THE SERENDIPITY OF MERTON’S COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Though not as well-known as other of his writings, Robert K. Merton’s communications research represents an important body of work. From 1941, when he first joined forces with Paul Lazarsfeld at Columbia University, through 1949, when he published his last articles in the area, Merton was active in the overlapping fields of propaganda, public opinion, and communications research. He codified methods, formulated middle range concepts, and composed a small but distinctive corpus that remains useful for contemporary study. Borrowing one of Merton’s own concepts, this essay argues that his communications research was serendipitous—an unplanned, surprising, but highly productive episode in his nine-decade ‘life of learning’. Not only was communications research the vehicle through which he and Lazarsfeld initially forged their famous partnership, it also helped Merton advance his own sociological thinking and yielded some of the best work on mass media published before 1950. Following the logic of the idea of serendipity, I trace the development of Merton’s communications research from his unplanned preparation in the 1930s, through the structured opportunity he ambivalently embraced working with Lazarsfeld during the war, and on to some of the more significant consequences that followed.

It was November of 1941. Robert Merton, a 31-year-old assistant professor of sociology, was seated in a radio studio for the first time. Several months earlier, he had moved to New York from New Orleans, leaving Tulane University for Columbia and moving his young family from the geographical hinterlands to the center of the new broadcast communications empire. He was at CBS studios in Manhattan with his new colleague Paul Lazarsfeld, like Merton hired the previous spring, by a divided Sociology Department that could not agree on a single senior appointment so were given two at lesser rank. The two men were supposed to be dining together with their wives, but plans had changed. Earlier that day, Lazarsfeld had been asked to go downtown to CBS and conduct an emergency test of a government sponsored ‘morale’ program concerning the war in Europe. When the Mertons came to dinner, Lazarsfeld met them at the door, swept his

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new colleague up, and the two men rode a taxi off into the field, while their wives got to know one another.

At the studio, Merton listened and watched as Lazarsfeld and an assistant tested the program with a small audience. Though he had a sporadic memory of personal events, Merton remembered the scene five decades later. ‘Seated there in two (or was it three?) rows were some 20 men and women who were instructed to press a green button mounted on each chair when they liked what they heard in a recorded radio program and a red button when they didn’t like it’ (Merton, 1998, pp. 167–168). Their responses were being recorded by a primitive hand-crafted polygraph of fountain pens, known as ‘Little Annie’ or, more formally, the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer. After the test broadcast, as an assistant asked follow-up questions about the audience’s likes and dislikes, Merton began passing notes to Lazarsfeld, citing problems with the interview, which led to Lazarsfeld inviting his new colleague to try himself. As Merton later wrote, he ‘took the bait’ and began conducting the interview. Lazarsfeld liked what he heard, and after the two men had been ‘emphatically reassured’ by their wives (Sue Merton and Herta Herzog) that dinner was long over, they went to the Russian Bear, celebrated the evening with champagne and caviar, and talked deep into the night. The next week they put together the report, commissioned by the U.S. Office of Facts and Figures, a predecessor of the Office of War Information and the Voice of America. It was the first collaboration of one of the great partnerships in twentieth-century social science.

That first night together, originally recorded in a long 1961 New Yorker profile of Merton and subsequently amplified by both its principals, was what Merton might call a serendipitous event.1 As Merton conceptualized a then little-known term in 1945, serendipity is ‘the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for’ (quoted in Merton, 1968, p. 157). It is the subject of his most recent published work, The Travels and Adventures of Serendipity, essentially a terminological diffusion study, conducted by Merton and Elinor Barber in the 1950s and long unpublished (Merton & Barber, 2004). If we take the ideas of ‘discovery’ and ‘valid results’ rather broadly (imagining Merton’s mild displeasure as we do so), we could say that the unplanned night in the radio studio was serendipitous, for through it the two men discovered overlapping interests and complementsaries and set in motion socio-intellectual processes which had highly productive results. While my neo-pragmatist extension departs from the letter of Merton’s idea of serendipity, it follows the spirit—an unintended, unforeseen moment that a sensitized and appropriately prepared individual makes consequential. It seems fitting,

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1 That Merton appeared in the New Yorker is itself one of those facts from which an entire history of sociology in the United States might flow, and reveals a great deal about the state of that discipline in the American public imagination of the late 1950s.
two years after the end of his remarkable life, to stand on Merton’s own shoulders to peer backward at an important episode in his life.

Merton’s first evening with Lazarsfeld commenced his brief but significant foray into the overlapping and still-developing fields of propaganda, mass communications, and public opinion research. Merton’s 1940s work in those fields, while not rivaling his better known contributions to sociological theory and the sociology of science, was as good as anything written on those subjects during that formative decade of social research in public communication. Merton the communication researcher is not well-known, largely absent from the remembrances that followed his death and missing in most discussions of his work. Yet communications research, which he entered ambivalently and never fully embraced, was a key site where Merton established his famously productive relationship with Lazarsfeld, worked out aspects of his mature sociological positions, and forged concepts and methodological techniques of subsequent importance in the study of communication and other social processes.

Working with Lazarsfeld at the Office of Radio Research (ORR, later the Bureau of Applied Social Research or BASR) wasn’t what Merton intended to do when he moved to Columbia, but it turned out to be a structured opportunity within which he did important work. A full discussion of his communications research awaits another day. This essay, straddling the line between what Merton later called ‘the history and systematics’ of social research (1968, pp. 1–38), aims simply to fill in the contexts Merton brought with him to the radio studio in 1941, outline key constraints that helped structure his subsequent research, and identify some of the consequences that followed. Serendipity requires a prepared mind to seize upon the unanticipated moment and from it produce something of significance. My essay moves from Merton’s unplanned preparation to the strategic fruits of his labor, following the temporal logic of serendipity as it goes.

Merton’s Unanticipated Preparation: Personal Contexts for a Missed Dinner

In noting the differences and commonalities that he and Lazarsfeld brought to their partnership, Merton once wrote, ‘The substantive fields in which we had worked before joining forces at Columbia had nothing in common’ (1968, p. 170). Actually, this was only half true. Lazarsfeld and Merton had not published in the same journals or cited many of the same authors, but they had in fact been working in closely related fields in the period immediately before their

2 Except when making a specific point about propaganda or public opinion research, I will use ‘communications research’ as a shorthand term to cover the three fields that in the 1940s were still relatively undifferentiated from one another. For complementary discussions of Merton’s communications research within the context of the field in the first half of the twentieth century, see Simonson and Weimann (2003), Simonson (2004), and Peters and Simonson (2004).
serendipitous evening together in November 1941. The general images we have of Lazarsfeld the methodologist meeting Merton the theorist, and Lazarsfeld the marketing and radio researcher meeting Merton the sociologist of science are partly accurate, but they occlude Merton’s own ‘pre-Pauline’ engagement with propaganda research and social scientific methodology. In the four years before he met Lazarsfeld, Merton’s interest in propaganda as an object of disciplined attention had intensified. In discussion groups and classrooms, Merton ‘orally published’ ideas that became newly relevant when he entered Lazarsfeld’s socio-intellectual orbit, and which he later drew upon in articles jointly published with Lazarsfeld. In retrospect, we can see a kind of unanticipated preparation for Office of Radio Research when we look back at some of Merton’s social experiences before 1941.

Merton’s scholarly exposure to the idea of propaganda dated back at least to a 1931 social psychology course he took from Frederick Lund as an undergraduate at Philadelphia’s Temple College (now Temple University). Merton’s meticulous class notes reveal his early attention to concepts of communication, public opinion, and propaganda, which Lund defined for him as the ‘deliberate attempt to manufacture public opinion’ (RKM, undergraduate course notes, personal files). Furthermore, Lund insisted to his students that social psychology was an empirical science, a counter to the introspective view that Charles Horton Cooley (1909) and others had taken a generation before. His attention to propaganda and public opinion was part of a broader trend, fed by multiple intellectual and institutional tributaries, which in the United States dated back to the early Progressive Era and gained momentum after World War I. As a student in Lund’s class, Merton was one small part in a much larger socio-intellectual matrix (on which, see Sproule, 1997).

In the late 1930s, as the political situation in Europe deteriorated and America struggled with its own economic upheaval and social demons, propaganda took on additional urgency as a topic of public concern. In January of 1937, Merton was a 26-year old instructor at Harvard. He had taken his Ph.D., but few jobs were available during the Depression and he was pleased to be teaching in Cambridge. In December, two of his articles had been published in leading sociology journals, and now between teaching and writing he was also taking part in a professionalized, late-1930s version of an earlier and more famous Cambridge discussion

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3 On the idea of oral publication, see Merton (1980a).
4 One, the ‘Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action’ (Merton, 1936b) became a classic. The other, ‘Civilization and Culture’ (Merton, 1936a) is pretty well forgotten, even by Merton fans and interpreters of his early work (e.g. Sztompka, 1986, 1996; Crothers, 1987; Zocchi del Treco, 1998); but it is an important piece with seeds of a number of ideas that became significant in his later work—e.g. the ideas of ‘concept’, ‘culture’, independent multiple inventions (also a theme in his published dissertation, Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England), ‘sociology as an analytic discipline’, differences between scientific and artistic technique, and the relation of science as a cumulative and universal endeavor and the particular cultural matrices in which it grows up.
group, the Metaphysical Club. Merton had stature in the group, which also included Kingsley Davis and Robert Bierstedt, but it revolved around a young Talcott Parsons, whose *Structure of Social Action* would come out later that year, helped by comments and editing by Merton. Among other topics, members of ‘the Parsons Sociological Group’, as it was called by its members, addressed the problems of persuasion, propaganda, and political power. On these topics, they worked broadly in Max Weber’s wake, but also took the very long view and used Plato’s distinction between rhetoric and dialectic as the pivot for distinguishing coercion from rational persuasion. Drawing upon examples ranging from Hitler to Ivy Lee, the Jesuits, and Mary Baker Eddy, the Parsons Group analyzed the elements and apparent effects of propaganda in a way that foreshadowed Merton’s work at Columbia. To Parsons and the others, Merton orally published ideas about propaganda that later appeared in his published sociology of science (Merton, 1938) and mass communications research (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1943, 1948). He also offered the group an analytical map of propaganda divided into ‘three of its major aspects’—the motives of the propagandist, the content, and techniques of the propaganda, and the influence exercised on ‘the propagandee’ (Parsons Sociological Group, 4 May 1937). Coincidentally, that same year Lazarsfeld described the task of radio research as determining ‘who listens to what, why, and with what effect’ (quoted in Buxton, 1994, p. 207, fn. 1; see also pp. 188–201). In their parallel encounters with propaganda and radio, the two men addressed overlapping phenomena in complimentary ways. Merton’s schema attended to producers and texts, Lazarsfeld’s to audiences, but both were concerned with the related questions of influence and effect. Together, their correlative dicta nearly added up to the field-conceiving schema established in 1940 by the important Rockefeller Foundation Communications Group—that ‘the job of research in mass communication is to determine who, and with what intention, said what, to whom, and with what effects’ (quoted in Gary, 1996, p. 138; see also 1999; and Buxton, 1994).

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5 That club being the 1872 discussion group of Cambridge intellectuals that included the young Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and Oliver Wendell Holmes among others and is seen, somewhat romantically, as the birthplace of American pragmatism (see Menand, 2001).

6 In one meeting, notes indicate that ‘Merton pointed out an important type of propaganda in which the general ends are already accepted and assumed, but in which the specific ends or special applications of the fundamental principles or general ends are pointed out or made explicit’—an early version of the canonic Columbia idea of ‘canalization’, that mass communication is most effective when it channels existing general beliefs into specific actions (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, pp. 114–115). He went on to say that this type ‘readily passes over into the case of mere clarification where A merely gives B relevant and true information’—an anticipation of what he later called ‘the propaganda of facts’ (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1943, pp. 75–79; reprinted in Merton, 1968, pp. 578–582). Finally, Merton noted that ‘propaganda can often be most effective when it takes on the guise of clarification as, e.g. the literature used by temperance societies which used the authority of science in a biased way, and spread its reports among people often incapable of critical judgment on the matter’—an insight he applied to the contemporary propaganda that borrowed the prestige of science to promote its own unscientific doctrines and ‘new mysticisms’ to lay audiences who were in no position to judge scientific validity (Merton, 1938, p. 333; reprinted in Merton, 1973, p. 264). All quotes found in, ‘Parsons Sociological Group’, p. 21, RKM, personal files. For a brief discussion of the group in the context of Parsons’ intellectual biography, see Gerhardt (2003, pp. 65–67).
After a spring partially spent in dialectic inquiry on the problems of propaganda, Merton traveled to Europe in the summer of 1937 to improve his German and spend time in a small Austrian village, Grundlsee.\(^7\) From Austria, he slipped into Germany, where he collected pamphlets and other academic and public literature on Nazi and Jewish science, writings that represented a kind of border zone between the sociology of science and propaganda research. As the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who had fled the Czar’s Pogroms, Merton had personal as well as scholarly reasons to be concerned about the Nazi ‘dogma of “race purity”’ and its effects on the institutions of science, subjects he perceptively analyzed in his classic ‘Science and the Social Order’ (Merton, 1938), written on the heels of his trip to Germany. It was in the context of sorting out the distinctive features of Nazi science that Merton first discussed his famous notion of ‘the scientific ethos’, one part of which was ‘the functionally necessary demand that theories or generalizations be evaluated in terms of their logical consistency and consonance with facts’ and not by ‘the hitherto irrelevant criteria of race or political creed of the theorist’—an idea that later morphed into the norm of universalism (Merton, 1942; see also Hollinger, 1996).

In 1939, Merton was offered an associate professorship in New Orleans at Tulane University, where he worked for two years teaching the sons and daughters of the white Southern elite. As part of his duties there, he was expected to deliver public lectures, to ladies’ groups and other genteel audiences, which became sites for a rather different kind of oral publication, and opportunities for Merton to display the charm and eloquence for which he was later well-known. After Germany invaded Poland on September 1, the war in Europe loomed large in America, and Merton spoke to New Orleans elites about the role of propaganda among the combatants and helped to organize campus forums where experts debated offering aid to Britain. Although never a political activist, in the summer of 1940, Merton lent assistance to the Council for Democracy, a New York based civic group that aimed to strengthen Americans’ ‘traditional belief in the value and workability of democracy and to counteract the propaganda’ of those who attempted ‘to undermine democracy.’\(^8\) Propaganda drew the energies

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7 As Merton later remembered, he stayed at Seeblick, a summer place populated by Viennese artists and intellectuals and presided over by Frau Doktor Schwarzwald, a Viennese educator and philanthropist who, also coincidentally, had known Lazarsfeld as a young man (Merton, 1998, p. 179).

8 He contributed to their pamphlet, ‘Freedom of Assembly and Anti-Democratic Groups’, and noted how in times of real or imagined threats to traditional institutions of society, ‘sections of the public demand immediate action in “defense” of their threatened beliefs; mobs, with little in common but the feeling of acute tension demanding release, await only a leader to make an attack upon the most available scapegoat.’ He went on to articulate one of his fundamental, liberal tenets, backed here by social scientific credibility. At times such as the present, he observed, there is social pressure for intense emotional opposition to groups that repudiate or question core ideals, ‘but this very procedure threatens the maintenance of democracy and its values. Unless stress is laid upon toleration of differences of opinion as essential to democratic unity, a social situation is created in which hostility, anger and intense moral indignation are engendered by any person or group which questions any feature of current national beliefs and practices’ (‘Freedom of Assembly and Anti-Democratic Groups,’ American Council for Public Affairs, p. 17; RKM, personal files).
of both Merton’s scholarly and citizen selves. As he confessed to George Simpson, his undergraduate mentor, ‘I’m afraid I’ve been wasting … too much time listening to the short-wave European broadcasts during the last few weeks. I rationalize it by saying that it’s valuable propaganda material, which I can use in discussions of that subject. And, incidentally, I’m gradually becoming convinced that the field of propaganda, with all its implications, is practically the field of social psychology’ (Letter to George E. Simpson, 21 April 1940. RKM, personal files).

Over the next year, Merton developed this conviction about the basic identity between the fields of propaganda research and social psychology as he planned and taught a course on the subject in his final semester before moving to Columbia. Along with Hiram Johnson, a psychology professor and former Harvard Fellow who had helped bring Merton to Tulane, he co-taught Social Psychology in the spring of 1941. Attitude was a major topic of the course, and Merton drew upon his own research, including a methodological critique of Thurstone attitude scales he had begun at Harvard and published in 1940 (with an additional section based upon a small survey Merton administered, during the height of racial segregation, to his all-white Tulane students about their sentiment toward ‘Negroes’, as African-Americans were then called in progressive circles). Propaganda was another major topic of the course, and Merton’s never published ‘Ethnic Epithets: A Study in Language as a Means of Social Control’ provided some of the relevant supporting materials. Like other researchers of the day, Merton and his class explored propaganda in a wide range of forms—from wartime and revolutionary pamphlets to children’s cartoons and school textbooks.

In retrospect, we can see the Tulane social psychology class as probably Merton’s most salient preparation for entering the radio studio with Lazarsfeld and beginning their collaboration in an area of common interest, propaganda. Merton’s course notes reveal ideas that subsequently entered the Columbia communications research vocabulary, and for which Lazarsfeld is generally credited. He called students to find ‘cases of “boomerang propaganda,” i.e. where it rebounds to the disadvantage of the propagandist-group’, an idea that later grew into “the boomerang effect” (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1943; Merton & Kendall, 1944). He articulated parts of what later became known as the limited effects paradigm, telling his students that the effectiveness of propaganda depends upon ‘the mores supporting existing institutions or the counter-mores which challenge the legitimacy of these institutions’ (cf. Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1948, pp. 112–118). More generally, he displayed the kind of skeptical eye, epistemological exactness, and interest in method that marked classic Columbia research. As he said at Tulane:

Current analyses of the effectiveness of propaganda presuppose some knowledge of the demonstrable results of propaganda. In point of fact, systematic materials on such effects are notably wanting. What material there is pertains largely to the effects of
commercial advertising. Review this material and set forth the various methods of ascertaining the relative effectiveness of propagandistic methods and content. To what extent may these procedures be applied to propaganda other than commercial advertising? (‘Lectures in Social Psychology,’ Tulane University. RKM, personal files).

In raising this last question, Merton previewed one of the fault lines that separated his own thinking from his future colleague’s, as they paired up to generate ‘knowledge of the demonstrable results of propaganda’. While Lazarsfeld believed that marketing research and individual buying decisions offered a valid template for propaganda and mass communications research, Merton would have his doubts.9

If longer-standing attention to propaganda provided one of the contexts Merton brought to his aborted dinner with Lazarsfeld, interest in social scientific method was another. Like his exposure to propaganda study, Merton’s acquaintance with subsequently relevant methods dated back to his undergraduate years at Temple. He served as research assistant to his mentor George E. Simpson, who, at the time, was conducting research for a dissertation analyzing the portrayal of African-Americans in white Philadelphia newspapers (later published as Simpson, 1936). This was Merton’s first important experience with empirical research on ‘the agencies of communication’, as the media were then sometimes called. He and Simpson engaged in what would later be called quantitative content analysis. They read the newspapers, found and classified stories about blacks, and measured column inches to discern overall trends, gaining research experience Merton later applied to his groundbreaking dissertation at Harvard, one of the founding texts in the sociology of science (Merton, 1938/2001).10

Beyond this proto-content analysis of newspapers, Merton also brought other experience with method when he moved to Columbia. Over two different summers, he conducted interviews, first after college as an intern at the Elwyn Training School for the Feeble Minded, and then at Harvard for a government sponsored study of ‘hobos’ and the agencies that worked with them. Although Harvard offered little in the way of formal training in sociological methods, Merton’s notes from that era show a sustained commitment to developing a scientifically oriented sociology built partly upon sound methodologies. His dissertation evinced this view, based as it was upon reading and classifying some 6,000 entries in the British Dictionary of National Biography in a method later known as

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9 As Merton wrote in an unpublished 1946 text, much of which appeared in Lazarsfeld & Merton (1948), ‘The single or repeated purchase of a branded commodity under the persuasive impetus of an advertisement need not involve the same processes and factors as engaging in “social action” over a continuing period’ (RKM personal files).

10 The method Merton and Simpson used had grown out of newspaper research by sociologists at Columbia in the 1910s and ‘20s, including A. A. Tenney (1912) and students like Malcolm Willey, whose Country Newspaper (1926) provided a model for Simpson’s project (Simpson, 1936, pp. 127–140, 153–156). For a fine recent discussion of Merton’s sociology of science and fascinating personal recollection by a deeply ambivalent former student, see Cole (2004).
prosopography, inspired partly by his work on the newspaper study with Simpson and partly by research on Arabian intellectual development he did with his advisor, Pitirim Sorokin (Merton, 1979, pp. 24–26). By the late 1930s, Merton’s methodological thinking (if not his practice) had reached sophisticated levels, as evidenced in the critique of Thurstone attitude scales published at Tulane (Merton, 1940). With regard to methodology, it is probably most accurate to say that before he met Lazarsfeld, Merton was a capable practitioner with a strong theoretical sense about the nature and significance of method for sociology as a scientific endeavor (cf. Crothers, 1998, esp. pp. 233–238).

Finally, Merton brought at least one other relevant personal context with him to Columbia—a series of important intellectual friendships with men a decade or so older than he. The first was Charles Hopkins, or ‘Hop’, boyfriend and then husband of Merton’s older sister Emma. An amateur magician and self-taught polymath, Hop was role model and father figure to the young Merton, then still known as Meyer Schkolnick. After Hop, to whom Merton dedicated Social Theory and Social Structure, it was Simpson, the young instructor who lived in a Temple dormitory and introduced Merton to race relations, which remained an interest into the 1950s, when Merton helped to write the Social Science Brief for the landmark Supreme Court desegregation case, Brown vs. Board of Education. At Harvard, it was Talcott Parsons, eight years older and, like Simpson, a kind of older brother (see Merton, 1980b). Lazarsfeld, ten years Merton’s senior, was next in line, and filled a high-level conversational role Merton had established with three men before him. Given these contexts, it is not hard to imagine Merton talking animatedly with the brilliant and sometimes charming institution-builder Lazarsfeld, as the two drank champagne and ate caviar in 1941.

STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITIES: LAZARSFELD, WARTIME, AND THE OFFICE OF RADIO RESEARCH

Animated conversation over champagne is one thing, signing on to be Associate Director of Lazarsfeld’s Office of Radio Research quite another. For all the lines of unanticipated preparation we can retroactively see leading into the moment, the fact remained that Merton was coming into Columbia basically a lone scholar who worked in library and study and had little taste for ‘applied research’ of any kind. Although he was interested in propaganda and social scientific method, he was a long way from being a Lazarsfeldian administrative researcher who oversaw research teams and completed assigned projects for funding sources. Left to himself, Merton was unlikely to become a communications researcher, certainly

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11 An aspiring magician himself, the young Schkolnick adopted the stage name Robert K. Merlin—and then, at Hop’s suggestion, the less ‘hackneyed’ Merton—after having done a school report on another Americanizing son of European Jews who had transformed himself—from Ehrich Weiss, son of a rabbi, to the great Harry Houdini from the all-American sounding town of Appleton, Wisconsin.
not of the sort he soon was. He fell into a situation constrained by three interlocking forces, however, which structured his attention in his early years at Columbia.

The first was Lazarsfeld himself, who exercised on others the sort of interpersonal influence he also made it his business to study. Throughout his life, Lazarsfeld self-consciously used charisma, intellect, and coercion to convince people he respected to work on problems of interest to him. Merton was among many who felt and later commented upon this aspect of his colleague and friend. Lazarsfeld had ‘a way of drawing others into the vortex of his ideas, commitments, passions and visions,’ Merton remembered, ‘and so his life long he co-opted associates of every kind to work on them, preferably in a research organization of his own making’ (Merton, 1998, p. 169; see also Coleman, 1988; Sills, 1987). At the CBS studios, Lazarsfeld, in what Merton called ‘typically Pauline co-optative fashion,’ asked his new colleague if he would like to try his hand interviewing. At the Russian Bear afterward, Lazarsfeld explained his program of applied research and the ORR. ‘My purpose was to recruit Merton’s collaboration,’ Lazarsfeld frankly said (1975, p. 36). At the time, Columbia paid its assistant professors very poorly, and the extra income Merton might gain from the ORR’s contracts would have been appealing to him.12 ‘The weekend and the days following found us hard at work,’ Merton (1998, p. 168) remembered, so Lazarsfeld had succeeded for at least the short term.

This was November 1941. On December 7, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, the United States entered the war, and a second constraining force entered Merton’s world. Owing to his family’s Jewish origins, Merton had special reasons to feel patriotic sentiments widely shared in 1941, except in isolationist circles which had been active since World War I (and which had generated some of the propaganda research of the period). He volunteered for active duty, but poor eyesight prevented it. Instead, he directed his patriotism elsewhere, and, like many academics of the era, offered his expertise to the U.S. government, initially through Lazarsfeld and the government contacts he had made through the ORR.13

Merton had mixed feelings about his work, as evidenced in a letter from the period to Kingsley Davis:

As for me, my trouble lies in not having learned to say ‘no.’ As a consequence, I’ve been spending six and eight hours a day on a ‘project’ which has the advantage of

12 Merton had actually taken a cut in both pay and rank when he moved to Columbia. At Tulane, he was a full professor making $4,000 a year and scheduled for a $200 raise if he stayed on. Columbia hired him as an assistant professor at a salary of $3,600, which, coupled with New York’s higher cost of living, would have represented a significant drop in family income.

13 Through Rockefeller Foundation funding and organization, Lazarsfeld and the ORR had been involved in planning and carrying out war related communications research since at least 1939, when Rockefeller’s John Marshall convened the ‘Communications Group’ that was instrumental in the development of subsequent research (Berelson, 1959; Buxton, 1994; Gary, 1999). Two January 1941 conferences had brought together researchers with representatives from key government agencies coordinating morale and propaganda efforts (Buxton, 1994, pp. 205–207). When Merton began working at the ORR, he ‘benefited’ from these established connections, which intensified when the United States entered the war.
being in some small measure a patriotic undertaking as well as an intrinsically interesting job. I accepted the invitation of the Office of Radio Research, here, to ‘test’ the effectiveness of the morale-program, *This is War*, which is broadcast overall all four networks Saturday nights (Letter to Kingsley Davis, 18 March 1942, RKM, personal files).

Lazarsfeld (1975) quoted from this letter as evidence of Merton’s ambivalence about applied empirical research, which is surely true; the quotation marks around ‘project’ and ‘test’ indicate both their novelty to Merton and his misgivings about them. Yet the rest of the letter, quoted only in part by Lazarsfeld, shows enthusiasm for the work as well, as Merton found in it new contexts to pursue longer questions about propaganda.

We have a fairly elaborate setup at the NBC and CBS studios which enables us to check the spontaneous responses of samples of listeners on the spot. This is followed through with fairly detailed interviewing around the ‘peaks’ of response to various parts of the program. My immediate interest lies in having run into a problem where preliminary analysis and hunches can be checked by direct observation of human beings in action. The entire business is still in its early stages, but it’s dammably interesting. Inasmuch as the group which is running the broadcasts seems to have profited by our preliminary work, there is this added incentive. But it does rip into my private program—I’ve been getting home at one and two a.m., times without end. I’ve got some hunches, incidentally, which supplement some of Lasswell’s analysis at the very points where his work is most vulnerable, i.e. a direct check on the selective attention of ‘propagandees’ to the several kinds of propaganda content. For the most part, this particular aspect of propaganda has either been ignored as not subject to test (particularly in ‘real-life’ situations) or as a problem to be dealt with in theoretic rather than observational terms. As you can gather from this scrambled paragraph, my chief interest lies in the rare opportunity of having more or less immediate checks on theoretically derived hypotheses (or, if you prefer, ‘bright ideas’). I hope we can refine our procedure to the point where some real progress will become evident (Letter to Kingsley Davis, 18 March 1942. RKM, personal files).

I have quoted from this letter at length because it reveals so much of what preceded it and what was then developing. We see Merton the methodologist describing the Program Analyzer and follow-up interviews. We see Merton the budding empirically oriented theorist, interested in checking preliminary analysis and hunches against observation. We see Merton the propaganda analyst using the neologistic concept of the ‘propagandee’ that he had offered to the Parsons Group. We see Merton the administrative researcher, pleased to be helping the group that developed the propaganda but also intent on using the research to advance generalized social scientific knowledge. We see Merton the scientist, guided by the hope that disciplined investigation and the refinement of procedure might yield real progress over time. And we see Merton the ambivalent intellectual, working many hours on a project that was ‘in some small measure
a patriotic undertaking’ but that cut considerably into his own ‘private program’ of research. (What his wife thought of all this, one can only surmise.)

The ambivalence intensified as Merton became Associate Director of the ORR (soon to be BASR), effectively in 1942 and officially the next year. In that formal capacity, Merton conducted a number of studies for the Office of War Information (OWI), and was also summoned to work briefly at the Pentagon for the Office of Strategic Services (a predecessor to the CIA). Among other OWI projects, he ran a study of patriotic radio broadcasts and rumor in Philadelphia as well as audience tests for the director Frank Capra’s ‘Why We Fight’ series. In 1943, Lazarsfeld also assigned him primary responsibility for two large research projects that grew into Merton’s leading solo-authored communication monographs—a study of Time magazine readership in ‘Rovere’ (Dover, New Jersey), eventually published as ‘Patterns of Influence’ (1949a; see also Merton, 1943); and a study of singer Kate Smith’s 18-hour radio war bond drive, published with Marjorie Fiske and Alberta Curtis as Mass Persuasion (1946/2004) (see Appendix). Both were administrative projects that involved overseeing small research teams of interviewers (typically women, in the gendered division of labor at Columbia that is a story in itself), paid for by Time and CBS respectively. Merton was clearly in a new socio-intellectual world, not fully happily, and his attention was structured by roles and relationships developed in the wake of that first evening with Lazarsfeld.

SERENDIPITOUS PRODUCTION: MERTON’S COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

When Merton’s prepared mind entered the context provided by working for Lazarsfeld’s ORR in the first years of American involvement in World War II, the result, I am arguing, was serendipitous—unplanned, surprising, but ultimately ‘strategic’ in the sense of yielding productive results. One obvious productive outcome was this: wartime propaganda and communications research was the vehicle that launched the partnership that became ‘Lazarsfeld and Merton’, which did so much to establish the contours of social science in postwar America and those nations then in its sphere of intellectual or ideological influence. Beginning late in 1941, he and Lazarsfeld spoke frequently14 and worked in tandem on propaganda research, leading to two co-authored papers, ‘Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda’ (1943) and the classic ‘Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action’ (1948). This was their first and in many ways formative context of interaction, importantly supplemented by a graduate

14 By Merton’s estimation, he and Lazarsfeld averaged 10 to 15 hours of conversation a week between 1942 and 1965 (Converse, 1987, p. 503). One can imagine that this was perhaps an underestimate for their first years, when both were busy doing war-related research and Lazarsfeld was anxious to enlist Merton’s help in securing the ORR’s success.
seminar they offered together in 1944, where they staked out an agenda of blending theory and empirical research. By the 1950s, their partnership well established and full professorship easing earlier financial burdens, both men largely abandoned communications to pursue other interests, solo and in tandem.

Their 1943 paper, ‘Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda’, already indexed the blend of codified methodologies, middle-range theory, and empirical research that the two men would make a staple of Columbia sociology. Merton contributed at least as much to the paper as Lazarsfeld, but it was also peppered with examples from ORR research conducted by Herta Herzog and others, both from the war effort and studies of anti-discrimination campaigns and other ‘propaganda for social objectives’. The paper included a definition of propaganda, the idea of the boomerang response, and the broader theme of social distrust, all of which Merton had pursued before coming to Columbia. At the same time, it elaborated methods long used by Lazarsfeld and other ORR researchers, namely content and ‘response analysis’—the latter coupling the Program Analyzer with ‘interviews of a special type, which we shall call the “focused interview” ’ (p. 568)—here the print origins of the focus group, soon codified by Merton and Lazarsfeld’s next wife, Patricia Kendall (1946; see also Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956, and Merton, 1987). Five years later came their second joint piece, ‘Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action.’ Although pieced together from speeches Lazarsfeld delivered and drafts of an earlier, aborted effort by Merton, it remains one of the most significant articles on mass communication to come out of the United States—the classic statement of 1940s communications research at Columbia, and still ‘full of enough ideas to keep research going for quite some time’, as David Riesman wrote about it in 1951 (p. 45; see also Simonson & Weimann, 2003).

Between their propaganda and communication papers, Lazarsfeld and Merton co-taught a graduate seminar in the fall of 1944, where they rehearsed arguments about their work and respective roles publicly before a group of students that included, among others, Alvin Gouldner. Drawing upon examples from their communications research, they charted relations between theory and method that they later formulated in writing. In their second meeting, Merton identified one of their chief aims this way:

It has become quite clear, as I indicated in the first meeting of the seminar, that Paul and I have distinct emphases in our work. Paul is, above all, concerned with methodology: the logic of procedures, the ways in which given types of data and information can be acquired and how they are analyzed. My primary interest is on content, on theory, that is, the hypotheses with which one operates, and deriving those hypotheses from previously tested theory. One of the chief purposes of the Seminar, therefore, should be to integrate these two emphases: to show how one derives hypotheses from previous theoretical work, and then to examine the logic of the procedures used to test these
Merton confessed to the group that his *Time* magazine study was inadequately conceptualized, which he said illustrated the lesson that ‘facts never speak for themselves; they must be cross-examined in terms of a set of concepts’ (a reminder that Merton was never a positivist in any straightforward way). He and Lazarsfeld had their differences, but the seminar provided a forum for a kind of joint oral publication about the relations among theory, method, and empirical research, the triad they were then pursuing in their communications work.

The seminar in turn led to papers Lazarsfeld and Merton presented together at the meetings of the American Sociological Society in 1946. It was a kind of public announcement of their new partnership and union. Merton spoke first, refuting the then-standard view that empirical investigation merely tests pre-established hypotheses. Instead, he argued, empirical research yielded surprises, which might be used to initiate, clarify, or reformulate theory. Quoting a footnote from an earlier paper (Merton, 1945), Merton said, ‘Fruitful empirical research not only tests theoretically derived hypotheses; it also originates new hypotheses. This might be termed the ‘serendipity’ component of research, i.e., the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for’ (1968 [1948], p. 157). Merton himself had experienced such surprises in his propaganda research, which he now conceptualized more generally as ‘the Serendipity Pattern’.

As he wound down the paper, ‘The Bearing of Empirical Research Upon the Development of Social Theory’, Merton indicated that Lazarsfeld would pick up where he was leaving off, and then closed with an image that captured both his own developing sociological orientation and his relation with Lazarsfeld. Research and theory would need to ‘be married if sociology is to bear legitimate fruit,’ he said, but, ‘they must not only exchange solemn vows—they must know how to carry on from there. Their reciprocal roles must be clearly defined. This paper is a brief essay toward that definition’ (1968 [1948], p. 171).

Beyond launching his partnership with Lazarsfeld, communication research also gave Merton a context to work out components of his mature sociological positions. It gave him his first experience overseeing research teams, which he would pursue further in his important studies of medical education in the 1950s. The partnership with Lazarsfeld helped accelerate the development of Merton’s understanding of social theory and its relation to empirical research and its methodologies, while communication research gave him first-hand experience

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15 For instance, Merton noted, ‘Paul took the position that any hypothesis can be dealt with through interview data, and that field observation has as its principal objective the detection of new hypotheses. I am still to be convinced on this point.’

16 The name of the American Sociological Association in the days before acronyms became popular, as Merton liked wryly to note.
with those things. This was an important experience for Merton, for it offered the opportunity to formulate in practice the middle-range theory he would name and defend in the first edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949).¹⁷ Leading into that signal discussion, Merton had formulated a number of important middle range concepts which have proved to be of continuing value, ranging from the boomerang response to the self-fulfilling prophecy, ‘pseudo-Gemeinschaft,’ public image, locals and cosmopolitans, the status conferral function, and the narcotizing dysfunction,¹⁸ all of which rose directly or (in the case of the self-fulfilling prophecy) obliquely from his encounter with communication.

‘Public image’ is worth pausing over. Merton never fully conceptualized it, but the term is all over his work in the late 1940s, and he was perhaps the first author to use it in an extended manner.¹⁹ It indexes one late cluster of Merton’s communications work, which might be called ‘public image research’, and points in directions that Merton might have gone, had he not abandoned a field that was never his true love but only a marriage of convenience. From *Mass Persuasion* through sections of his massive but mostly unpublished study of public housing, through two little known election-related studies conducted in 1948, Merton’s public image research was a largely undeveloped corollary to the public opinion survey research that proliferated in the 1940s.²⁰ The concept itself was part of Merton’s Durkheimian inheritance (a public image was a kind of collective representation) and also revealed his debt to Mead, Cooley, and, more distantly, Aristotle, but Merton deployed it with a Marxian eye for contradiction and, sometimes, a dialectician’s distance from popular perceptions and rhetorical appeals (Simonson, 2004). This was characteristic of the

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¹⁷ The concept of middle-range theory is first used, as far as I have found, in the Introduction to the 1949 *Social Theory and Social Structure* (pp. 5–10), although parts of Merton’s argument (absent the ‘middle-range’ terminology) were developed in a criticism of Parsonsian grand theory he presented two years earlier (Merton, 1947, esp. pp. 165–166). The concept receives its fullest explication in chapter 2 of the expanded, 1968 *Social Theory and Social Structure*, ‘On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range’.

¹⁸ Merton had briefly discussed the crucial theoretical concept of dysfunctions in his short 1947 critique of Parsonsian grand theory, but the narcotizing dysfunction—the social process whereby mass media cultivate mass apathy (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948, pp. 105–106)—was his first explicit specification of any particular dysfunction.

¹⁹ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘public image’ came out of the advertising and public relations industries of the late 1950s, and only had scattered use before then. Merton published the concept in the 1940s, both in print and orally, and it could have easily circulated from Columbia sociology circles through the graduate students and others (including Lazarsfeld’s second wife, Herta Herzog) who went to work in New York media industries in the 1950s. For an early application of the concept in Merton and Lazarsfeld’s (1950) edited *Continuities in Social Research* volume, see Lerner, 1950.

²⁰ Merton was developing other corollaries as well. In a 1947 note for an unwritten paper, Merton outlined an insightful critique of public opinion data as ‘typically reported in terms of ‘personal characteristics’, i.e., in terms of the status of the respondent (age, sex, economic position, etc.) and not in terms of the social structure in which respondents find themselves. . . . Thus working-class status as an attribute of the respondent may have quite different effects upon behavior according to whether [the] respondents are in a homogeneous workers’ community or live in a highly stratified community. . . . I think this is a crucial point at which psychological attributes differ from sociological: in the first case, you classify attributes of individuals; in the second case, you classify attributes of the ‘social environment’ in which the individual lives’ (‘Social Structure and Public Opinion: Quantitative Studies in Social Structure,’ 1 May 1947, RKM, personal files).
distinctively Mertonian strain of the sociology of mass communications—complementary to Lazarsfeld’s but more robustly social, critical, and historically oriented than his colleague’s, which by contrast favored the study of aggregated individual actions with stricter detachment and relative inattention to the broader contexts of cultural life. Some of these qualities come out in election-related studies Merton conducted, during a period when he was briefly interested in political sociology and oversaw a never-published analysis of some 20,000 letters written to then-General Dwight Eisenhower and urging him to run for president (Merton, Doris, Jahoda, & Sussman, 1949; see Goldhammer, 1997). It was partly a story of Eisenhower’s public images as expressed by letter writers, and ran parallel to a second study that examined newspaper editors’ images of opinion polling after its failure to predict Harry Truman’s victory in the election (Merton & Hatt, 1949). In both instances, it was understood that legitimacy partly depended upon the perceptions of the public, whether Eisenhower’s generalized public or the strategic public of editors. Merton’s choice of ‘image’ instead of ‘opinion’ had interesting but never worked out implications for understanding the nature of the public and of the entity that pollsters measure in their survey research.

In the final analysis, Merton’s sociology of mass communications was truncated and incomplete. He had a hand in the educations of a number of Columbia graduates who went on to do important work in the field in the 1950s and after—including Elihu Katz, Rolf Meyersohn, Charles Wright, Warren Breed, Thelma McCormack, W. P. Davison, and Albert Gollin—but his own work in the area was done by 1949. Some of his concepts persisted, but for the most part the Mertonian model of communication research, as exemplified in Mass Persuasion and sections of ‘Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action’, fell to the side as Wilbur Schramm took over leadership of a field that Lazarsfeld and Merton had earlier staked out.

That leaves us to make new use of his work, by re-reading and extending his concepts in our own different times and places. Merton was a consummate scholar, whose analytic precision, telling footnotes, and prose elegance all stand ready as models for ourselves and our students. Too few of us re-read classic texts, forgetting Merton’s own dictum that any work worth reading is worth re-reading periodically, for ‘part of what is communicated by the printed page changes as a result of an interaction between the dead author and the live reader’ (1968, p. 37). Currently out of vogue, Merton is a dead author well worth re-reading, not casually but with the dedicated concentration of the scholar described by Edmund Wilson who, again quoting Merton, ‘interrupted at his work by a knock on the door, opened it, strangled the stranger who stood there, and then returned to his work’ (ibid.). Returning to Merton’s writings, with a mix of open mindedness, critical skepticism, and creative appropriation, is itself a kind of Mertonian activity, filled with small surprises that prepared minds
might make productive. Like his 1940s communications research, it is potentially the stuff of serendipity.

APPENDIX: MERTON’S PUBLISHED AND SELECTED UNPUBLISHED WORK IN PROPAGANDA, MASS COMMUNICATIONS, AND PUBLIC OPINION, 1942–1949


‘Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda’. Paper orally delivered in October, 1943 (to the Writers Congress in Los Angeles) and November, 1943 (by Merton, to the New York Academy of Sciences). Published as Lazarsfeld and Merton in Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences, 6 (2, December 1943), 58–79. Reprinted in all editions of Social Theory and Social Structure.


Kate Smith Study. Based on Smith’s 18-hour bond drive over the CBS radio network on September 21, 1943. Published with Marjorie Fiske and Alberta Curtis as Mass Persuasion: The Social Psychology of a Bond Drive (1946; republished with a new Introduction by Peter Simonson, 2004). BASR Archives Folder Bo200 includes an undated earlier draft of the manuscript with significantly different concluding chapters that include stronger ideological and class analysis as well as a brief analysis of Jewish audience members, all cut before final publication.


‘Election Polling Forecasts and Public Images of Social Science’. Published as Merton and Paul Hatt in Public Opinion Quarterly, 13, 185–222. Along with the Eisenhower
mail project, one of Merton’s two ‘election studies’ conducted during his period of
greatest interest in political sociology and ‘public images’.

Introduction to Social Theory and Social Structure, Part III: ‘The Sociology of Knowledge
A consideration of the differences and possible points of congruence between
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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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