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Defining Psychological War

Communication research is a small but intriguing field in the social sciences. This relatively new specialty crystallized into a distinct discipline within sociology—complete with colleges, curricula, the authority to grant doctorates, and so forth—between about 1950 and 1955. Today it underlies most college- and graduate-level training for print and broadcast journalists, public relations and advertising personnel, and the related craftspeople who might be called the “ideological workers” of contemporary U.S. society.¹

Government psychological warfare programs helped shape mass communication research into a distinct scholarly field, strongly influencing the choice of leaders and determining which of the competing scientific paradigms of communication would be funded, elaborated, and encouraged to prosper. The state usually did not directly determine what scientists could or could not say, but it did significantly influence the selection of who would do the “authoritative” talking in the field.

This book takes up three tasks. First, it outlines the history of U.S. psychological warfare between 1945 and 1960, discussing the basic theories, activities, and administrative structure of this type of communication enterprise. Second, it looks at the contributions made by prominent mass communication researchers and institutions to that enterprise. Third, it examines the impact of psychological warfare programs on widely held preconceptions about communication and science within the field of communication research itself.

Since World War II, the U.S. government’s national security campaigns have usually overlapped with the commercial ambitions of major

advertisers and media companies, and with the aspirations of an enterprising stratum of university administrators and professors. Military, intelligence, and propaganda agencies such as the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency helped bankroll substantially all of the post-World War II generation's research into techniques of persuasion, opinion measurement, interrogation, political and military mobilization, propagation of ideology, and related questions. The persuasion studies, in particular, provided much of the scientific underpinning for modern advertising and motivational techniques. This government-financed communication research went well beyond what would have been possible with private sector money alone and often exploited military recruits, who comprised a unique pool of test subjects.²

At least six of the most important U.S. centers of postwar communication studies grew up as de facto adjuncts of government psychological warfare programs. For years, government money—frequently with no public acknowledgment—made up more than 75 percent of the annual budgets of Paul Lazarsfeld's Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) at Columbia University, Hadley Cantril's Institute for International Social Research (IISR) at Princeton, Ithiel de Sola Pool's Center for International Studies (CENIS) program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and similar institutions.³ The U.S. State Department secretly (and apparently illegally) financed studies by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) of U.S. popular opinion as part of the department's cold war lobbying campaigns on Capitol Hill, thus making NORC's ostensibly private, independent surveys financially viable for the first time.⁴ In another case the CIA clandestinely underwrote the Bureau of Social Science Research (BSSR) studies of torture—there is no other word for it—of prisoners of war, reasoning that interrogation of captives could be understood as simply another application of the social-psychological principles articulated in communication studies.⁵ Taken as a whole, it is unlikely that communication research could have emerged in anything like its present form without regular transfusions of money for the leading lights in the field from U.S. military, intelligence, and propaganda agencies.

This book is, in part, a study of the sociology of knowledge. It looks at the relationship between the production of "knowledge"—in this case preconceptions about communication and coercion—and the social and political conditions of a particular era. In this instance, leading

scholars identified the cramped, often brutal attributes of mass communication characteristic of one stage of advanced industrial societies, then substituted *that* conception of communication for communication *as such* through a process detailed in the pages that follow. Put slightly differently, the idea of communication became something like a Rorschach test through which favored academics spoke about the world as they believed it to be, and thereby helped institutionalize that vision at the expense of its rivals.

I focus on the role of U.S. government psychological warfare programs in that process, partly because the story of their impact on this aspect of academe has been largely forgotten or suppressed. But this book is not intended to be a complete history of mass communication research or of the forces that have shaped it; it is simply an opportunity to look at the field in a new way. At least two other important formative forces, in addition to psychological warfare projects, have been highly influential in the evolution of modern communication research. These are strictly academic or scholarly developments, on the one hand, and commercial studies for private companies, on the other. University scholars have written extensively about the academic history of the field and will undoubtedly continue to do so.⁶ Most authors, however, have sidestepped any substantive discussion of the role of commercial research in the intellectual evolution of communication research, this despite comments from both Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton asserting that commercial projects were crucial to the development of the field.⁷

Tracing the links between federal research sponsorship and the evolution of academic preconceptions about communication and mass media presents particularly knotty questions. The evidence shows that psychological warfare projects became a major, and at times the central, focus of U.S. mass communication studies between 1945 and at least 1960. But to what extent did the intense attention to this topic shape the broader structure of assumptions and "received knowledge" of the field?

Research funding cannot by itself create a sustainable academic zeitgeist, of course.⁸ Sponsorship can, however, underwrite the articulation, elaboration, and development of a favored set or preconceptions, and in that way improve its competitive position in ongoing rivalries with alternative constructions of academic reality.

U.S. military, propaganda, and intelligence agencies favored an ap-

proach to the study of mass communication that offered both an explanation of what communication "is" (at least insofar as those agencies' missions were concerned) and a box of tools for examining it. Put most simply, they saw mass communication as an instrument for persuading or dominating targeted groups. They understood "communication" as little more than a form of transmission into which virtually any type of message could be plugged (once one had mastered the appropriate techniques) to achieve ideological, political, or military goals. Academic contractors convinced their clients that scientific dissection and measurement of the constituent elements of mass communication would lead to the development of powerful new tools for social management, in somewhat the same way earlier science had paved the way for penicillin, electric lights, and the atom bomb. Federal patrons meanwhile believed that analysis of audiences and communication effects could improve ongoing propaganda and intelligence programs.⁹

Entrepreneurial academics modeled the scientific tools needed for development of practical applications of communication-as-domination on those that had seemed so successful in the physical sciences: a positivist reduction of complex phenomena to discrete components; an emphasis on quantitative description of change; and a claimed perspective of "objectivity" toward scientific "truth." With few exceptions, they assumed that mass communication was "appropriately viewed from [the perspective of] the top or power center," as Steven Chaffee and John Hochheimer put it, "rather than from the bottom or periphery of the system."¹⁰

Effective persuasion and propaganda were (and are) widely viewed as a relatively rational alternative to the extraordinary brutality and expense of conventional war. Persuasive mass communication can improve military operations without increasing casualties, its advocates contend, especially when encouraging a cornered enemy to surrender rather than fight to the death. Similarly, by supporting the morale and improving the command and control of their own forces, those who can exploit these techniques reap clear military advantages. More fundamentally, U.S. security agencies see propaganda and psychological warfare as a means to extend the influence of the U.S. government far beyond the territories that can be directly controlled by U.S. soldiers, and at a relatively modest cost. The CIA's radio broadcasting into Eastern Europe, for example, became "one of the cheapest, safest,

most effective tools of [U.S.] foreign policy," as Jeane Kirkpatrick—long a vocal proponent of U.S. psychological operations—argued.¹¹

Psychological warfare's role in the evolution of communication research must be examined in the context of political developments of the 1940s and 1950s. In truth, the primary object of U.S. psychological operations during this period was to frustrate the ambitions of radical movements in resource-rich developing countries seeking solutions to the problems of poverty, dependency, and entrenched corruption. The events in Iran, Egypt, Korea, the Philippines, Guatemala, Vietnam, and other countries discussed in upcoming chapters bear this out.

But that was not at all how things seemed at the time to many U.S. social scientists. To them the "real" enemy seemed to be Josef Stalin, not Iranian nationalists or Philippine Huk guerrillas. Stalin ruled the Soviet Union with extraordinary brutality up to his death in 1953, and many in the West regarded the terror of the Stalin years to be the defining feature of every communist society. The United States and the Soviet Union clashed repeatedly over geopolitical hot spots around the world, and the Soviets conducted a large and reasonably sophisticated psychological warfare campaign against the United States. Many observers in the West reasoned that the Marxist-Leninist doctrinal commitment to world revolution and the fact that communists were active in various labor and anticolonial movements proved that Moscow controlled a well-oiled, worldwide revolutionary conspiracy. The Soviet detonation of an atomic bomb in 1949, Mao Zedong's victory in China, and the outbreak of war in Korea were seen by many as warnings that the Soviet Union was bent on literally "taking over the world."

The Soviet view of the international competition, in contrast, was that the United States was an expansionist empire. The United States had already absorbed much of western Europe and the former European colonies into a postwar international economic order built around the dollar. The United States had isolated the Soviet Union internationally, severely restricted trade, and embarked on a clandestine campaign to overthrow the governments of the Soviet Union and several of its satellite states. It had openly intervened in Korea and secretly sponsored coups in a growing list of developing countries. The United States had twice used atomic bombs on civilian populations, the Soviets pointed out, and had on several occasions threatened nuclear attacks on the USSR, China, Korea, and Vietnam.

Given this situation, many leading U.S. social scientists regarded U.S. psychological warfare programs as an enlightened and relatively peaceful means of managing international conflicts through measures short of all-out war. As Ithiel de Sola Pool argued, social scientists' active participation in U.S. foreign policy initiatives was necessary because the "mandarins of the future"—Pool's term of praise for the decision-making elite—need a "way of perceiving the consequences of what they do if [their] actions are not to be brutal, stupid and bureaucratic but rather intelligent and humane. The only hope for humane government in the future," he continued, "is through extensive use of the social sciences by the government."¹²

In reality, though, U.S. and Soviet psychological warfare programs each fed its rival's appetite for escalated conflicts, particularly in contested countries in the Third World. Scientific research programs on either side that claimed to be a defensive reaction to foreign intrigues were easily interpreted in the rival's camp as aggressive preparations for war.

At heart modern psychological warfare has been a tool for managing empire, not for settling conflicts in any fundamental sense. It has operated largely as a means to ensure that indigenous democratic initiatives in the Third World and Europe did not go "too far" from the standpoint of U.S. security agencies. Its primary utility has been its ability to suppress or distort unauthorized communication among subject peoples, including domestic U.S. dissenters who challenged the wisdom or morality of imperial policies. In practice modern psychological warfare and propaganda have only rarely offered "alternatives" to violence over the medium-to-long term. Instead, they have been an integral part of a strategy and culture whose premise the rule of the strong at the expense of the weak, where coercion and manipulation pose as "communication" and close off opportunities for other, more genuine, forms of understanding. The problem with psychological warfare is not so much the content of individual messages: It is instead its consistent role as an instrument for maintaining grossly abusive social structures, notably in global North/South relations.

In the end, U.S. military and intelligence agencies became instrumental in the systematic elaboration of an interlocking series of concepts about communication that have defined much of post-World War II communication research. True, some academic and commercial roots of

U.S. communication studies can be traced back as far as the eighteenth century. Even so, cold war-era psychological warfare studies provided extensive, selective funding for large-scale projects designed to elaborate, test, and publicize the possibilities of communication-as-domination. They helped create networks of sympathetic insiders who enjoyed control over many aspects of scholarly publishing, rank and tenure decisions, and similar levers of power within academe. In doing so, these programs contributed significantly to the triumph of what is today regarded as mainstream communication research over its rivals in U.S. universities.

Federal agencies such as the Department of Defense, U.S. Information Agency, and Central Intelligence Agency and their forerunners provided the substantial majority of funds for all large-scale communication research projects by U.S. scholars between 1945 and 1960.¹³ Despite the heavy secrecy that still surrounds some aspects of U.S. psychological warfare, it is clear that the federal government spent as much as \$1 billion annually on these activities during the early 1950s.¹⁴ As is discussed in later chapters, the government allocated between \$7 million and \$13 million annually for university and think-tank studies of communication-related social psychology, communication effect studies, anthropological studies of foreign communication systems, overseas audience and foreign public opinion surveys, and similar projects that contributed directly and indirectly to the emergence of mass communication research as a distinct discipline.¹⁵ The major foundations such as the Carnegie Corporation and the Ford Foundation, which were the principal secondary source of large-scale communication research funding of the day, usually operated in close coordination with government propaganda and intelligence programs in allocation of money for mass communication research.¹⁶

Psychological warfare projects demanded scientific accuracy and academic integrity, to be sure, but they were at their heart applied research tailored to achieve narrowly defined political or military goals. Government agencies sought scientific data on the means to manipulate targeted populations at home and abroad, and they were willing to pay well for it at a time when there was very little other funding available for large-scale communication studies.

Further, some powerful factions of the government, notably the FBI and other domestic security agencies, aggressively repressed rival scientific concepts concerning communication, particularly those trends of

critical thought they regarded as subversive. Because of the bitterness of the cold war, the influence of McCarthyism, and the strength of clandestinely funded ideological campaigns then under way among U.S. scholars (each of which is discussed in more detail in later chapters), unorthodox analysis of the relationships between communication and ideology could lead to professional ostracism, hostile FBI investigations, attacks in the press, and even violence.¹⁷ Sociological research that could be interpreted as critical of U.S. institutions usually entailed serious professional risks during the 1940s and 1950s, and it sometimes carries similar risks today.

In time psychological warfare projects became essential to the survival of important centers of what are today regarded as mainstream mass communication studies in the United States. They were central to the professional careers of many of the men usually presented as the "founding fathers" of the fields; in fact, the process of selecting and anointing founding fathers has often consisted of attributing enduring scientific value to projects that were initiated as applied studies in psychological warfare. Thus Daniel Lerner's *Passing of Traditional Society*—today widely recognized as the foundation of the development theory school of communication studies—is usually remembered as a politically neutral scientific enterprise. In reality, Lerner's work was conceived and carried out for the specific purpose of advancing U.S. propaganda programs in the Middle East.¹⁸

U.S. psychological warfare programs between 1945 and 1960 provide a case study of how the priorities and values of powerful social groups can be transformed into the "received knowledge" of the scientific community and, to a certain extent, of society as a whole. It is a twofold story, first of the successes and failures of the government's effort to achieve the engineering of consent of targeted populations at home and abroad, and, contained within that, the story of the mechanisms by which consent was achieved among the scientists who had been hired to help with the job. Intriguingly, the latter effort was apparently more successful than the former, at least for a time. Study of psychological warfare is in part a look at how powerful groups manage change, reconstitute themselves in new forms, and struggle—not always successfully—to shape the consciousness of audiences that they claim as their own.

What, then, is "psychological warfare"? According to William Daugherty, the term first appeared in English in a 1941 text on the Nazis' use of propaganda, fifth column activities, and terror in the early stages of the European war.¹⁹ U.S. military and intelligence organizations stretched the definition during World War II to cover a broader range of applications of psychology and social psychology to wartime problems, including battlefield propaganda, ideological training of friendly forces, and ensuring morale and discipline on the home front.²⁰

Since World War II, U.S. military and NATO manuals have typically defined "psychological warfare" or "psychological operations" as tactics as varied as propaganda, covert operations, guerrilla warfare, and, more recently, public diplomacy.²¹ Communist theoreticians have often referred to somewhat similar activities as "agitation and propaganda" and regarded them as a component of the related, yet broader concepts known as class struggle and peoples' war.²² British and Nazi German strategies and tactics in the field have historically been termed "political warfare"²³ and *Weltanschauungskrieg* ("worldview warfare"),²⁴ respectively. Each of these conceptualizations of psychological warfare explicitly links mass communication with selective application of violence (murder, sabotage, assassination, insurrection, counterinsurrection, etc.) as a means of achieving ideological, political, or military goals. These overlapping conceptual systems often contributed to one another's development, while retaining characteristics of the political and cultural assumptions of the social system that generated it.

Within the present context, psychological warfare can best be understood as a group of strategies and tactics designed to achieve the ideological, political, or military objectives of the sponsoring organization (typically a government or political movement) through exploitation of a target audience's cultural-psychological attributes and its communication system. Put another way, psychological warfare is the application of mass communication to modern social conflict: it focus on the combined use of violence and more conventional forms of communication to achieve politicomilitary goals.

A more complete illustration of the U.S. government's view of psychological warfare can be found in the definition used by the U.S. Army in war planning during the early cold war years. The army's definition was classified as top secret at the time it was promulgated (early 1948)

and remained officially secret until the late 1980s, when I obtained a collection of early psychological warfare planning records through a Freedom of Information Act request. One of these documents reads:

Psychological warfare employs all moral and physical means, other than orthodox military operations, which tend to:

- a. destroy the will and the ability of the enemy to fight.
- b. deprive him of the support of his allies and neutrals.
- c. increase in our own troops and allies the will to victory.

Psychological warfare employs *any* weapon to influence the mind of the enemy. The weapons are psychological only in the *effect* they produce and not because of the nature of the weapons themselves. In this light, overt (white), covert (black), and gray propaganda; subversion; sabotage; special operations; guerrilla warfare; espionage; political, cultural, economic, and racial pressures are all effective weapons. They are effective because they produce dissension, distrust, fear and hopelessness in the minds of the enemy, not because they originate in the psyche of propaganda or psychological warfare agencies.

The phrase "special operations," as used here, is defined in a second document as

those activities against the enemy which are conducted by allied or friendly forces behind enemy lines. . . . [They] include psychological warfare (black), clandestine warfare, subversion, sabotage, and miscellaneous operations such as assassination, target capture and rescue of downed airmen.²⁶

The army study goes on to summarize several of the tactics of persuasion just outlined, the three most basic of which are known as "white," "black," and "gray" propaganda. "White propaganda," the army states, "stress[es] simplicity, clarity and repetition." It is designed to be perceived by its audience as truthful, balanced, and factual, and the United States publicly acknowledged its promotion of this type of information through outlets such as the Voice of America. "Black" propaganda, in contrast, "stresses *trouble, confusion, . . . and terror.*"²⁷ A variation of black propaganda tactics involves forging enemy documents and distributing them to target audiences as a means of discrediting rival powers. The U.S. government officially denies that it employs

black propaganda, but in fact it has long been an integral aspect of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. "Gray" propaganda, as its name suggests, exists somewhere between "white" and "black" and typically involves planting false information about rivals in news outlets that claim to be independent of the U.S. government.²⁸

Other U.S. Army and National Security Council documents from the same period stress three additional attributes of the U.S. psychological warfare strategy of the day: the use of "plausible deniability" to permit the government to deny responsibility for "black" operations that were in truth originated by the United States;²⁹ a conscious policy of polarizing neutral nations into either "pro-" or "anti-U.S." camps;³⁰ and the clandestine targeting of the U.S. population, in addition to that of foreign countries, for psychological operations.³¹

Throughout this book, psychological warfare and psychological operations encompass this range of activities, as specified by the Army and the National Security Council. Several points should be underlined. First, psychological warfare in the U.S. conception has consistently made use of a wide range of violence, including guerrilla warfare, assassination, sabotage, and, more fundamentally, the maintenance of manifestly brutal regimes in client states abroad. Second, it also has involved a variety of propaganda or media work, ranging from overt (white) newscasting to covert (black) propaganda. Third, the targets of U.S. psychological warfare were not only the "enemy," but also the people of the United States and its allies.

In the pages that follow I first discuss U.S. psychological warfare prior to 1945, stressing the early work of noted communication theorists Harold Lasswell and Walter Lippmann and the pioneer studies underwritten by the Rockefeller Foundation. I then describe the emergence of informal social networks among communication researchers employed in psychological warfare projects during World War II.

Turning to the postwar period, I next trace the interdependent evolution of psychological warfare and communication research during the cold war. I pay special attention to *Public Opinion Quarterly (POQ)*—long regarded as among the most prestigious mainstream academic journals of communication research—as a barometer of the impact of psychological warfare programs on academic concepts of what communication "is," what it could be, and how best to study it.

In the final chapters I review the scientific legacy of U.S. government psychological warfare contracting between 1945 and 1960 and summarize some insights into how these programs have affected preconceptions about communication, ideology, and responsible scholarship in the United States.