, a renewed focus on misinformation notwithstanding, even the general area of propaganda studies has waned since the field's origins. One cause for this erasure, I argue, is that communication scholarship has for many decades largely avoided assailing the *structural* roots of misinformation in *commercial* media systems, especially problems pertaining to monopoly power, systemic racism, and capitalism's effects on news and information systems.

Recalling a time when structural analyses were more central to the communication field—and considering why they receded—might offer insights as to why it was largely ill-prepared for recent crises afflicting news and information systems, from the proliferation of disinformation to the collapse of commercial journalism. Multiple factors have contributed to this intellectual disengagement, including definitional confusion, methodological shifts in research, and technological changes in media systems. But it also stems more broadly from the field's gradual depoliticization and its accommodation of capitalist logics vis-à-vis media institutions. Shaping the enterprise of communication research in profound ways, these processes trace back to an early pivotal moment when the communication field elevated administrative research—especially its "limited effects" model—and turned away from more critical and structural analyses of commercial media.

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The limited effects model—what Todd Gitlin (1978) referred to as the "dominant paradigm"—assumed media were relatively impotent in changing public opinion. This shift was bound up in a growing liberal consensus that overshadowed more critical and radical approaches to studying (and questioning) media systems' core structures. Historicizing the communication field's retreat from structural analysis, this essay situates the rise of the limited effects paradigm within a broader context, one marked by depoliticization and a rightward turn in the American academy and political landscape. These shifts diminished communication scholars' ability to critique the threats to human freedom posed by media's capitalist structures.

This intellectual and ideological formation in the communication field is part of a larger story—one I've touched on elsewhere but I continue to develop (Pickard, 2013, 2015, 2016)—that favored particular trajectories while foreclosing on others. Revisiting this paradigmatic shift away from critical frameworks can help us think differently about the dis/misinformation we face today. Confronting the field's history might deepen critical reflexivity in communication research—and even, perhaps, help prevent us from recapitulating similar errors. An honest engagement may lead to a renewed focus on structural problems in our communication systems. Recentering a critique of social harms caused by profit-driven communication systems provides purchase for studying capitalism's relationship to American media (especially its legacy of racial capitalism), alternative imaginaries for what news and information systems could look like, and political programs for structural reform.

A convenient turn: The dominant paradigm of limited media effects

Political scientists and sociologists began studying in earnest propaganda-related issues in the 1920s—interests also taken up by the still-inchoate communication field. Beginning in the late 1930s and '40s, early critical communication researchers studied various kinds of propaganda and their connection to commercial media. Scholars associated with the Frankfurt School—having fled Nazi Germany—advanced incisive critiques of fascistic tendencies in American media and commodified culture (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). In the postwar 1940s, a similar commitment to anti-fascism and strengthening democracy animated policy scholars and political economists such as Charles Siepmann and Dallas Smythe, teaching at the nation's first communication departments at New York University and the University of Illinois, respectively. These scholars were especially concerned about monopoly power and commercialism's effects on media systems' democratic potential (Pickard, 2015, 2016). Even noncritical scholars identified media's potentially negative effects, including "status conferral," "enforcement of social norms," and the "narcotizing dysfunction" (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948).

Yet, despite figuring centrally within the early communication field in the 1940s, by the 1950s such critique had dissipated. The field's pro-market, rightward turn pushed critical and structural analyses to the margins. In describing the early field, Lazarsfeld (1941) famously dichotomized two trends within communication research, one that scrutinized media systems' structural bases according to normative concerns (critical) and one that worked toward evaluating and improving media's effectiveness (administrative). Scholars have long debated and contested this imperfect binary, but it approximates key differences separating the academic research that attracted foundation and corporate underwriting from the more normative-focused scholarship that did not.

A significant if under-appreciated consideration is that these distinctions weren't merely theoretical and methodological, but deeply *ideological* (Jones, 2019; Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983), playing a formative role in shaping the field's early contours. In the late 1960s, Smythe looked back to observe that, for an entire generation of communication students and scholars, critical research had been "undersupplied" and administrative research "oversupplied" (Schiller, 1969, p. ix). This imbalance led U.S. scholars to take

media's commercial nature for granted and, as Smythe put it, uncritically adopt the "frame of reference laid down by the mass media themselves" (ibid.).

The field's pivot from analyzing the structural roots of power did ideological work with significant material consequences. Disproportionate funding for administrative research uninterested in power relationships obscured American media's systemic problems—especially related to commercialism—and pushed critics of American imperialism and corporate power to the intellectual margins (Lent, 1995). Ultimately this conditioned mainstream communication research to de-emphasize structural problems endemic to unregulated, commercial media systems. Today we reap the consequences of this decades-long accommodation to corporate power.

This key juncture in the communication field's intellectual formation reflected a broader ideological struggle throughout society over whether American news media should amplify commercial propaganda or serve a more democratic purpose (Pickard, 2015). Intellectual trends in the 1930s also contributed to orienting communication research around noncritical analyses, such as internalizing values that good social science is politically neutral and quantitative. According to one leading historian of the early communication field, research that "raised questions pointing to possible reform," increasingly was deemed "nonscientific and academically peripheral" (Sproule, 1987, p. 70). The Rockefeller Foundation even stipulated that its funding for the Princeton Radio Project—established to study media's social effects—couldn't be used to question the private/commercial ownership of broadcast stations (a system markedly different from most others around the world such as the publicly funded British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC]).

In such subtle but significant ways, critiquing the American media system's commercial nature—and its effects on media content and people—increasingly fell beyond the bounds of acceptable academic discourse. These changes within the academy coincided with a period of vicious red-baiting across the U.S. that undercut media reform efforts and marginalized left-leaning scholars (Pickard, 2015). To take one example, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), a respected reform-minded research institution that studied disinformation in the late 1930s from a critical perspective, increasingly struggled to procure funding and find venues for publishing its work. Red-baited by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) for being allegedly unpatriotic, it ultimately ceased operation altogether due to insufficient support (Sproule, 1987).

Interrogating how media propagandize and mobilize people further receded as what later became known as the "limited effects" model ascended. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) seminal book *Personal Influence* concluded that media messages had relatively little impact on people's thinking and behavior, but instead were socially mediated by "opinion leaders" in a two-step flow process through interpersonal networks. Their findings left lasting imprints on how we understand media's social influence. Often seen as replacing the much-ridiculed "hypodermic needle" or "magic bullet" model—assuming media messages immediately altered audience's thoughts and behavior—these accounts rely on fictitious, strawman arguments. In fact, relatively few people (especially scholars) ever promoted such caricatures of powerful media zapping people's minds (Sproule, 1989; Lubken, 2008). Meanwhile, generations of communication graduate students have received and rehearsed such historical narratives.

Such behavioral conceptions of media effects tracked with a broader political shift in communication research. By sidelining critical research, the dominant paradigm's ascendance also *depoliticized* the communication field. After all, if news media had only minimal effects on society, why bother critiquing or reforming these institutions? And yet, although deeply wired into the field's DNA, the limited effects model wasn't inevitable. This historical contingency comes into focus when we consider that the initial lead researcher for the "Decatur study"—which surveyed hundreds of women to ascertain what influenced their decision-making, ultimately producing the limited effects model—was the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills.

At various points before Lazarsfeld fired him from the project, Mills had expressed reservations about the study's lack of class analysis of social stratification (Sterne, 2005; Summers, 2006). Inspired by some of the same data that generated Katz and Lazarsfeld's conclusions in *Personal Influence*, Mills would go on to author more critical analyses, including his 1956 book *The Power Elite,* which emphasized concentrated, hierarchical power in American society. Mills argued that "[a]s the means of information and of power are centralized, some men will come to occupy positions in American society from which…their decisions mightily affect the everyday worlds of ordinary men and women" (Mills, 1956, p. 3). Had it become the dominant paradigm, this framework could have inspired a different view of media effects—and perhaps a different communication field.

In his deconstruction of the limited effects paradigm, Gitlin (1978) argued that subsequent communication scholars, trained to see only minimal media effects, ultimately helped reproduce status quo relationships. Mainstream communication scholarship, characterized by positivist, quantitative methods, diverted attention from media's discursive power to naturalize and legitimize existing power structures through predictable patterns of selection, emphasis, and omission. By suggesting that audiences were largely impervious to media-generated messages, Gitlin argued, mainstream communication scholars typically framed their analysis in a "behaviorist fashion, defining effects so narrowly, microscopically, and directly as to make it very likely that survey studies could show only slight effects at most" (p. 206). Fixated on discretely measurable, "short-run effects," researchers often ignored media's ideological effects over extended periods of time, rendering such power relationships invisible and beyond the scope of permissible study. K. Lang and G. E. Lang (2006) similarly observed that *Personal Influence's* success permanently altered academic discourses describing media's societal role, effectively diverting media sociology from studying long-term effects.

Noting how such narrow foci cast criticism of core power relations outside the parameters of legitimate research, Herb Schiller observed that the limited effects model's "usefulness to existing power is obvious" (1991, p. 146), especially in absolving media owners from accountability: "[T]heories that ignore the structure and locus of representational and definitional power and emphasize instead the individual message's transformational capability present little threat to the maintenance of the established order" (H. Schiller, 1991, p. 156). Likewise, Dan Schiller observes that media's purportedly limited effects arose as the standard explanation "only as the structural underpinnings of institutionalized communication were willed off limits" (D. Schiller, 1996, p. 59). Critical scholars have long noted the supreme irony that this model ascended within the U.S. academy just as the American government and its military apparatus were heavily investing in propaganda operations overseas (Pooley, 2008).

Meanwhile, many leading communication scholars benefitted handsomely from these government propaganda efforts. From Brett Gary's (1999) "nervous liberals" (intellectuals who kept the propaganda apparatus intact after World War II) to Christopher Simpson's (1994) *Science of Coercion* (describing how government funding for propaganda efforts helped expand and institutionalize the communication field), academics and intellectuals learned to overlook or even promote propaganda, but were less likely to critique it, especially the corporate variety. In the 1950s, as the U.S. promoted a "free flow of information" doctrine around the world (Pickard, 2007), key scholars, including foundational figures such as Wilbur Schramm, aided the government's propaganda war against communism. Paradoxically, concerns about domestic propaganda—particularly advertising and public relations amplified by commercial media—faded from the field. Over the ensuing decades, such critical research usually occurred outside the field if conducted at all (e.g., Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Accommodating commercialism, then and now

Accommodating capitalist relations in news and information systems rendered the field ill-equipped to

diagnose contemporary structural crises. Media scholars typically took the commercial system as a given that, if not celebrated, was accepted as part of the natural order. Even those of a more critical bent often limited their research to micro-phenomena and evaded structural criticism—otherwise risking charges of being alarmist, hyperbolic, pessimistic, reductionist, over-determined, or, worst of all, Marxist. Nonetheless, threads of critical research from the field's origins to the present day have persisted. While many scholars within critical/cultural studies have trenchantly dissected race, gender, sexuality, and other power hierarchies, quantitative social scientific research also has proven capable of advancing critical work, such as George Gerbner's (1970) "cultivation analysis" of commercial television's long-term effects.

Another steady stream of critical research stems from the often-neglected subfield of political economy, whose practitioners long decried that corporate capture and hyper-commercialization squandered digital media's democratic potential. If society had heeded their warnings, perhaps we could've avoided the scourge of unregulated digital monopolies. Decades ago, Oscar Gandy (1993) exposed corporate surveillance and discriminatory practices against social groups, arguing that not just government—but also private commercial power—threatened our freedom. Others raised alarms about encroaching forms of "digital capitalism" (Schiller, 1999), warning that an increasingly privatized and commercialized internet won't "set us free" unless embedded in democratic social relations (McChesney, 1999). Nonetheless, having naturalized a commercial system whose sole criterion for success is making profit, democracy be damned, many scholars were disinclined to promote policy reforms that could minimize the negative externalities of run-amok commercialism. Noting this remarkable naivete toward such predictable harms, Des Freedman (2014) muses that, after all, "this is how capital–whether in the shape of the car industry, oil, pharmaceutical, or even social media—operates."

Instead of calling out capitalism's corrosive effects on news and information, many were celebrating the affordances of new digital technologies and belittling concerns about monopoly power. Henry Jenkins (2006), for example, dismissed media reformers as "critical pessimists" for treating audiences as passive dupes and relying too much on "melodramatic discourse about victimization and vulnerability" (pp. 247–248). Over the years, strands of cultural studies (ironic, given their Marxist roots) joined positivist social scientists in privileging descriptive over prescriptive analyses and, at least by implication, dismissing reformist and normative concerns. This long-term marginalization of structural and critical approaches to communication research made identifying potential harms and necessary reforms less likely.

Today, as in the 1940s, communication scholars are scrutinizing monopolistic firms and their social roles. Using terms like dis- and misinformation, we too rarely acknowledge the unbridled commercialism driving these propaganda machines, from Facebook to Fox News. There's less evasion now, but we still face a crossroads. Scholars who study these issues can once again travel the path that ultimately reaffirms existing power structures—perhaps through some "social responsibility" arrangement for platforms and media outlets. Or we can advocate for radically reforming and democratizing information and communication infrastructures. The choice is ours.

Fortunately, positive signs suggest we're doing better this time. A new generation of critical scholars, many of whom are women and people of color, are connecting dis/misinformation and systemic racism to structural failures such as illegitimate business models, monopoly power, and capitalism writ large (e.g., Cottom, 2020; Noble, 2018), and media reform activists are centering critiques of racial capitalism in their calls for "media reparations" (Free Press, 2020). However, other analysts are contending there's an overemphasis on such structural factors, denouncing it as so much social hysteria and moral panic. While some concerns about overreactions and misdiagnosing problems are legitimate, they run the risk of reinscribing a limited effects framework that de-emphasizes harms posed by commercial media institutions and implicitly pooh-poohs reform efforts.

Of course, misinformation alone doesn't cause social pathologies, but it helps prolong and exacerbate them, from hardening distrust toward public institutions to promoting outright fascism. Falsehoods

circulating through media don't always produce dangerous mythologies and behaviors, but they can legitimate, reinforce, and amplify them. Media serve as ideological glue for keeping long-standing narratives intact. Studying political elites and social groups in disinformation campaigns—and cultural and psychological factors that comprise audiences' affect and identity—is certainly important. But if we fail to acknowledge the structural enablers that make malignant communicative behavior possible in the first place, we doom ourselves to perpetuating it.

Ultimately, we should heed earlier critical scholars' insights that structural problems require structural reform. These reforms should remove or reduce commercial logics incentivizing corporate behavior that hurts democracy. More than simply placing regulatory patches on broken commercial systems, we must intervene at media's very foundations via a two-pronged strategy of breaking-up and/or aggressively regulating corporate monopolies while building out non-commercial, democratic alternatives. This approach recognizes that we need not only a *negative* program that aims to snuff out fascistic propaganda, but also a *positive* program that provides robust, diverse, and reliable news and information to *all* communities—and these communities should be centrally involved in governing and making their own media.

Trustbusting information monopolies always should be on the table, but we also must address systemic market failures that aren't solvable by simply enhancing competition between media outlets. In other words, these aren't just monopoly problems; they're capitalism problems. In some cases, we should remove news and information from the commercial market entirely and treat them as the public goods they are. For example, it's now abundantly clear that the market won't support the local journalism that democracy requires. Therefore, we should bring local news media under public ownership and democratic governance (Pickard, 2020). Accordingly, we could treat platforms like public utilities, enforce strong public interest requirements, build out public media infrastructures, municipalize broadband services, and subsidize local journalism.

Our window for meaningful reform might be short. A backlash against the so-called "techlash" is growing and history suggests that opportunities for structural change are fleeting. While immediate reforms are needed to prevent dangerous propaganda, ultimately dis/misinformation will continue to flourish until we confront their systemic roots, including the capitalist logics that incentivize them. Eliminating the sources of misinformation won't solve deeply entrenched maladies and inequities overnight. No magic wand can immediately reverse the damage. But without structurally reforming our news and information systems, the myriad problems facing society today are insurmountable.

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