Introduction

Mass Persuasion is a neglected jewel in twentieth-century media and communication study. Long out of broad circulation, it has become a classic text now largely unread by a generation of students and researchers. This is a loss, as Robert K. Merton's wartime study has much to offer. Historically, it is a window upon an earlier version of our own mediated public culture—its events, personalities, modes of address, and structures of popular affection. Composed in the early days of scholarly communication research, it also represents a rich and distinctive style of media analysis, largely stillborn in the 1940s but full of resonance today. To read the book carefully is to open an intellectual time capsule filled with small treasures that turn out to fit beautifully amongst the conceptual furniture we have acquired in its absence.

Many of the book's themes remain current. Merton writes about cynicism and public distrust. He explores the cultural contradictions of celebrity and image carefully cultivated through public relations technique. He outlines the emotional contours of fans who feel personal closeness with distant stars more widely recognized than presidential candidates. In his careful analysis of Kate Smith's all-day radio war bond drive, Merton shows us how popular nationalism can gain collective expression through mass media and cultures of commercialized entertainment. In the process, he offers one of the earliest studies of a now commonplace phenomenon—the live, broadcast "media event" which electrifies a ge-
ographically dispersed home audience and gives them a sense of participation in a shared, public endeavor.

*Mass Persuasion* is also an important study of a historical media audience, that elusive social entity many of us talk about but few can quite point to. Today, we would call this audience a marginalized social group—overwhelmingly female, largely working class, many of them fans of a popular singer and talk show personality. *Mass Persuasion* charts these women’s affections and wartime anxieties, sketches working class Americans’ uneasy encounter with the national creed of material success, and shows the symbolic work Smith does in both easing her listeners’ social tensions and reinforcing dominant ideologies. Moreover, Merton does these things with a distinctive research style, unique in the 1940s and unfortunately abandoned by the mainstream of communication research thereafter. Blending empirically disciplined American social science with Continental social theory and classical rhetoric, measured in tone but peppered with critical cultural insights, *Mass Persuasion* stood out from other forms of mass communication study in its era and, to a large extent, today.

That Merton came to write *Mass Persuasion* is something of a surprise. He was an ambivalent recruit to communication research and never fully shed that attitude. My introduction thus begins by recounting the origins of the Smith study and the rather unlikely trajectory that led Merton into it. I then situate *Mass Persuasion* in relation to other modes of media study in the first half of the twentieth century and go on to draw out the continuing significance of the book. Merton’s small but important body of communication research has never received adequate attention, by either sociologists or students of communication. Like his better known sociological work, Merton’s communication research is elegant, witty, knowing, and conceptually fertile. As a result, it is a pleasure to read, think with, and argue against. Hopefully, republishing this classic text will make some of these pleasures available to a new generation.

The Origins of *Mass Persuasion*

When Robert K. Merton was hired at Columbia University in 1941, no one would have predicted that in two years he would administer a $5,000 grant to direct a nine-person research team charged with investigating a popular entertainer who sold war bonds on the radio. Thirty-one years old, he was still eight years from publishing the first edition of his core work, *Social Theory and Social Structure*—“as close to a Bible as one is likely to come when surveying social theories that provided inspiration and conceptual guidelines for the most fruitful social research undertaken since the Second World War,” in the words of one observer. Merton was clearly a rising star well on his way to becoming the most brilliant, creative, and productive sociological theorist and practitioner of his generation. Already he had written nearly 20 articles and book chapters, including seminal essays on social structure and anomie, bureaucratic personality, and the unanticipated consequences of purposive social action. He had published a revised dissertation, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth-Century England*, that would lay the intellectual foundation for a new field, the sociology of science, and had penned some 50 book reviews.¹ Though close reading shows the idea of com-

munication to be a minor thread in this early work, in both substantive focus and research style, it was very different from the subsequent Kate Smith study.

Like Smith, a self-taught singer who became the most popular female entertainer of her day, Merton was in the 1940s enacting the mythic story of success in America. Born Meyer R. Schkolnick, he grew up in South Philadelphia, the son of working-class Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. From age 5, he trekked alone to the public library where, adopted by the female librarians, he cultivated interests in biography, literature, science, and history. As a young aspiring magician in an era of hegemonic Americanization, he briefly changed his name to Robert K. Merlin, before settling on the less "hackneyed" Merton. Instead of becoming the next Harry Houdini (born Erich Weiss, the son of a rabbi), Merton attended Temple College, founded by Russell Conwell for "the poor boys and girls of Philadelphia." A young socialist in the early days of the Great Depression, Merton studied philosophy and sociology and, with his first mentor, George E. Simpson, developed abiding interests in race and race relations. From the then-unaccredited Temple, Merton earned a scholarship for graduate study at Harvard, where working with Pitirim Sorokin and Talcott Parsons, he was drawn deeply into the European sociological tradition of Marx, Weber, and, especially, Durkheim. He also did substantial work outside of sociology, auditing classes in many disciplines and, in particular, studying with George Sarton, at the time the world doyen among historians of science. A brilliant and energetic young man presented with a series of favorable "opportunity structures," Merton was by the mid-1930s on the cusp of greatness.

The first 30 years of Merton's "life of learning" established the main contours of the research style he brought with him to Columbia. It was marked by intellectual cosmopolitanism and literacy of the very highest order. A prodigious reader since childhood, he was broadly read in the Western tradition since classical antiquity. As part of this humanist side, he took great care with language, both his own and other people's. Virtually alone among his generation of sociologists, he aspired to be a close reader of difficult texts. His own writing is well known for its precision, grace, and essayistic elegance—qualities he has spread through what he terms his "almost lifelong addiction to editing." At Temple and Harvard he grew into a sociologist, committed to progress in the discipline and the advancement of social scientific knowledge. As an under-

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3 Though never a major research focus, race remained an interest for Merton into the early 1950s, when he helped his neighbor Kenneth Clark prepare the Social Science Brief for Brown v. Board of Education, which was partly written on Merton's patio. Reference to race studies peppers Mass Persuasion (e.g. pp. 5, 7, 12, 144). With Simpson, Merton gained his first exposure to media study and content analysis, without ever conceptualizing them as such, by serving as a research assistant for Simpson's inquiry into the portrayal of "Negroes" in the Philadelphia press. Robert K. Merton, "A Life of Learning," The Charles Homer Haskins Lecture, delivered in Philadelphia (April, 1954; reprinted in Merton, On Social Structure and Science, ed. Piers Safron, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). For more details of Merton's life, see Morton White, "How Does it Come to Be So?" New Yorker, 28 January 1961, 39-53.

4 In his first two publications, while still a graduate student, Merton had helped introduce Durkheim to the English speaking world in two review essays of recent French sociology and of Durkheim's Division of Labor in Society. For this section, see Merton, "Opportunity Structure," in On Social Structure and Science, pp. 153-161.

5 Among the many innovations Merton can fairly claim vis-à-vis the role of language in social theory is this insistence upon rigorous hermeneutic practices within an influential graduate program" (Sica, "Robert K. Merton," p. 114). Sica's insightful discussion of Merton's use of language and relation to an "intensely literate" form of life has influenced my interpretation here and elsewhere.

6 Merton, "Life of Learning," pp. 156-7. His editing began at Harvard with Sorokin's and Parsons' work, and continued through some 350 books and more than 1,000 articles over the next six decades. For a wonderful discussion of Merton the editor, see David Caplovitz, review of The Idea of Social Structure, Contemporary Sociology 6, 1, pp. 141-150.
graduate he read "just about everything American sociology had to offer in the late 1920s," while at Harvard he drank deeply from the older and to him "more evocative European traditions of sociological thought." As a theorist he displayed a liberal openness to useful insights from any intellectual quarter and sympathy for empirical investigation, though his own research of this type was primarily directed toward seventeenth century science. In all his early work he characteristically toiled alone, a solitary scholar working in study or library. This was worlds away from directing a research team, looking at an icon of contemporary popular culture, and trying to understand her all-day attempt to persuade the masses.

Between his 1941 arrival in New York and Smith's 1943 bond drive, however, Merton himself had been persuaded. He was hired at the same time as Paul Lazarsfeld, a brilliant, energetic, and charming methodologist with a very different set of interests and research style. Since coming to the United States from Austria in the mid-1930s, Lazarsfeld had been engaged in the fledgling field of empirical radio research, pursued through a new kind of institution—the university-based applied social research institute. He had founded his first such institute in Vienna, and extended the model in the U.S., starting the Office of Radio Research (ORR) at the University of Newark in 1936. (He would move it to Columbia in 1939, where he later renamed it the Bureau for Applied Social Research (BASR).) Lazarsfeld's institutes were staffed by students and other research associates hierarchically positioned under lead investigators who oversaw projects that utilized increasingly codified social scientific methods including surveys, structured interviews, and content analysis. Though affiliated with universities, the institutes operated mostly on

grants from commercial, philanthropic, and government organizations. Since they often operated in the service of some kind of administrative agency, public or private, Lazarsfeld called their work administrative research. As Merton later remembered, "Paul could scarcely imagine doing research except through such an organization."

Lazarsfeld could also scarcely imagine having talented students and colleagues who were not working on his own projects, and Merton quickly became one of those colleagues. In the fall of 1941, a planned dinner engagement at Lazarsfeld's turned into Merton's initial encounter with administrative research. As the New Yorker told the story in 1961, Lazarsfeld greeted his new colleague at the door of his apartment, said he had just been contacted to do an emergency test of a pre-war morale building radio program, and asked if Merton would like to go with him. The two men then left their wives at the apartment and went downtown to CBS, where Frank Stanton was Director of Audience Research. It was Merton's first time in a radio studio, and he watched a basic test involving the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, a primitive polygraph device that allowed audience members to note those moments of a radio broadcast they liked and disliked. Afterwards, when an assistant probed the audience about reasons for their responses, Merton raised concerns about the adequacy of the interviewing. Lazarsfeld encouraged his new colleague to try

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for himself, Merton agreed, and a first impromptu collaboration had begun. Lazarsfeld recruited Merton to help prepare the report for the Office of Facts and Figures (a predecessor to the Office of War Information [OWI] and the Voice of America), and one of the most fruitful partnerships in twentieth-century academic life had begun.11

In 1942, Lazarsfeld made Merton Associate Director of the ORR (a position he held for nearly 30 years at the renamed Bureau) and drew the young theorist, sociologist of science, and solitary scholar further into new socio-intellectual waters. Merton was unsure about his new line of work, as he confessed in a letter from March of 1942:

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 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.

As Lazarsfeld later observed, Merton’s letter reveals ambivalence about the idea of an organized research “project” designed to “test” the effectiveness of war propaganda.12 But like a great number of academics, Merton contributed to the war effort, both on that project and others. He worked closely

with Samuel Stouffer and Carl Hovland at the Research Branch of the U.S. Army’s Division of Morale, for a time at the Pentagon and then later as a liaison to the ORR. Like other researchers at the ORR, Merton also directed a number of war-related propaganda studies for the Office of War Information (OWI).13

The Kate Smith study was of a piece with this war-related administrative communications research conducted by Merton and others at the ORR. It was Smith’s third all-day war bond drive on CBS, and Lazarsfeld saw it as a good candidate for the “opportunistic research” his institutes sometimes conducted. Like The Invasion from Mars, Hadley Cantril, Hazel Gaudet, and Herta Herzog’s 1940 study of Orson Welles’ “War of the Worlds” broadcast, and “What Missing the Newspaper Means,” Bernard Berelson’s classic article on the 1946 New York City newspaper strike, the Smith drive represented an out-of-the-ordinary event which might offer new insights into mass communication processes. “The episode seemed to me almost as bizarre as the ‘Invasion of Mars,’” Lazarsfeld later remembered, “and again I obtained from Frank Stanton the necessary funds to arrange for a hundred interviews with people who had pledged over the telephone to purchase war bonds.”14

At the time Smith, a self-taught singer with a folksy manner, was perhaps the most listened-to personality on

radio. She was the star of two highly popular, long-running shows on CBS: the prime-time "Kate Smith Hour," devoted to her singing and other entertainment, and "Kate Smith Speaks," a 15-minute noonday show which was broadcast three times a week and featured Smith speaking on topics ranging from cooking and gardening to child labor and—her favorite subject—patriotism. At the height of its popularity, the talks how reached some 20 million weekly listeners, the evening show 25 million, and Smith reportedly received more than three million fan letters per year. Long associated with patriotic causes (as a child, she had sung for American troops during World War I), her popular connection to America had been cemented on Armistice Day, 1938, when she debuted Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" on "The Kate Smith Hour." Response was so enthusiastic that she sang the song for 65 consecutive shows, and there was even a movement to make it the national anthem. When President Roosevelt introduced her to the King and Queen of England in 1939, he reportedly said, "Your Majesties, this is Kate Smith, this is America." She was a national icon.

Lazarsfeld convinced Merton to conduct the CBS-funded study of the Smith drive, which in some ways bears the Bureau's imprint. Methodologically, it draws upon the mix of content analysis and focused interview techniques that Merton, Herta Herzog, and other ORR researchers were helping to codify in their war work for the OWI, along with the survey research that Lazarsfeld had long utilized. Characteristic of the often-gendered division of labor at Lazarsfeld's institutes, Merton oversaw a team of eight women and one man who did the interviewing and aided with analysis of the data. And of course the study was done in the service of an administrative agency, in this case CBS, who hoped they would gain information that would help them conduct more effective bond drives in the future, and perhaps learn something about Smith's audience. But in the end Merton, the ambivalent recruit to administrative communications research, wrote a book that did not please its funding source and looked far different than what Lazarsfeld, the ORR, or any other investigators were doing in the 1940s.

Mass Communication Study in the 1940s

When Merton wrote Mass Persuasion, the social analysis of communication in the U.S. was nearly five decades old and marked by four main constellations of thought and research. To put Mass Persuasion into historical context, it is worth briefly characterizing these different approaches to mass communication as a social phenomenon. Doing so serves two purposes. First, it shows how the intellectually cosmopolitan Merton both drew upon varied currents of mid-twentieth century research and melded them together with a distinctive style all his own. In addition, it throws new light upon mass communication study at Columbia in the early 1940s. Most of our understanding of that period centers upon Lazarsfeld and his research, which received a great deal of attention by critics and defenders in the decade after his death in 1976. The historical narratives that emerged almost never made mention of Merton, a piece with their broader mischaracterization of Co-

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15 This had begun a decade earlier. A 10-city telephone poll in 1933 found Smith to be the number one listening choice on the dial for 31% of the respondents, with second place being Rudy Vallee's 18%. That same year, she reportedly had almost 400 fan clubs with 24,000 members nationwide (Michael R. Pitts, Kate Smith: A Bibliography [New York: Greenwood, 1988], p. 6). "Portrait of a Great American," CBS publicity release, n.d. Robert K. Merton, personal file, Mass Persuasion.

16 Pitts, Kate Smith, pp. xii–20.
lumbia in the 1940s as a place dominated by administratively oriented “media effects” research.\(^{17}\) In fact, through at least the publication of *Mass Persuasion*, Lazarsfeld’s Bureau was a fairly ecumenical institution that sponsored a variety of research with different and sometimes competing analytic paradigms. *Mass Persuasion* both indexes and exemplifies this variety and reminds us of a richness in the field we sometimes forget.

Scholarly discussion of communication in the U.S. dated back to the 1890s, pushed by sociologists and social philosophers who typically operated with an organic view of society and were often under the sway of philosophical Idealism. For Progressive Era thinkers like Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and Robert Park, communication and its technologies provided the social and moral base for collective life of a democratic sort. Their writing was not typically informed by ideals of objectivity or value neutrality but was instead part of a broadly reformist, social democratic impulse which coursed through American public life. For the most part, they were hopeful that modern technologies of large-scale communication could be brought to serve the causes of democracy and social progress. That faith was sometimes challenged, particularly in the wake of World War I, but into the 1920s full-throated Progressives like Dewey remained essentially optimistic about the democratic possibilities of his favored modes of communication—newspapers, public art, and face-to-face conversation.


The relative constancy of Dewey’s faith in twentieth-century communication separated him and other Progressives of his generation from the harder-edged analysis that came to dominate the study of mass communication in the 1920s and ’30s. Shifting the terms of discussion from “communication” to “propaganda,” writers like Walter Lippmann and Harold Lasswell influentially drew attention to the ways modern agencies and channels of mass communication could manipulate public opinion. Working in a number of disciplines in the social sciences, propaganda analysts often maintained the Progressive Era commitment to democratic reform, but now expressed it in a manner consonant with post-war attitudes of disillusionment and distrust. The mainstream of propaganda analysis operated through case studies that revealed social and institutional forces threatening democratic life. They were often accompanied by a warning, explicit or assumed, that citizens needed to maintain a critical skepticism about news, advertising, education, religion, and other forms of widely disseminated public communication.\(^{18}\)

From very different intellectual quarters, the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research developed an alternative paradigm for mass communication study during their years in exile in the U.S. in the 1930s and ’40s. Extending the non-orthodox Marxian theory they began formulating in the 1920s, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Leo Lowenthal turned their attention toward institutions, technologies, and patterns of mass culture when they came to America. Working in the

tradition of Hegel and Marx, the Critical Theorists understood mass media in terms of the larger, historically specific social totality of which they were a part. Against the ideal of value neutrality that Lippmann and Lasswell grew to embrace, the Frankfurt theorists practiced dialectical social critique that drew attention to positive moral ideals like individuality, inwardsness, and spontaneity that mass culture and mass society threatened to eradicate. In the late 1930s, their work on radio, popular music, and other elements of mass culture was primarily theoretical and interpretive, but in the 1940s they sometimes added empirical elements to their mass communication studies, something especially true of Lowenthal.19

Adorno and Lowenthal both worked for a time at Lazarsfeld’s Office of Radio Research where their critical-Marxian analysis came up against a different, more positivist species of communication research. Initially funded by a 1937 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, the ORR collected data on radio and the print word. In contrast to the propaganda analysts who tended to focus on media content, or Progressive theorists who often speculated about communication processes, ORR research was distinguished by the attention and empirical rigor it directed toward the audience: who they were, what they listened to and read, what roles mass commun-


ications played in their lives, and what consequences it had on them. The Rockefeller Foundation had reformist and educational goals—they hoped to raise the cultural level of radio—but the ORR’s research also had clear commercial applications as well.20

Initially, Lazarsfeld accumulated data without having a well-defined conceptualization of how it fit together or a clear paradigm for communications research. This distressed Rockefeller’s John Marshall, who responded by organizing an ongoing seminar in communications which developed the now-famous dictum that “the job of research in mass communication is to determine who, and with what intentions, said what, to whom, and with what effects.”21 The last part of this formula—with what effects—has come to be equated with Lazarsfeld, Columbia, and the mainstream of American mass communications research, but throughout the 1940s, “effects” studies were, in Lazarsfeld’s mind, simply one approach among several.22 In fact, there were two analytic paradigms


21Brett Gary, “Communication Research, the Rockefeller Foundation, and Mobilization for the War on Words, 1938–1944,” Journal of Communication 46:3, pp. 124–148 (quote is on p. 138); Morrisson, The Search for Method, pp. 77–86. “With what intentions” dropped out of the formula but it was an important part of some 1940s research, including Mass Persuasion. Harold Lasswell is often credited—or blamed—with establishing the formula and thus helping to move U.S. communications research toward the study of effects, but the “effects” paradigm was already an important part of the University of Chicago’s Douglas Waples research on books and reading in the late 1930s. Waples was also a member of the Rockefeller seminar. See e.g. Waples, People and Print: Social Aspects of Reading in the Depression (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), pp. 45–71, What Reading Does to People (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), pp. 101–33.

for ORR communications research in the early 1940s, one centered on effects, the other on audience "gratifications." In general terms, the gratifications paradigm took media as a social experience from which audience members drew varied meanings and socio-psychological gratifications, while the effects paradigm took media as a casual force which altered some aspect of the world. Both were present in the ORR's earliest publications, and they grew in tandem during the war years.23

Though Lazarsfeld had a broad understanding of different approaches to the study of media, in his own work he was always drawn to the positivistic study of effects, gauged through survey research and panel interviews. This was part of his abiding interest in the analysis of individual opinion formation, decision making, and behavioral action, all of which translated well into marketing and voting studies where researchers could isolate a particular choice (buying soap, tuning into a radio program, voting for a candidate) and investigate the forces that influenced it. The cause-effect conceptualization of mass communications prepared the way for the so-called limited effects paradigm—the idea that mass media rarely have powerful direct effects on audiences, who are protected by social and psychological mechanisms from strong media influence. Proponents of limited effects argue that media are most influential when their messages are supplemented by other modes of communicative contact (especially personal contact), and when they draw upon and channel existing values and beliefs. Since these three conditions are rarely met, mass media tend to have limited effects.24

Distinct from the effects research, gratification studies had a prominent place in ORR/BASR publications throughout the 1940s. Pioneered by Herta Herzog, Lazarsfeld's second wife and one of the most skilled interviewers at the ORR, gratification studies focused on audiences not subject to explicit persuasion campaigns that might change attitudes or lead to identifiable behavior choices. Instead of examining political campaigns, advertising, or "propaganda for social objectives," gratification studies usually centered upon entertainment media and the role that particular shows or genres played in listeners' everyday lives, often by using broadly Freudian categories. Early studies addressed soap operas, quiz shows, and children's comics, drawing upon relatively open-ended interviews with audience members. Partly an offshoot of Hadley Cantril's 1930s radio research, they typically emphasized psychological gratifications, but some studies also drew attention to the position of audiences within broader cultural or social structures.25

23 See for example Lazarsfeld's introduction to the first ORR research published for a broader audience, his guest-edited Journal of Applied Psychology 23 (1939), pp. 1-7, which uses lightly developed versions of both the "gratifications" and "effects" paradigms. Often, the gratifications approach (or, by its 1950s label, "Uses and Gratifications") is seen as a response to the perceived inadequacies of early effects research, but in fact, gratifications studies developed alongside effects studies in the late 1930s and 1940s, only to be ignored in the early 1950s before being rediscovered a decade later.


Communication Research with a Mertonian Accent

*Mass Persuasion* has elements in common with all four constellations of communication study—propaganda analysis, ORR empirical communications research, Critical Theory, and Progressive Era social democratic communication study—but it also departs significantly from each. These differences within similarities are worth sketching, for together they point to the originality of Merton's work and to some of its enduring value. An intellectual cosmopolitan, Merton was willing to draw upon useful insights from all quarters. An ambivalent participant in communications research, he was committed to none of the established ways of doing things. In the end, *Mass Persuasion* is an elegant example of disciplined eclecticism that is characteristically Mertonian.

In some ways *Mass Persuasion* is a classic propaganda study and was understood as such when it appeared in 1946. "Propaganda has forced itself upon the attention of twentieth-century man," the Preface opens, and "this book is yet another effort to add to our stock of knowledge on this score." Like the bulk of propaganda studies from the 1920s and '30s, *Mass Persuasion* was a case study that might warn readers not to be duped, and the publisher marketed the book in these terms. "Radio's Proven Power for Persuasion... Social Asset or Menace?" their newspaper ads blared. "Read this warning," which will "astonish and alarm all who would guard and keep free the channels of public communication." *A New York Post*

writer agreed and closed his review of the book by exhorting that "it is up to radio listeners everywhere to be vigilant and to yell good and loud when they feel radio is being used against the community welfare." One scholar predicted *Mass Persuasion* would set the tone for all future studies of propaganda, just as *Folkways, The Theory of the Leisure Class,* and *Middletown* had done for other areas in the social sciences; but he also noted that the book would be the subject of academic controversy for "its failure to use the ritual language and the procedural obsfuscation of established denominations of specialists."27

Its careful attention to the audience put *Mass Persuasion* outside established modes of propaganda analysis, but so too did the fact that Merton oriented the book in relation to the classical rhetorical tradition. "In every age, the artifices of rhetoric have moved men to act—or to refrain from action," Chapter One begins, but "as long as we continue to speculate about the arts of persuasion and propaganda we shall have little to add to what Aristotle, Bacon, Hobbes and Bentham had to say each in his own day" (pp. 1–2).28 Four of the book's subsequent six chapters open with extended quotes


28This statement represented an early version of a characterization Merton simplified in *Social Theory and Social Structure*—empirical mass communication research as an offshoot of the rhetorical tradition. In contrast to the sociology of knowledge, which was "concerned with the intellectual products of experts," Merton saw mass communication research as the "study of popular belief" which focused on "opinion rather than knowledge" and on "the masses" rather than "the intellectual elite" (1949, pp. 100–1, rpt. in 1968, pp. 494–5). This was a gloss on the classic Greek distinction between *episteme* (knowledge) and *doxa* (popular belief), and for Plato it characterized the difference between philosophy on the one hand, rhetoric on the other. For Merton, mass communication research was part of a 1,500-year-old intellectual tradition.

Merton never quite discharged his initial ambivalence about empirical communications research. In the last piece he wrote on the subject, for the first (1949) edition of *Social Theory and Social Structure,* he gently lampooned the field as engaging "trivial matters in an empirically rigorous fashion" and railing around the motto, "We don't know that what we say is particularly significant, but it is at least true" (p. 100; rpt. in 1968, p. 494).
from canonic tests in classical and early modern rhetoric: Plato's *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, and Thomas Hobbes' *Art of Rhetoric*. Merton's historical sweep and broad knowledge of the Western humanist tradition gave *Mass Persuasion* an interpretive depth other propaganda studies lacked.  

Merton also draws upon the analytical paradigms and vocabularies of mass communication research at Columbia. At times, he talks about the "effects" of different aspects of Smith's radio marathon, which for many listeners issued in the kind of behavioral action (buying bonds) that fit nicely into the Lazarsfeldian mold of short-term effect studies. He draws upon Lazarsfeld's work when discussing the buyers' decisions, and uses ideas like personal influence and monopolization that would be associated with the limited effects paradigm (pp. 124, 129-30, 138, 172). But methodologically and conceptually, *Mass Persuasion* has more in common with Herzog and gratification research than with Lazarsfeld's effects studies.

The core of its data comes from intensive, three to four hour focused interviews with people who had listened to Smith's broadcasts. This represented the extension and codification of a technique Herzog had used with quiz show and soap opera fans and Merton had refined in wartime research. *Mass Persuasion* was the first book-length study that incorporated the newly codified research method, which later morphed into the now ubiquitous "focus group." Consonant with gratification studies, interviews probed the subjective meaning mass media carried for individuals. It "provided clues to the symbolisms and images contained in their listening experience" (p. 15), which Merton, like Herzog, described in broadly psychoanalytic language.

*Mass Persuasion* moves significantly beyond the psychological frame of Herzog's gratification studies, however, to amplify the distinctly social and cultural elements of media experience. Merton does this in part through a concept given its first widespread circulation in this book—*public image*. An important idea to which Merton uncharacteristically never gives adequate definition, public image is arguably an update of Aristotle's notion of rhetorical ethos, or the character of the speaker as perceived by the audience. Though Merton insists his book "is not a study of Kate Smith" (p. 3), he does move well beyond the radio marathon to discuss the popular star's "kaleidoscopic set of images" (p. 146) and the symbolic work they do both in the bond drive and more broadly within the culture. These images are fundamentally social, products of years of sedulous attention to the building of a public reputation through performance and public relations technique, and they are shared among Smith's audiences. Aspects of this...

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"As Sproule writes, "the writers on propaganda analysis were unaware of the extensive literature of rhetoric since classical times and [ ] missed the opportunity to turn their attention to a rich body of theory" ("Propaganda Studies in American Social Science," p. 71). This is certainly not true of Merton, nor was it true of some of the next generation of researchers, who widely used Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in courses on communication and public opinion (W. Philips Davison, "On the Effects of Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, p. 343, fn. 2)."


"When the interviewer, through his familiarity with the objective situation [through content analysis], is able to recognize symbolic or functional silences, 'distortions,' aversions, or blockings, he is more prepared to explore their implications. Content analysis is a major cue for the detection and later exploration of private logics, personal symbolisms, and spheres of tension. Content analysis thus gauges the importance of what has not been said, as well as what has been said, in previous stages of the interview" (Merton and Kendall, "The Focused Interview," p. 542).

"Merton's main discussion of Smith's public image comes in Chapter Four, which he opens with a quote from Aristotle calling ethos "the most effective means of persuasion" a speaker possesses (p. 70). For Merton's use of "public image" and related terms, see pp. 15-19, 71-96, 141, 145-152, 171-72, 175-77."
cultivated image (particularly her perceived sincerity, altruism, and genuine patriotism) are key factors in persuading listeners to buy bonds.

Smith's public image only gained meaning and particular resonance within a broader social context, one marked by skepticism, distrust, and self-interested manipulation of others. This context is the focus of Chapter Six, in many ways the book's best chapter and unique among Columbia research for the attention it devotes to the broader structures of sociocultural life. With echoes of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, Merton sketches the contours of anomie in modern, capitalist life.33 On every side, Americans "feel themselves the object of manipulation...the target for ingenious methods of control, through advertising which cajoles, promises, terrorizes...through cumulatively subtle methods of salesmanship which may simulate values common to both salesman and client for private and self-interested motives" (p. 142). Listeners' "magnified 'will to believe'" in Smith's sincerity took shape in a society "which has foregone a sense of community ('Gemeinschaft') and has substituted...the mere pretense of common values in order to further private interest ('pseudo-Gemeinschaft')" (p. 144).34 This environment provided the social background against which listeners' mediated relationships with Smith took shape. "I trust her," one listener confessed. "If she were a fake, I'd feel terrible" (p. 145; see also pp. 10-11, 82-106, 142-146).

Beyond this general social context, Merton also explores gendered and class-oriented aspects of Smith's public image. He draws attention to conflicts of American women presented with conflicting ideals of domesticity, beauty, and career and sketches the cultural work done by Smith's complex and contradictory set of images (pp. 146-52). In addition, he shows how Smith appealed to Americans shut out from material prosperity yet still buffered by the ideology of success and upward mobility. Smith offered them an "ideological balm," providing an alternate credo for orientation and self-respect, yet one that never challenged any of the sacrosanct institutions of the U.S. social, economic, or political system (pp. 152-172). In sum, Merton argues that Smith's multiple images performed key symbolic functions within a society that was undergoing significant structural and ideological stress.35


Merton made this stress especially clear in the final chapter of an earlier draft of *Mass Persuasion*. "American adults now have lived through three decades of turmoil," he wrote. "At the turn of the century, almost every industrial nation assumed that capitalism would and should be its dominant economic framework. Since then, Russia had turned to communism, Australia and New Zealand to socialism, Canada and Britain to social democracy. "The traditional answers no longer seem to be accepted anymore," he wrote. Interestingly, between that draft and the published version, Merton's "critical" voice became somewhat more muted. The final two chapters, for instance, then titled "Kate Smith as a Symbol in American Culture," and "Ideological
Columbia communication research and closer to critical-Marxian studies. Like Frankfurt School communication studies, *Mass Persuasion* interprets particular social phenomena within the context of broader, historically distinct, sociocultural structures. Merton was well read in Marxist thought, and through his work in the sociology of science was in close conversation with Marxian sociologies of knowledge from the Continent. But there are also obvious differences, particularly between Merton and Adorno. Though Merton was mildly critical of positivism (see e.g. pp. 187–89), this attitude diminished as he and Lazarsfeld drew close, and “disciplined research” came to be one of Merton’s favorite phrases. The same could never be said of Adorno, who though he did moderate his early contempt for empirical research always remained highly critical of positivism and would never have taken “disciplined research” as a favored term. Moreover, while Adorno typically wrote in the dense, dialectical style characteristic of German high theory in the Hegelian tradition, Merton’s prose was crisp and perspicuous, not unlike Anglo-American analytic philosophy. More-

over, the obvious high-culture disdain for mass culture that strongly marks Adorno’s work is only a trace element in Merton—*Mass Persuasion* does not celebrate Kate Smith and her fans but neither does it dismiss them or show them no sympathy.

Merton and Lowenthal were much closer, and should perhaps be set off as distinctive and complementary voices in mid-century media studies. The two men had productive contact and mutual admiration for each other. Lowenthal wrote Merton an interesting memo for the Smith study, and he later called Merton “one of the most cultured and progressive American sociologists of the late forties.” 38 In *Mass Persuasion*, Merton draws upon Lowenthal’s classic “Biographies in Popular Magazines” (pp. 145–46), a work Merton later praised as a rare and successful hybrid of European social theory and American-style empirical research. 39 *Mass Persuasion* also displays such hybrid qualities, and both stand apart from ‘purer’ examples of Columbia or Frankfurt School inquiry.

Finally, the book ends on a Deweyan note, linking *Mass Persuasion* back to Progressive Era writings on democratic...


39 Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 1949, p. 170; rpt. in 1968, pp. 501–4. Lowenthal later said he “was very proud of this” praise from Merton. He also went on to note that Lazarsfeld then said, “In his typically empiricist-positive way, so far you have shown what a bad biography is, now you ought to demonstrate what a good biography is.” Thus he failed to see the political and analytical meaning of my study” (Unmastered Post, p. 134).
communication. “Devices of mass persuasion, primarily technical in character though they are, have a moral dimension as well,” Merton writes (p. 175). Neither the “technician in mass opinion” nor the social scientist who investigates it can escape the moral issues “which permeate propaganda as a means of social control,” though they may try. The technician may think only in terms of “effectiveness,” measured solely by the number of people brought to a desired action or frame of mind. The social scientist might “adopt the standpoint of the positivist,” declare science is value-neutral, and refuse to see how his choice and definition of the problems produce results which can benefit one group in society and not others (pp. 185–6). For Merton both are in error. They narrowly focus on technique and ignore broader moral issues raised by the practices and investigation of mass communication.

CBS’ Frank Stanton was not kindly disposed toward those pages, and it is little wonder. Without explicitly identifying it as such, Merton was criticizing the commercial logic that guided industry-oriented audience and marketing research, including much that was conducted by Lazarsfeld’s Bureau. In careful, almost subjunctive terms, Merton argues that gauging effectiveness in terms of short-term effects represents a kind of moral blindness. To be oriented toward democratic values, he suggests, drawing upon Dewey, is to think also about “the further, more remote but not necessarily less significant effects of these [persuasive] techniques upon the individual and the society”—the possibility that untrammelled propaganda and advertising might blunt the critical capacities of listeners, manipulate human anxieties, or erode the mutuality of confidence necessary for a stable social structure (pp. 188–89).

The politics of the book thus tie it back to the Progressives. Mass Persuasion is a reform-minded product of the institutional establishment. Funded by CBS and conducted at Columbia University, it closes with measured, social democratic criticisms of Stanton and Lazarsfeld’s preferred forms of communication research. Built upon disciplined social science, it is guided by the method Dewey and others saw as the best hope for social and epistemological progress. But Mass Persuasion is also a generation removed from the Progressives. Merton is in closer dialogue with broad currents of Continental thought, but he is also part of a more developed discipline with more codified methods and a more professional audience. Democratic values inform the study, but rarely explicitly. We can hear Merton’s politics, but we have to listen carefully. His critical moments are restrained, understated, and in the final pages tempered by loyalty. These qualities too are part of Merton’s distinctive style.

The Continuing Significance of Mass Persuasion

Mass Persuasion could provide grist for a short chapter on the sociology of knowledge about mass communication. It never became the Folkways of communication research, as the 1946 reviewer had predicted, though it did influence some important 1950s discussions of mass media. David Riesman drew upon it in The Lonely Crowd to argue that mass media play an important role in a new kind of politics which emphasizes sincerity on the part of candidates over competence. It helped inspire Donald Horton and Richard Wohl to create the concept they called “para-social interaction,” the seeming “intimacy at a distance” audiences feel toward mass mediated

personae.\(^4\) And it informs some of C. Wright Mills' analysis of mass media in *The Power Elite*, though Mills nowhere cites Merton.\(^4\) But after that, *Mass Persuasion* began slipping from view. When communication researchers drew upon Merton in the 1960s and early '70s, it was usually for the functionalist theory he developed in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, sometimes used in grander discussions of communication systems in modern societies.\(^4\) The more particularistic, culturally oriented, and interpretive *Mass Persuasion* had little use to these researchers. To the critical and cultural scholars who came on the scene in the 1970s, Merton represented a problematic and outmoded functionalist paradigm they were trying to overthrow. Aspects of *Mass Persuasion* would likely have resonated with them, but they too were unlikely to pick it up. As a result, the book became the largely unread classic it is today.

Part of the responsibility for *Mass Persuasion*'s marginalization rests within the Columbia tradition itself. The most widely cited book on mass communication to come out of the Bureau was Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* (1955), which contributed mightily to the conceptual dominance of "effects" and the limited effects paradigm in media research. In a highly influential characterization, Katz and Lazarsfeld declared that "fundamentally, all communications research aims at the study of effect." This was an inaccurate and reductive portrayal of the field, even within the relatively localized domain of Columbia. It left little room for *Mass Persuasion*, which was nowhere cited in the text.\(^4\) Thus began the process of collective forgetting of Merton's classic.

*Mass Persuasion* resonates with a number of contemporary conversations, however, and in the remainder of this introduction, I would like to call attention to three, each of which might be enriched by serious readings of Merton's book: audience studies, ritual studies, and discussions of communication and public cynicism. "Serious readings" is the loaded term here. As a field, communication studies, particularly its more social scientific wing, has not been marked by anything resembling the hermeneutic care Merton demanded of himself and his students. Classic texts are ritualistically cited but rarely re-read. They become fixed objects, sources of positive or negative authority used to justify our contemporary projects. This does more to obliterate the past than to honor it, and it is also decidedly un-Mertonian. "I have long argued that the writings of classical authors in every field of learning can be read with profit time and time again," he once wrote, "additional ideas and intuitions coming freshly into view with each re-reading. What is to be found in writings of the past is anything but fixed, once and for all. It changes as our own intellectual sensitivities change; the more we learn on our own


\(^{42}\)C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1956, pp. 315-16. Mills also draws upon Lazarsfeld and Katz's idea of the two-step flow without calling it that or citing them. After working at the BASR in the 1940s, Mills had a dramatic falling out with Lazarsfeld, though he had not yet published *The Sociological Imagination* (1955), where he famously lambasted Lazarsfeld and "abstracted empiricism." Mills' relation with Merton was friendlier. Merton had brought Mills, who got his academic start in the sociology of knowledge, into Columbia, and Mills wrote Merton an admiring note when *Social Theory and Social Structure* came out. Significantly, Merton is never mentioned in *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills' critique of mid-century sociology.

account the more we can learn by re-reading from our freshly gained perspective.\footnote{Merton, 

\textit{Mass Persuasion} makes important contributions to audience and radio studies, two of the most vibrant fields of media research over the past 25 years. The book is certainly one of the most significant studies of a historical audience we have and provides a glimpse of one segment of the greater world of radio in 1940s social life. The women who conducted the interviews were talented; excerpts of dialogue show informants who have been put at ease, and offer slices of lives that drew distant broadcasts into local settings. Listeners reveal their affection for Kate Smith and their seemingly personal contact with her. “She . . . makes me feel that I’m talking to my neighbor over the washline,” one says (p. 61). Other women express anxieties about their sons fighting overseas, and desperately hope buying a bond from Kate Smith will keep them safe. We even get a snapshot of dialogue between Replilina, a “half-woman, half-serpent freak” and her New York dime museum attendant (pp. 131–2), a glimpse of a social audience in action!

As an audience study, gender is one of \textit{Mass Persuasion}'s more interesting aspects, both amplified and repressed in the text. The empirical core of the book is built upon women’s talk. All but one of the interviewers were women, as were the great majority of informants. Interestingly, though, the text never mentions the gender makeup of the audience. Only in the Appendix do we learn that 88% of focused interview informants and 71% of the poll population were female. But Merton considers the gendered aspects of Smith’s public image and discusses the symbolic work she did in helping women deal with the contradictions of female identity (pp. 146–51, passim). Though his brief analysis here falls short by present-day standards, it was well ahead of its time in providing such an analysis.

\textit{Mass Persuasion} is also a good representation of an active audience. Since the 1970s, both uses and gratification and cultural studies scholars have argued for and often celebrated the idea of audiences who actively take media and mold it to their own psychological, socio-cultural, or political purposes. Merton had been well aware of the interpretive power of audiences since his OWI research, out of which he had conceptualized the “boomerang response,” where “the audience acts as co-author . . . [and] responds to propaganda in a fashion opposite to that intended by the author.” “All media are richly endowed with boomerangs,” Merton wrote.\footnote{Merton and Patricia L. Kendall, “The Boomerang Response,” Channels XXI, 7 (June 1944), pp. 1–4, 15–17; Lazarsfeld and Merton, “Studies in Radio and Film Propaganda,” Social Theory and Social Structure (1968), pp. 571–78 (originally published 1943).} Testing propaganda for the OWI or advising a group of public health officials, Merton was sometimes in an administrative position where boomerang effects were not such a good thing (“the bane of propagandists, educators and publicists,” he called them),\footnote{“Boomerang Response,” p. 1. The subtitle of this article, written for the National Publicity Council for Health and Welfare Services, identifies the perspective: “The Audience Acts as Co-Author—Whether You Like It or Not.”} but this is not the case in \textit{Mass Persuasion}. The cultural politics stop well short of the uncritical celebration that marks some contemporary studies of fans of popular culture, but it nowhere approaches the condescension of Adorno or even Herzog: Merton shows audience members responding to Smith’s “kaleidoscopic set of images” (p. 146) in different ways, based partly on their position in broader social structures, partly on needs specific to their own lives. Though marked by mild cultural elitism in places (this was after all the
1940s, when few intellectuals embraced the new mass entertainments), *Mass Persuasion* is overall a sympathetic and nuanced portrait of the Smith audience attuned to the cultural complexity of a popular audience.

Merton also documents a kind of mediated social event that has become common in the television era and has drawn attention of researchers interested in the ritual dimensions of mass communication. Smith’s 18-hour bond drive was a live event that gave audiences a sense of participation in a common undertaking. The experience represented a kind of ritual time out of time for Smith’s listeners, who became deeply involved in it. “We never left her that day,” one woman remarked. “We stood by her side” (p. 27). The radio marathon was a popular enactment of the nation’s civic religion which emphasized “the ‘sacred’ area of patriotism” rather than “the ‘profane’ area of private gain” (p. 45). As the day wore on “the marathon broadcast took on the attributes of a sacrificial ritual” as the sincere Smith, voice trembling with fatigue, gave herself up to the sanctified cause (p. 92). Here Merton drew upon Durkheim (virtually alone among 1940s media researchers) and identified communicative processes that Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, Carolyn Marvin, James Carey, and others have analyzed in recent work on media rituals.

The fact that listeners stayed by Smith’s side all day was probably one aspect of the bond drive that Lazarsfeld had found “bizarre.” “The whole affair was so obviously staged,” he later remembered. Yet time and again Smith’s listeners remarked upon her sincerity, which had great force in moving them to continue listening. This in turn points to another of Merton’s themes that has also become our own: cynicism. We sometimes seem to think that cynicism only came to us in the 1970s and that before there was a long and steady history of social trust and public confidence, but of course that is not the case. In fact, the theme of cynicism pervades much propaganda and communication research of Merton’s era. *Mass Persuasion* reminds us that on the other side of the 1950s, there was a great deal of doubt and distrust. Merton both documents that sensibility and, to some degree, exemplifies it. “Pseudo-Gemeinschaft,” or “the feigning of personal concern with the other fellow in order to manipulate him the better,” gets to both aspects. It describes a social order “of commercial duplicity and pretended enthusiasms” where people “see themselves as the target for ingenious methods of control, through advertising which cajoles, promises, terrorizes; through propagandas . . . [and] through cumulatively subtle methods of salesmanship” (pp. 83, 142). But the concept also reveals Merton’s own cynical wit about that social order, a wit he also exercises in a dry, cynical footnote about “patriotic” wartime advertising for dentures, ice cream, and skin products (p. 187).

Cynicism and mass media have again become yoked term in public discourse, including a body of social scientific literature that has generally lacked the style and elegance of Merton’s 1940s work. Much is effects-type research that investigates news media and their coverage of public affairs.

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The press become a causal agent, and reformers turn to convincing journalists and networks to do a better job so as to cultivate an engaged and less cynical populace. Merton offers a different, socially broader perspective. Cynicism is the product of a capitalist social order which increasingly operates through duplicity and instrumental technique. News media may play a role in generating disengagement, but the cynicism he sees is a product of the social order itself. Amidst that cynicism, Merton suggests, distant entertainers brought close through mass media offer audiences new opportunities for closeness and apparent authenticity. Here are kernels for a wider ranging account of mass media, cynicism, and newer modes of affective engagement with public culture.

Perhaps, as Alan Sica has said, reading vintage Merton is a bit like listening to Caruso on 78-rpm records. The voice is "marvelously from another world," a part of an "intensely literate and hopeful" form of life not quite commensurate with our own. In Mass Persuasion, Merton's voice emanates from the highest levels of literate culture, but it discourses upon a different world, one that was still in the process of being born. Peopled by icons of popular entertainment, structured by national and increasingly international culture industries, and marked by deep and wide social experience with mass media, the world of Kate Smith's bond drive is one that has grown into our own. Merton charted this new dispensation with a style that was unique in 1946 and remains unique today. Virtually no one in contemporary media studies or communica-

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54 Sica, "Robert K. Merton," pp. 120, 123.