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Published online: 11 Nov 2013.

To cite this article: Allison L. Rowland & Peter Simonson, Critical Studies in Media Communication (2013): The Founding Mothers of Communication Research: Toward a History of a Gendered Assemblage, Critical Studies in Media Communication, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2013.849355

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2013.849355

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The Founding Mothers of Communication Research: Toward a History of a Gendered Assemblage

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This paper blends historical retrieval, feminist political intervention, and an effort to think about our fields from the perspective of assemblage theory in an attempt to remember the founding mothers of the fields of communication and media studies. Entwined humanistic and posthumanistic impulses create space for voices, labors, bodies, and other material things that deserve our attention. At the narrative and moral core of the story is a group of remarkable yet unsung women who, from the late 1930s through the early 1950s, helped to invent practices, produce research, shape thinking, and establish social relationships that laid foundations for media and communication study in the United States and the world. These women are the figures we call the founding mothers of our field. Focusing on the Paul Lazarsfeld-led Office of Radio Research (ORR) and the Bureau of Applied Social Research (the Bureau) from 1937 to 1949, we attend to four representative women—Herta Herzog, Hazel Gaudet, Thelma Ehrlich Anderson, and Rose K. Goldsen—as means of illustrating roles played by women in an assemblage of human and nonhuman agents.

Keywords: History of Communication Research; History of Media Studies; Women in Communication; Bureau of Applied Social Research; Assemblage Theory

The field of communication has largely forgotten its founding mothers. This essay aims to write a group of them into our collective memories—and in the process stokes new kinds of thinking about the history of the field. It blends historical

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retrieval, feminist political intervention, and an effort to think about our academic fields from the perspective of assemblage theory. Its entwined humanistic and posthumanistic impulses reflect our desire to create space for voices, labors, bodies, and other material things that deserve attention. At the narrative and moral core of the story is a group of remarkable but largely unsung women—the founding mothers of our field—who from the late 1930s through the early 1950s helped to invent practices, produce research, shape thinking, and establish social relationships that laid foundations for media and communication study in the United States and the world.

It’s a little-known fact, but women made huge contributions to the field as it established itself in the 1930s and 1940s. Although this was true in other disciplines, the early days of the field of communication offered an opportune space for female participation. This was a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, with one axis running from Vienna to the New York City area (Fleck, 2011), led by Herta Herzog and centered around a series of research institutes begun by the man who became her husband, Paul Lazarsfeld. Herzog is the best known of a group of more than 50 women who helped produce the communication research that came out of the pioneering Princeton Radio Research Project, University of Newark’s Office of Radio Research, and Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research—a trio of organizations Lazarsfeld founded or co-founded after he emigrated to the United States in 1933. Women served in roles that ranged across the traditional status hierarchy (that we’ll trouble later), from associate director to cleaning woman, with co-authors, lead researchers, research assistants, interviewers, and secretaries in between. These researchers often talked to and studied other women, whose experiences with mediated and face-to-face communication grounded much of Columbia’s classic research in the realm of everyday life. The paid and unpaid labors of female researchers and audiences helped give collective birth to the new field, materialized through typeface, speech, technologically enhanced methods, money, and embodied presence.

The women who worked at the Bureau of Applied Social Research and its predecessor organizations represent the most consequential cohort of women in the field before the 1970s, when women began seizing academic jobs in larger numbers. Living in an era when patriarchy enforced itself even more resolutely than it does now, even exceptionally well-qualified women like Herzog and the University of Chicago’s Helen MacGill Hughes (on whom, see Dorsten, 2012) spent their careers on the margins of academia or in the commercial sector of communication research. It is partly for this reason that these pioneering women have been mostly overlooked, with even the most comprehensive recovery effort to date suggesting that “only a few women were active in the discipline before the 1960s and 1970s” (Signorielli, 1996, p. xxii). We believe that statements like this both miss on-the-ground facts of the case and conceive the field in unnecessarily top-heavy manners that limit intellectual labor to the work done by professors and other high-status characters. We need a more spacious conception than has informed the bulk of work on the history of the field, one that accounts for the heterogeneous array of labor and other agencies that go into field making. Such a conception would allow us to remember the mothers we’ve forgotten, access work of continuing interest today, and discover narrative

Our essay begins with brief consideration of the present state of the historiography of communication and media studies, which we follow by introducing assemblage theory as a useful heuristic to supplement thinking about academic fields. From there, we offer an overview of the founding mothers within the broader assemblage of communication research in the United States from 1937 to 1949, a key moment in the institutional formation of the field. To delve deeper, we turn next to individual women operating in different locations within the assemblage, mapping some of their work and vectors of agency in developing communication research in the era, reaching beyond those individuals fortunate enough to become well-published lead authors. We present them as both individuals and representative characters, embodied figures inhabiting roles who invented and animated new research methods, operated their technologies, mediated the communicative experiences of ordinary people, and did much of the material work that issued in the publications for which Lazarsfeld, Robert K. Merton, Elihu Katz, and other Columbia men would gain credit as “founding fathers.” The collective story of the founding mothers is much larger than we can detail in this essay, but in providing a start, we illuminate a forgotten episode in the gendered history of our field. We end with a call for further extensions of the assemblage frame and further excavation of forgotten figures and other agencies in the history of the field internationally.

**Narrating Histories of the Field**

Though we can trace the social inquiry into “communication” so named back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was only in the 1940s that an academic field called communication research came to organize itself institutionally in the United States and, later, the world (Delia, 1987; Heyer, 1988; Simonson & Peters, 2008; Simonson, Peck, Craig, & Jackson, 2013). By the 1950s, the field was beginning to narrate its history—and erase its founding mothers. As Park and Pooley (2008) have shown, that history coagulated around two narratives. One appeared in the influential capstone of Columbia communication research: Katz and Lazarsfeld’s (1955) *Personal Influence*. That story cast all media research as fundamentally concerned with “effects,” and portrayed Columbia’s work as heroically correcting the naïve “hypodermic needle” model of media influence propounded by a mostly unnamed earlier generation, rediscovering “the people” in the process (Lubken, 2008; Pooley, 2006). The other story, amplified by the discipline-building Wilbur Schramm (1960, 1963; Schramm & Roberts, 1971) and extended by Everett Rogers (1997), began with Bernard Berelson (1959) and organized itself around four “founding fathers” of the field (Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, Kurt Lewin, and Carl Hovland). As
Pooley argues, both narratives were essentially legitimating myths. We would add that both myths had the effect of narrowing the field considerably, focusing attention on “founding fathers,” and symbolically erasing the women at Columbia and elsewhere who helped make Lazarsfeld’s, Berelson’s, and Katz’s work there possible.

The history of the field has progressed considerably since these myths were invented, particularly over the past two decades. Pooley and Park (2013) survey the state of the historiographical art in an essay that follows their important edited collection (Park & Pooley, 2008). Their introduction to that volume shares some tough love about continuing inadequacies while holding out a vision for “what a more serious and sensitive historiography would look like” (p. 5). They call for: (1) qualified historicism that attempts to place ideas, figures, and struggles “within the full context of their original location in space and time”; (2) explanatory eclecticism that utilizes multiple intellectual schemes to make sense of “the full complexity of a discipline”; (3) dirty fingernails that dig through “untapped archival material … and oral history work”; and (4) openness to institutional histories that attend to both daily life and broader patterns (pp. 5–7). Pooley’s (2008) discussion of what he calls “the new history of mass communication research” sketches how these qualities have informed some of the best recent work on the subject.

Despite this progress, the founding mothers remain largely outside our collective purview. Part of the problem lies with fingernails insufficiently soiled by archives and tape recorder buttons, incomplete historicisms, and inadequate attention to institutions in their rich detail. Another part of the problem is that while the field developed sophisticated theory-focused conversations on feminist historiography (in communication proper, see Spitzack & Carter, 1987; for more rhetoric-focused arguments, see Ballif, 1992; Biesecker, 1992), with few exceptions it neglected archive-driven histories featuring the field’s early women that disciplines like sociology embraced robustly (Deegan, 1978, 1991; Grant, Stalp, & Ward, 2002; Lengermann, Niebrugge, & Niebrugge-Brantley, 2007; McDonald, 1994). An exception is Dorsten’s (2012) article that focused on the work and institutional constraints on three important figures of the same era—Hughes, Hortense Powdermaker, and Mae Huettig—drawing on feminist standpoint theory to advance a collective effort that goes back to Signorielli’s (1996) edited volume, Women in Communication.

Yet another part of the problem has to do with the interpretive schemes we have for understanding a “field.” Lüblich and Scheu (2011) recently advanced a model that conceptualizes the field in terms of ideas (including paradigms, theories, concepts, and methods), institutions (forms of organization ranging from associations to departments, courses, and textbooks), and individual biographies (actors embedded in social contexts but carrying particular experience)—which in turn are situated within a broader “constellation of disciplines” and larger contexts of politics, economy, and media systems (pp. 6–11). We find this model promising, but also believe that it is perhaps overly schematic, neglects material agencies and practices, and downplays social relationships. Moreover, in their otherwise useful application of the model to the history of critical communication studies in Germany, they continue the dominant practice of featuring primarily male professors as the leading actors.
Like Park and Pooley, they provide us useful tools, but we need supplementary schemes to capture the fuller complexity of the history of the field.

**Assemblage Theory and the Bureau**

To track this complexity, we suggest that the field can be thought of as an assemblage—a heterogeneous, historically particular collection of parts whose interactions and dispersed agencies produce a range of emergent effects (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987/2004). These elements combine in “relations of exteriority” (DeLanda, 2006, p. 10), meaning that parts can be unplugged and perform different roles elsewhere. Situated in Deleuze’s anti-essentialist rhizomatic ontology, the assemblage supplies a revision of the seamless whole Hegelian organism. Assemblage components combine along two axes: content/expression, and territorialization/deterritorialization (or lines of articulation/lines of flight). The first dimension describes parts as playing a material or communicative role not reducible to language, or a mix of both. Any entities, even nonbiological and nonsocial ones, are capable of “expression.” In the second dimension, assemblages “territorialize” when component parts increase in homogeneity or when spatial boundaries are sharpened; they deterritorialize when there’s an increase in heterogeneity or when spatial boundaries are blurred (DeLanda, 2006). Bennett (2010) captured this dynamic movement when she wrote, “Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within” (p. 23).

Member-actants come into congress but move, change, discharge, and attract components, and sometimes disperse. They traverse human and nonhuman realms and can include persons, networks, language, cognitions, concepts, techniques, habits, organizations, and all modes of physical matter and materiality. Every entity simultaneously consists of assemblages, is an assemblage itself, and is a component of a number of larger assemblages, which allows historical processes to account for a range of phenomena—from the basic levels of cells and atoms, up to persons and organizations, and on through nation states and beyond—a benefit germane to the project of intellectual history broadly construed. In addition to DeLanda’s work on assemblage theory, we read Bennett’s (2010) *Vibrant Matter*, especially her concept of “thing power”, as contributing to a congregational and distributed understanding of agency, which she demonstrates in analyzing a power blackout. The concept of assemblages has been used to capture an ephemeral emergence while resisting traditional notions of structure (Marcus & Saka, 2006). Other scholars engaging assemblage theory discuss the networked, immanent, and relational features of phenomena as wide-ranging as teacher education (Beighton, 2012), automobile–human interactions (Dant, 2004), geography (B. Anderson & McFarlane, 2011), and digital culture (Sampson, 2007).

As we think about the historical production and reproduction of the fields of communication and media studies, the assemblage frame proves to be a useful heuristic. This is true at any moment in the history of the field, but perhaps especially in those fluid early years of institutional formation in the United States, from the late
1930s into the early 1950s. We lack the space to provide a general account of communication research as an assemblage born out of other fields, funding agencies, persons, networks, books, journals, conferences, classrooms, departments, technologies, methods, ideas, affects, and embodied cognitions, amongst much else. Materials for that larger story lie scattered across a number of excellent studies of the era and in the archives and oral histories not yet captured in them.

We focus on what might be considered an assemblage within the broader assemblage of the field—the Office of Radio Research (ORR) and what Merton called its “amplified” successor, the Bureau of Applied Social Research (the Bureau)—and more particularly on the female labor that powered it from 1937 to 1949, before spaces for women in the assemblage contracted significantly (though not totally) and the intensity of female agencies diminished accordingly. These institutes in turn were components of broader assemblages that articulated themselves with the Rockefeller Foundation (Buxton 1999, 2009), media and advertising industries (Morrison, 2006), wartime government agencies like the Office of War Information (Gary, 1999; Simonson, 2010), universities (Princeton, the University of Newark, and Columbia; A. Barton, 1982, 2001; Fleck, 2011), broader academic fields (sociology, psychology, marketing, propaganda studies, public opinion research, and political science), media (newspapers, magazines, radio, motion pictures, and popular music), research-related technologies (typewriters, punch cards, Hollerith machines, the Lazarsfeld–Stanton Program Analyzer) and techniques (including shorthand, writing for varied audiences, oral presentations, and the administration of surveys and interviews), theoretical paradigms for communication (propaganda, persuasion, effects, functions, and gratifications), and interactions of many local and distant people.

Our aim is to draw attention to women who populated the ORR and Bureau and some of their varied agencies within this broad and complex assemblage. As the methodological supplement to a feminist intellectual history, assemblage theory creates space for three things. The first is a transition from leadership-oriented organizational models (since Deleuze and Guattari maintain that no central “General” can alone determine the trajectory of an assemblage) to an assemblage composed of territories, or triggers for self-organizing processes. Second, an assemblage frame situated within a Deleuzian anti-arborealist ontology allows us to critique the state-sanctioned, phallic forms of knowledge-building in favor of connective rhizomes, which invites focus on the dense and vibrant networks beneath and between the top-heavy intellectual histories of the Bureau that focus on “important works.” Finally, assemblages allow us to follow DeLanda’s approach to connectivities between material and symbolic realms. Deleuze, Guattari, and Bennett assemble “things” as a response to the social constructionists who have dominated the humanities since the 1970s. Assemblages displace language from “the core of the matter, a place that is has wrongly occupied for many decades now” (DeLanda, p. 16). As Deleuze and Guattari argue, assemblages are the precondition for materialities and symbols intertwining in the first place, and assemblages necessarily act on material, semiotic, and social flows.
The Founding Mothers of the Field

From the time Paul Lazarsfeld co-founded the ORR in 1937 through the 1940s at the Bureau, women found significant if constrained space to operate in the nascent field of communication. By our count, at least 34 women authored or co-authored the reports and publications that poured from the Bureau, while at least 20 others contributed sufficiently enough to be acknowledged in the books published by the Columbia group, operating as interviewers, research assistants, or secretaries (see the master list we have compiled at http://www.outofthequestion.org). Scores more local women conducted on-the-ground interviews for major Bureau studies conducted from 1940–1948 in Erie County, OH, Decatur, IL, and Elmira, NY, helping to generate the empirical base for three of the most influential books to come out from Columbia—The People’s Choice (1944), Personal Influence (1955), and Voting (1954). This represented a unique opportunity in the era for women to exercise significant agency in the generation of academic knowledge.

Despite his openness to hiring women, Lazarsfeld and his institutes distributed most of the high-status activities to men: higher-order conceptual work, methodological codification, and leadership of significant research projects. Within these limits, women engaged in a wide variety of rhizomatic labors, much of it clustering around what we might call “body work”: face-to-face interviews, laying hands on paper-based texts undergoing analysis, sorting and punching data cards for the Hollerith machine, operating the Lazarsfeld–Stanton Program Analyzer, recruiting and meeting with on-the-ground survey interviewers in the largest field studies, typing, taking shorthand, and so on. In the ORR and Bureau’s gendered division of labor, women were situated closer to the experiential and material ground of knowledge production, while the male center of gravity trended upward toward the officially disembodied higher-order activities of the mind (though these were never far from the empirical ground in a place that emphasized applied research in its name). Prestige radiated from activities associated with (presumably disembodied) intellect as opposed to the facework associated with interviewing ordinary audience members, and from affixing one’s name to the refined and finished product of publications instead of handling the “raw data” and the material technologies of knowledge production. Still, as Fleck (2011, pp. 216–7) has shown, from 1937 to 1945, 6 of the top 10 authors in terms of pages produced in published articles and circulating research reports were women, including Herta Herzog (second) and Marjorie Fiske (third).

During the war, along with Rosie the Riveter manufacturing munitions, Rosie the Researcher generated social research. But by 1947, the Bureau assemblage became less available for women as millions of veterans entered college on the GI Bill—a trend accelerated by the professionalizing aspirations of sociology and its new offshoot, communication research. From 1937 through 1948, women served as lead author for 50% of ORR/Bureau reports (55/109) and 22% of published articles (23/106). In comparison, from 1949 to 1955, women were lead authors for only 20% of all reports (29/147) and less than 9% of published articles (8/94).2
To bring elements of the picture into sharper relief, we will focus on four figures inhabiting different role-defined loci in the assemblage: Herta Herzog, Thelma Ehrlich Anderson, Hazel Gaudet Erskine, and Rose K. Goldsen. Their positions and work overlapped as they performed a wide range of administrative, compositional, and grunt-work tasks at the Bureau. Yet we can distinguish them to illuminate the complex realities of intellectual production. Space constraints demand that we focus on how these women articulate with the larger assemblage of the ORR/Bureau, but detailed biographies are available at http://www.outofthequestion.org

The Associate Director: Herta Herzog

The acclaimed television drama Mad Men acknowledged Herta Herzog as an influential Madison Avenue figure in its 2007 pilot episode, and the homage is well deserved. Herzog’s great insight—that some larger meaning, discoverable through probing interviews and other complementary methods, fuels the everyday moment of consumption—marked her impressive tenure in the advertising industry from 1943 to 1970 (Gladwell, 1999). But before she was a Madison Avenue legend, she helped establish the nascent field of communication research at the ORR. Herzog’s career seems to confound theories of the glass ceiling. Her formidable intellectual force brought her academic and commercial success at the ORR and beyond, as evidenced by a 2011 Austrian symposium dedicated to honoring her life’s work (Klaus & Seetholer, forthcoming). After emigration from Austria, she got her start as research assistant to the sociologist Robert Lynd (Perse, 1996). She would become the ORR’s Associate Director for consulting studies before leaving to join the advertising giant McCann Erickson in 1943.

Herzog’s major intellectual contribution at the ORR was the development of a research paradigm organized around audience “gratifications,” later known as the uses and gratifications paradigm. She also published a spate of single-author studies now considered part of the media research canon on a diverse array of subjects: radio trivia shows (“Professor Quiz,” 1940), women’s soap opera listeners (“On Borrowed Experience,” 1941), and children’s radio habits (“Survey on Research of Children’s Radio Listening,” 1941). These studies are relevant today for their elegant prose, careful observation, and sophisticated mixed methodologies. As Douglas (2006) quipped about her renowned qualitative work, “With Herzog, we got the dirt” (p. 48; see also Liebes, 2003).

In the early years of the ORR, Herzog produced as much as anyone, and her erasure as founding figure and recognizable author testifies to the complex gendered politics of the ORR assemblage. Although the field acknowledges her as an early pioneer of gratification studies, soap opera studies, and qualitative research methods, we often forget her early years, which include her groundbreaking doctoral dissertation in Vienna on listeners’ perceptions of voices and personalities of radio speakers, and her later contributions at advertising agencies such as McCann Erickson, Marplan, and the supergroup Jack Tinker & Partners. An assemblage-driven intellectual history seeks to recover the forgotten agency of both human and
nonhuman forces. In that spirit, we’ll trace Herzog’s erasures from authorship in *Invasion from Mars* (1940) and from status as an inventor of the focus group method (for which Robert K. Merton would receive credit), while attending to nonhuman agents and gesturing toward components that dispersed into the commercial realm. Though Todd Gitlin (1978) and others have critiqued the marketing focus of Lazarsfeld’s work, histories of the field have generally ignored the actual migration of the theories and methods of academic media research into the commercial sector. For example, many material-conceptual knowledge-generating practices, such as the focus group, were enthusiastically embraced in the private sector in consequential ways for the history of marketing.

After Orson Welles spoofed the nation with the “War of the Worlds” radio broadcast in 1938, Herzog, along with Hazel Gaudet and Hadley Cantril, conducted and analyzed detailed interviews in order to understand the panic that ensued when people believed that Martians had indeed invaded Earth (see Hayes & Battles, 2011). This study resulted in Cantril, Herzog, Gaudet, Koch, and Wells’s (1940) book *Invasion from Mars: A Study in the Psychology of Panic*, easily the most cited Herzog publication to emerge from the ORR/Bureau. Though the three main collaborators should have shared authorship for the book, Cantril appeared on the title page as the author, “with the assistance of Hazel Gaudet and Herta Herzog” (pp. xiii–xv). In the preface, Cantril credits Herzog with an “independent survey of the panic before the study was undertaken,” which formed the basis of the interview schedule (p. xv). In addition to the initial investigation, Herzog analyzed six individual listeners in greater depth, which provided the basis for the eighth chapter of the book. In an essay that further investigates Herzog’s erasure from authorship in the Mars study, Pooley and Socolow (2013) suggest the main points of the published book owe much to the comprehensive memo that Herzog wrote based on the first 30 interviews, an argument that illustrates what they call the “exploitative” conditions of gendered labor in early communication research. Lazarsfeld (1968) later publicly wrote that he “hoped Dr. Herzog would receive a major share of the credit for her imaginative work” on the study (p. 313, fn. 54). Archival evidence suggests that Cantril leaned heavily on Herzog as the publishing deadline approached. As Fleck (2011) has noted, at the time Cantril was still compiling the book, he got into “a heated argument” with Lazarsfeld, who accused Cantril of “monopolizing the authorship at Herta Herzog’s expense” (p. 187).

Herzog’s foundational contributions to the development of the focus group are also expunged from the historical record. Robert K. Merton received public credit for developing the focus group method, as evidenced by the title of his *New York Times* obituary: “Robert K. Merton, Versatile Sociologist and Father of the Focus Group, Dies at 92” (Kaufman, 2003). But by the time Merton started codifying the method in 1943, Herzog had been administering some species of depth interview for a decade, and interviewing groups for at least five years in conjunction with the Lazarsfeld–Stanton Program Analyzer, a machine that recorded audience response to radio programming in real time (Levy, 1982). In addition to practicing the method earlier than Merton did, Herzog made the focus group a more central component of her
research throughout her career and pioneered its introduction to the commercial world. Despite this, Merton’s publications (1946/2004, 1957/1990, 1987) on the focus group for the field of sociology progressively erased Herzog from the record. Purposefully or not, Merton, among the most influential American sociologists of the twentieth century, contributed to the symbolic annihilation of Herzog and her work in establishing the practices of qualitative focused interviewing.

Like Herzog, the Program Analyzer informed fields and industries far beyond its beginnings at the ORR. Lazarsfeld and CBS’s Frank Stanton teamed to produce a machine that would provide second-by-second analysis of audience members’ responses to a radio program. Between 10 and 20 individuals seated in rows were instructed to press a green button for “like” and a red button for “dislike,” triggering magnetic pens to produce a display of audience reaction to each second of a radio program. The first Program Analyzer was manufactured with off-the-shelf parts by a lab in Columbus, OH, based on plans drawn up by Stanton. “Little Annie,” as it was affectionately dubbed, was an academic–commercial hybrid, much like Herzog and the ORR/Bureau, that symbolized the marriage of convenience between “mass media administrators and the academic community” (Levy, 1982, p. 30).

The ORR, eager to augment its income with commercial research jobs, produced a brochure in the early 1940s called “Listen to your Listeners: How to improve your program with the Lazarsfeld–Stanton Program Analyzer.” The pamphlet explained the Analyzer to potential clients:

Mrs. Susan Housewife comes to our listening room with a group of other listeners. She … is told to press the green button when she likes what she hears and the red button when she dislikes what she hears … [W]ithout knowing it, your listeners have been drawing you a graph of their reactions, second by second. (ORR, New York, n.d.)

The reference to “Mrs. Susan Housewife” reminds us of the sexist milieu in which female pioneers like Herzog labored. No Susan Housewife herself, Herzog was an expert on the intellectual and commercial uses for the Program Analyzer and the qualitative interviews that followed a test broadcast (hence the group element of the focused group interview). When McCann Erickson hired her in 1943 to head its new “Program Analyzer Department,” the company purchased exclusive rights to the Analyzer, and Herzog disseminated the technology in England and South America. Little Annie asserted its own quasi-agency as a material-technological component demanding focus group expertise from Herzog, but also pulling her from academia, resulting in her erasure.

Later, Herzog advanced to Director of Research at the home office of McCann, which under Marion Harper’s leadership became one of the leading advertising agencies in the world. By 1954, Herzog had become, according to one authority, “the most powerful woman in the American advertising community” (Fullerton, 2007, p. 374). We remember her here as a component of the ORR assemblage, founding grandmother of the focus group, and advertising legend who played a significant role in the early development of the commercial wing of communication research.
The Interview Trainer: Thelma Ehrlich Anderson

When Lazarsfeld offered a young Thelma Ehrlich a job as an interviewer and “coder” for market research, she jumped at the opportunity. Her affability, intelligence, and training from secretarial business school earned her a leadership position in two major off-site Bureau studies: the 1945 Decatur, IL, study on the influence of “opinion leaders” and the “two-step flow” of information that led to the classic book *Personal Influence* (1955, see Simonson, 2006), and the Elmira, NY, study in 1948 that used the panel method to understand voting behavior in the Truman/Dewey election and led to the classic *Voting* (1954).

Along with the rest of the female-heavy field teams, Anderson’s facework and emotional labor generated the data that formed the empirical basis of both books, even as authorship went to men: *Personal Influence* lists Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz (1955) as authors, and *Voting* lists Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954). Redistribution of credit for the labors, materials, and ideas that produced these major works and others involves understanding Thelma Anderson as an assemblage component in valent combination with a host of other units: job skills and responsibilities, nascent sociological theories such as the “two-step flow,” a hulking data processor called the Hollerith machine, and loose networks of collegial affiliations.

An interview trainer at the Bureau would work closely with the project managers—in the case of the Decatur study, this included a young field manager, C. Wright Mills—on the goals of the project, the interview script, the recruitment and training of local interviewers, scheduling, and oversight. Over the course of the data analysis, Lazarsfeld fired Mills and eventually gave the data to his graduate student, Katz (Katz, 2006; Summers, 2006). Anderson tailored her instruction of the interview protocols and the Bureau system of shorthand to individual women with widely differing backgrounds. For the Decatur study, she trained a volunteer team of local women to ask questions such as, “Do you know anybody who keeps up with the news, anybody you trust to help decide your opinion?”

With questions like these, Lazarsfeld and Mills sought empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that a set of the public called “opinion leaders” were especially influential in determining the opinions of others in a “two-step flow” of information (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944/1965). Lazarsfeld, an entrepreneurial scholar resourceful with money management, used this insight to tantalize MacFadden Publications with access to these opinion leaders, framing opinion leaders as cash cows for the market insider. MacFadden, eager to expand the female readership of its popular lowbrow magazine *True Story*, agreed to fund the Decatur study. The two-step flow of information was a theory of communication, straddling academia and the marketplace, configured within a series of other agentic forces (Morrison, 2006).

By the end of her tenure at the Bureau, Anderson’s publications included a collaborative piece with Mills on unions (1947) and two Bureau reports co-authored with Lazarsfeld on methods (1944, 1947). Sometimes coders sifted through qualitative interviews in order to extract “themes.” However, most coders at the Bureau translated data from quantitative questionnaires onto “punch cards,” one
card per survey participant. These punch cards were for the Hollerith machine, an electrical data tabulator invented by Herman Hollerith (see Figure 1). Ehrlich, long since Thelma Anderson, described Hollerith tabulation in a 2007 interview:

[W]e’d enter a “1” for male and a “2” for female … [W]e would classify the background information of age, sex, socioeconomic level … [W]e would assign codes to this code sheet which would then be transferred to a [Hollerith punch] card. And you’d say, “I’m going to take a look at men versus women,” so you would sort the cards by sex and you’d have a pile of the men and a pile of the women. And then I want to see how they differ on whatever it is, how they voted, or how much education they had … (p. 3)

The Hollerith machine, famous for revolutionizing the efficiency of the 1890 U.S. census, was later infamous for its implication in Nazi population management when it was mass-produced by IBM. Punch-card tabulation machines such as the Hollerith enjoyed their heyday in the 1930s before the advent of stored program computers, and the Bureau owned or rented their share of Holleriths and their supplemental apparatus, which included machines called “the interpreter” and “the collator.” For its larger data-processing tasks, the Bureau used the behemoth tabulator at IBM’s Watson laboratory, across the street from its West 115th street location (Cruz, n.d.). Bureau interactions with the Hollerith range from the mundane (in a 1957 public address, Goldsen remembered fixing one with a hairpin) to the theoretically significant, as data were collected and coded in ways amenable to speedy punch-card analysis. As a crucial member of the assemblage, the Hollerith machine

Figure 1. Women enter data onto punchcards like those described by Thelma Anderson. This image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Keypunching_at_Texas_A%26M2.jpg
exerted “thing power” (Bennett, 2010) by favoring market reports and academic publications founded upon survey and interview data in the form of nominal, ordinal, interval, or ratio measurements. When Mills (1954/1964) pithily critiqued Bureauocratic sociological work with the line, “IBM + Reality + Humanism = Sociology,” it’s the Hollerith to which he alluded.

After her time at the Bureau, Anderson worked for Wilson and Roper’s International Public Opinion Research, a job she got through fellow Bureau alumna Helen Dinerman. In the late 1960s, Anderson worked for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency for five years, where she was hired through Rena Ross Bartos. Bartos worked at McCann Erickson as the secretary for Herzog. Joan Doris (Goldhammer), also an ORR alumna, shared an office with Thelma Anderson at McCann Erickson. Expanding networks of gendered collegial affiliation deterritorialized the boundaries of the Bureau assemblage as people, skills, and methods disseminated into the commercial realm.

The Data Analyzer: Hazel Gaudet Erskine

Like Herzog, Hazel Gaudet was a brilliant woman who used the dilated opportunities for women in the early days of the ORR to launch a respectable career. Most notably, Gaudet co-authored two major publications: The Invasion from Mars (1940) and The People’s Choice (1944). In addition to analysis for both studies, Gaudet organized site-based fieldwork. In the preface to Mars, Cantril acknowledged Gaudet’s responsibilities of “actual administration of the investigation” (p. xv) as well as the value of her detailed memoranda. As a field manager in Sandusky, OH, Gaudet recruited and trained local interviewers and conducted interviews herself. In both the “War of the Worlds” study and the People’s Choice study, the complex panel research design owed some of its cogency to Gaudet. At least once, she acted as the voice of reason for the enthusiastic Lazarsfeld, reminding him of their difficulties with finding significant change in the data as he eagerly pursued funding for new projects (Converse, 1987, p. 299).

Gaudet went on to become a regular contributor to Public Opinion Quarterly, editing a section called “The Polls” from 1961 to 1975 that required the robust data-analysis skill set she fostered at the ORR. In 1947, she married to become Hazel Gaudet Erskine and moved to Reno, NV, where she was active in progressive politics for 30 years. In addition to working for Adlai Stevenson, she started Nevada’s first chapter of the ACLU. But Gaudet’s impressive career aside, a lesser-known part of her story illustrates pivotal expressive elements of the Bureau assemblage.

Gaudet and C. Wright Mills had a love affair in the mid-1940s. In a letter that he asked her to destroy, Mills thanked Gaudet for her help with his classic book White Collar and, in an observation that prefigured assemblage theory, listed “so many other things” that contributed to the book:

Coming back uptown I had the driver swing over by 14th street … I find I have very sharp images of 14th street in the middle 40s … the smell of well-kept offices at noon; the quick noon-time and the night times; and all the letters … After all, 14th street in the middle forties produced White Collar, along with so many other
things. And the way you live sets a sort of pace of how and what you write. (Mills, Mills, & Mills, 2000, pp. 156–57)

Mills and Gaudet are but one instance of components grouped in romantic or friendly generative conversation at the Bureau. An assemblage-focused intellectual history seeks to recover the inventive quality of conversation in elusive historical moments among co-workers, friends, lovers, and spouses. Sheridan’s (1979) thesis on the Bureau described “bull sessions” when folks spoke excitedly into early hours of the morning; Thelma Ehrlich Anderson (2007) described lively brainstorming meetings and coffee breaks. Intellectual bedfellows in full body tête à tête (in addition to the Mills/Gaudet affair, think of Lazarsfeld and his succession of three brilliant wives—Marie Jahoda, Herta Herzog, and Patricia Kendall—as well as reported affairs along the way) mingled the affective charges of bodily and intellectual eros. According to Converse, Merton estimates in a 1979 interview that he and Lazarsfeld “talked about the Bureau and its intellectual directions some ten to fifteen hours per week, on average, from 1942–1965” (p. 503). Lazarsfeld met with colleagues and students in taxicabs on his way to and from various destinations, and double-booked himself for lunch meetings in the Columbia cafeteria, relying on agile charm to extract him from resentment. Then, of course, there are the inventive conversational capacities between interviewer and interviewee during focus groups and one-on-one depth interviews. Finally, consider the institutional camaraderie that made possible a graduate student skit that roasted Lazarsfeld by alluding to his not-so-secret affair with graduate student Patty Kendall. The students skewered him for “burning the Kendall at both ends” (Merton, 1998). We seek to redistribute field-building agency to include the intimate or fleeting bonds between interviewer/interviewee, lovers, friends, and colleagues that produced affective intensities nurturing to intellectual activity. Among all else she did, Gaudet reminds us of this force.

The Secretary: Rose K. Goldsen

In 1941, a 24-year-old Rose Kohn sat at her Office of Radio Research desk at 22 East 17th Street, managing Lazarsfeld’s correspondence. That afternoon, she composed a response to Robert K. Merton’s request for mimeos of two Lazarsfeld articles (Merton, 1998). And so the first contact between the two men, soon to become colleagues, was mediated by Rose Kohn, typing her way through the assemblage.

A number of Bureau women either started in the role of secretary and then graduated to interviews or coding, or managed a series of secretarial duties in addition to other tasks. These duties included answering the phone, arranging the appointment books of Lazarsfeld or Merton, office management, and typing. Secretaries took dictation in shorthand and then typed and proofread the document. The typewriter, as a peculiarly gendered technological component of the assemblage, clustered together with female bodies as both entered the workplace. As McConnell (2008) observed, the feminization of the typewriter and its users as passive, fidelitous, and tidy, mediating communication between men as Kohn did, mitigated the threat
of women in the workplace. In assemblage terms, the feminization of the typewriter
restabilized (reterritorialized) the gender inequality briefly threatened by the
deterritorializing effect of women in the workplace; it helped keep women in their
(occupational–spatial) place.

At the ORR, the higher the employee’s status, the more likely they were to enjoy a
personal secretary. In original ORR/Bureau reports, the typist’s identity was inscribed
by lower-case initials on the title page of the document. Most Bureau women typed
their own reports; the initials on the title page read “au,” indicated typing done by
the author. Secretaries rarely saw their full names in publication.

But Rose K. Goldsen, as she later preferred to be called, was no ordinary secretary.
After the Bureau, Goldsen became the first female sociology professor at Cornell
University. Her best-known work, The Show and Tell Machine (1977), critiqued
television culture and marked her as an uncompromisingly original thinker. Twenty
years after the Bureau was founded, Goldsen delivered a warm anniversary address
that referenced the “excitement” and “yes, even love” in the early years of the Bureau,
suffusing her speech with affective intensities that could perform the epideictic
function of sharpening the Bureau-assemblage’s identity (Goldsen, 1957). In
constellation with love, mail, secretarial duty, typewriters, and stenography, Goldsen
articulated with the larger Bureau and academic assemblages that would later omit
her from their field-making histories.

The Interviewee: Thousands of Women

Across the space of the ORR/Bureau assemblage, thousands of women were
interviewed as research subjects in Elmira, Erie, Decatur, Sandusky, and in all five
boroughs of New York City. From their recounted experiences, ORR/Bureau
researchers generated the empirical base for classic media research. Participating in
an unpaid interview is both introspective and interpersonal labor. Interviewers and
coders wrung intellectual production from the transcripts of these interviews, some
of which lasted hours.

These women audience members are acknowledged en masse in prefatory
material. Some Bureau publications amplify the fact that their subjects were female,
like Herzog’s analysis of soap listeners, but others occlude that truth (Simonson,
2012). Mass Persuasion was built largely upon qualitative interviews with a listening
sample that was 88% female, but this fact is buried in the book’s appendices.
Similarly, the field-defining Personal Influence was based on a 1945 study of 800
women. Yet, unlike Herzog’s soap-opera studies, Personal Influence would conceal
the sex of its subjects behind the term “people,” as in the book’s subtitle, The Part
of the central contradictions of the Decatur study is that it simultaneously disguises
that only women are being studied and universalizes them as representative of the
general population” (p. 41). Here, we briefly “give voice” to a tiny sample of female
interviewees:
I first heard music when I was 20 years old. I was in the house alone, putting the baby to sleep. I thought I’d get some music on my crystal set. I found a Strauss waltz ... I had been feeling very happy and cheerful because I was starting a new life, and the music seemed to make the promise of better things. (“The Function of the Radio,” Suchman, 1941, p. 167)

I like Helen Trent. She is a woman over 35. You never hear of her dyeing her hair! She uses charm and manners to entice men ... if she can do it, why can’t I? (“What Do We Really Know about Daytime Serial Listeners?” 1944, pp. 27–28).

About eleven or twelve years ago, I was very ill. It was wintertime. The ground was all white with snow, the trees and everything. And nothing could be more realistic than Kate [Smith] singing, “When the moon comes over the mountain.” (Mass Persuasion, 1946/2004, p. 132)

Perhaps the most memorable “woman” ever interviewed appeared only in a footnote to Mass Persuasion. Reptilina, “half-woman, half-serpent freak” from a dime circus in New York, interrupted her attendant during the interview to explain why she participated in the war bond drive in order to “talk to Kate herself” (1946/2004, pp. 131–132). Human/lizard hybrids, too, populated the assemblage, and contributed the social labor that made the developing scholarly knowledge possible.

Opportunities for Women at the Bureau: Deterritorializing the Glass Ceiling?

Simply sharing women’s stories and voices elides the complex gender politics at the Bureau. As an organization, the Bureau maintained a strongly territorialized identity (through what DeLanda, 2006, called “habitual repetition,” p. 49) that allowed it to persist despite a number of deterritorializing processes that blurred its spatial and symbolic boundaries—off-site data collection, a mixed bag of contributing members, hastily cobbled financial support, and the inclusion of women, to name a few. As the emergent subjectivities of the entities marked as “women” deterritorialized the Bureau, twentieth-century patriarchal gender stereotypes in turn reterritorialized women and the Bureau in the ways explored below. Women were paid less, assigned less prestigious jobs, and were part of an assemblage that further propagated these sexist stereotypes in various publications.

From one perspective, the Bureau exploited women as cheap labor during the war while the preferred labor force was overseas. The accounting books support this reading: on a page-per-salary basis at the Princeton Radio Research Project, Herzog came in last among authors, earning $1.39 per page, whereas Hadley Cantril and Theodor Adorno collected nearly $42.00 per page (Fleck, 2011, pp. 216, 218). At the same time, the Bureau provided women with remunerable intellectual work and a brief respite from an otherwise exclusionary academic scene, even if they were often assigned “dumb jobs,” as Thelma McCormack (2007, p. 11) phrased it in an interview. The gender dynamics become more complex when we consider that compulsory femininity encourages women to perform sensitivity, empathy, and
patience—precisely the qualities that nurture productive interviews, the empirical foundation for much of Bureau research.

But what did the women themselves think about opportunities at the Bureau? When Columbia graduate students or career researchers (most of whom were women) expressed skepticism about the Bureau, it was often about the profit-driven nature of commercial research (Lipset, 1998), rather than gender inequality. Many Bureau women insisted that the opportunity “was there for women to succeed” (Anderson, 2007). Herzog resisted any notions of a glass ceiling, as she once wrote, “Gender has never played a role in my professional life” (Perse, 1996). Obviously, the success stories of the founding mothers outlined above lend credence to this reading. But other Bureau employees would disagree. Joan Doris Goldhamer (2007) recounted an anecdote of routine Bureau sexism in an interview: “Paul Lazarsfeld bustled into the room, and said, ‘Okay, we can come in, there’s nobody here.’ Nobody here was four or five of us women. And that’s how we were. Nobody” (p. 3).

Further feminist critique would be remiss to neglect the predictable 1940s-era sexist stereotypes propagated by the Bureau. Many Bureau publications constituted women as a profitable, overlooked, and unwitting advertising demographic. For example, Helen Schneider’s (1945) NBC-funded report “The Forgotten Women of Radio” explored the “untapped reservoir of women ready for appealing programs” (p. 15). The pamphlet for the Lazarsfeld–Stanton Program Analyzer appealed to companies by offering systematic insight into “Susie Homemakers” so duped by radio advertisements that they considered commercials “shopping news.” Similarly, other Bureau studies categorized women by essentialist reproductive destinies. As Douglas (2006) observed, the Decatur study sorted women into three possible groups: the transition from girlhood to womanhood (during which her primary concern was marriage), motherhood, and “older matronhood.” Meanwhile, reproductive destinies at the Bureau forced many career researchers (such as Rena Ross Bartos and Thelma Anderson) into unpaid career breaks that belittled the responsibilities of motherhood while making it more difficult for women to contribute to an intellectual community that privileged consistent research agendas. Finally, identities can be deterritorialized not only by destability but also by the augmentation of capacity (DeLanda)—that is, the acquisition of new skills, like the research and office administration skills that women acquired at the Bureau, which ultimately led many of them to greater things.

Conclusion (Looking Forward)

We have begun two projects in this essay, each of which has the potential to reshape the ways we understand the history of the field. Conceptually, we have suggested that we think of the field as a heterogeneous assemblage of bodies, material artifacts, technologies, ideas, cognitive paradigms, practices, communicative moments, roles, cultural sensibilities, methods, affective investments, and much else. Empirically, we have begun to write the founding mothers of the field into historical consciousness, taking a subset of them as representative figures for the larger group. These two projects are complementary but also distinct. Assemblage theory directs our attention
away from the traditional centers of our historical narratives—the men who authored work; the ideas and paradigms that affixed themselves to that authorship, and the books and articles linked to it; the departments and research institutes the men headed; the universities, funding agencies, and professional organizations that underwrote and helped organize it. All of those entities have played significant roles in the development of the field, to be sure, but so have other material, social, and symbolic agencies that have received less attention—including a large number of women. Through representative figures, we have drawn particular attention to the dozens of them who worked at the ORR and Bureau in the 1930–1940s, and the thousands more whose experiences with social communication entered the assemblage of the field through the skillful mediation of mostly women interviewers and the technologies articulated to their research practices. These women were excluded from parts of the assemblage possessing the agentic force to determine the official histories—academic posts, journals, books, and conference presentations.

A quick word on the compatibility of our conceptual-methodological project and our empirical project. We acknowledge the oddity of referring to these women simultaneously as “assemblage components” and “founding mothers,” but we maintain that it’s precisely the strength of assemblage theory that atoms, office furniture, people, organizations, and nation states share an ontology as a set of emergent effects and contributing agencies. While the posthumanist ontology of assemblage theory bristles against the very humanistic epithet “founding mother,” this is a productive tension inherent in all applications of posthumanist methodologies to humanist contexts.

Both the conceptual and empirical projects we commence here need to be developed further. We have focused on one institutional location—the Lazarsfeld-led research institutes. Other locations need to be mapped as well, not just in the United States but around the world, each with its own local cast of agencies, each connected to other places and agentic forces cutting across space and time. Similarly, we need fuller social and intellectual histories of the founding mothers of the field—both those at the ORR/Bureau as well as those who worked in other places. We believe that Lazarsfeld’s institutes were probably the epicenter for female labor in the early history of the field, but other historians may find analogous opportunity structures elsewhere, in addition to continuing to excavate the work of important individual figures such as Helen MacGill Hughes, Hortense Powdernaker (see Dorsten, 2012; Hier & Kemp, 2002), Hilde Himmler, and others. As we do so, we need to broaden our ken and consider a wider range of people and social roles, and their connections to the other human and nonhuman agencies that have built our field.

Notes
Web site and bibliography maintained by Jefferson Pooley: http://historyofcommunicationresearch.org/

[2] Calculated from J. Barton (1984)—which includes no reports from 1937 to 1938—and not counting those for which no author is listed or the gender of the author could not be determined.

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