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Abstract

Within communication and media studies, Paul Lazarsfeld is primarily known for his methodological innovations in the field of audience research. Yet, during the early 1950s, Lazarsfeld was asked to chair the Ford Foundation's Television Advisory Committee (TAC). This committee had been established by Robert M. Hutchins, then an associate director of the Ford Foundation. Hutchins had established the TAC as a means of continuing the work of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press, that he himself had chaired during the mid-1940s. Based upon material held in the Ford Foundation archives at the Rockefeller Archive Center, as well as material held at the archives of Columbia University and the University of Maryland, this paper provides an overview of Lazarsfeld's chairing of the TAC. It examines Lazarsfeld's relationship with both the commercial broadcasting industry and the media reform movement, two factions that had an interest in the work of the TAC, but whose relationship with each other was antagonistic. The paper argues that he was selected to chair the TAC because of his previous involvement with, and good standing within, the two factions. Ultimately, however, Lazarsfeld was unable to advance the cause of media reform within the Ford Foundation, and oversaw the production of a research report that was of little consequence, either to the development of television as a new medium, or to the case of media reform.

Paul Lazarsfeld and Media Reform at the Ford Foundation

Paul Lazarsfeld has long been acknowledged as a founding father of communications studies (Schramm, 1954), responsible for pioneering methodological insights that bridged psychology and sociology to form one of the main pillars of a new discipline. Yet, there is also a long-standing tradition of criticizing Lazarsfeld, based on his relationship with the business interests that funded much of his research. Media sociologists working with a tradition influenced by European positivism have tended to emphasize Lazarsfeld's methodological innovation, framing his collaborations with industry as a necessary means of funding large-scale projects that provided ground-breaking insights. Those working in a Critical Theory and Political Economy tradition of media scholarship have been more willing to portray him as a politically compromised figure, whose work is of predominantly commercial, rather than cultural. value. However, more recent research has viewed Lazarsfeld through a different lens, locating him and his work in the context of the media reform movement of the 1940s (Balas, 2011; Shepperd, 2013; Pickard, 2016). This paper forms part of this more recent trend, and aims to deepen and enrich our understanding of the values underpinning Lazarsfeld's work by examining his contribution to the development of educational and public broadcasting during the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Writing in 1954, C. Wright Mills railed against the scientists who "by the costly rigor of their methods...succeed in trivializing men and men and society" (Mills, 1954 / 2008: p. 80) - an attack that was clearly aimed at Lazarsfeld, his former employer. This antipathy towards Lazarsfeld grew throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as he forged stronger and closer relationships with the world of capital and commerce, in order to fund his research. Smythe and Van Dinh argued that the division between Critical Theory and Lazarsfeld's Administrative Research was not merely methodological or theoretical, it was fundamentally ideological. For them, academic research could either "criticize and try to change the existing political-economic order or...defend and strengthen it" (1983: 117); there was no

neutral middle-ground. Lazarsfeld was seen as a defender of the conservative status quo, and Smythe (1978) went as far as to call Lazarsfeld a "bourgeois sociologist" - although he waited until well after his death before doing so.

Balas (2011) and Shepperd (2013) have moved away from the dispute between Critical and Administrative Research, focusing instead at Lazarsfeld's relationship with the media reform movement and what this reveals about the values underpinning his work. The media reform movement was a broad-based coalition of civil society groups that campaigned for what Pickard (2015) has termed “media democracy”. The media reform movement had existed in some form or another since the 1920s, and its aims and objectives shifted over time. Fundamentally however, the movement advocated greater public control over broadcast media. It was critical of both the cultural power of commercial broadcasters, as well as the material that they broadcast. The reformers advocated for greater regulation of commercial broadcasting, and for increased government support for non-commercial broadcasting.

Shepperd (2013) argues that the media reformers were responsible for establishing both the intellectual case for public broadcasting in the USA, but also – through the development of educational broadcasting stations – for building the basic institutional framework that would be adopted on a nationwide basis, following the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. Lazarsfeld's work, according to Shepperd, played a key part in this process, because it provided evidence to support the claim that educational radio programming had a beneficial effect on the listener.

Balas (2011) goes further, arguing that not only did Lazarsfeld lend his expertise to the media reformers, but that he engaged in dialogue with them regarding the future of television. She draws attention to Lazarsfeld's contribution to the Allerton House Seminar of 1949, an event held at the University of Illinois that drew together the pioneers of the educational broadcasting movement of the 1940s and 1950s in order to examine "the purpose and philosophy for the emerging U.S. public television service" (Balas, 2011: 1). Lazarsfeld's name was not included on the official list of invitees, and as a result his contribution to the

discussion had previously gone unremarked. Balas' archival research findings reveal, however, that not only did Lazarsfeld attend the seminar but that he presented a discussion paper which "offered a progressive critique of the educational broadcasting system as it was in the 1930s and 1940s and remains today" (ibid.: 2).

Lazarsfeld's address to the Allerton House describes two competing visions for media reform. On the one hand, there were those who wished "to increase the cultural level of the country" and on the other, there were the "activistic and autocratic" educational broadcasters, who wanted to use radio "to promote certain important ideas" (Lazarsfeld, 1949: 6). While he was reluctant to ally himself too closely with either camp, Lazarsfeld made it clear that his sympathies were with the cultural improvers, rather than the autocrats.

Lazarsfeld saw that American universities contained an enormous number of interesting people, but that their contribution to educational broadcasting was restricted to delivering specialist lectures, rather than in producing programs designed to appeal to a broad audience. He outlined an alternative vision for educational television; one where stations presented reviews and discussions of local theatrical productions, documentaries about life in the local school, adapted profiles from the *New Yorker* magazine, and even news and current affairs programs. This appeal for the educational broadcasters to expand their remit was based upon Lazarsfeld's argument that they should broaden their understanding of the audience. He was critical of the "nice", English Victorian middle-class values that underpinned the cause of media reform and spoke of the "awe" that he felt towards aspects of American culture that horrified some media reformers. To borrow from Laurie Oullette (2012), he warned the media reformers against allowing educational television to be a service made by and for "Viewers Like You".

Much of what Lazarsfeld presented at Allerton House was drawn from his recent writing on broadcasting. *The People Look at Radio* (Lazarsfeld and Field, 1946) warns against adopting "social and aesthetic standards" that would alienate the ordinary listener (ibid.: 4), and notes that only six percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement that "I listen mostly to serious programs or educational

programs and wish there were more of them" (ibid.: 55). However, survey respondents also noted that radio had "added to their information or knowledge" in fields that lay outside the strictly circumscribed boundaries of educational broadcasting - most notably homemaking, cooking or shopping information (ibid.: 57). Lazarsfeld tried to impress upon those gathered at Allerton House that "radio listeners have developed their own educational world, different from the world of formal education but appropriate to the nature of this medium" (ibid.: 58). His plea was for education television to embrace this new "educational world", rather than see itself as merely an electronic extension of the classroom.

Lazarsfeld's contribution to the Allerton House seminars does mark him out as a progressive figure, albeit one who was often at odds with the mainstream of the media reform movement. Balas argues that the sacrifice of public service broadcasting on the altar of educational television in the early 1950s might have been prevented, had the philanthropic foundations committed resources to develop an "active, multidimensional and responsive public sphere" (2003: 90) - as Lazarsfeld had suggested. Yet Lazarsfeld's view was shared by a minority of the media reformers, and foundation support during the 1950s was targeted not at his "new educational world", but rather at extending the traditional electronic classroom. However, for a few years in the early 1950s, the Ford Foundation did attempt to develop a broader and more ambitious vision of public broadcasting. And Lazarsfeld played an important part in this - ultimately unsuccessful - attempt to rescue non-commercial broadcasting from the university lecture hall.

The Ford Foundation had been in existence since 1936, but following the death of Henry Ford in 1947 it was endowed with 90% of the non-voting Ford Motor Company stock, a bequest that immediately transformed it into the world's richest philanthropic foundation. For media reformers, this endowment was ideally timed, since the foundation was - by the end of the 1940s - run by people broadly sympathetic to the cause of media reform. Most prominent among them was Robert M. Hutchins, former chair of the 1947 Commission on the Freedom of the Press. Hutchins helped to raise the funds to support the formation of the Joint Committee on Educational Television in 1950, and in the early 1950s began to develop plans for a Ford Foundation Television Advisory Committee (TAC), The

TAC would examine "problems of organization, management, control, regulation, and finance" of television, with a view to establishing a "permanent commission, either public or private, to advise the government and the people periodically of the state of the medium" (Hutchins, 1952). Hutchins' vision was for a new institution, one placed to challenge the light-touch regulation of broadcasting that had been dominant since the 1920s.

While the TAC was Hutchins' brainchild, its chairmanship was eventually offered to Lazarsfeld. Considering the aims of the TAC, he seems, on the face of it, an unusual choice. Indeed, Lazarsfeld himself was a little puzzled as to why he was asked to take on the responsibility. Writing to Hutchins in 1953, he said: "occasionally I wake up at night wondering why it is I find myself suddenly organizing a television commission" (Lazarsfeld, 1953).

The truth is that Lazarsfeld was appointed to placate Henry Ford II. Ford II chaired the Ford Foundation Board of Trustees, but had struggled to assert his authority over it during the late 1940s and early 1950s. He said that during this period the foundation had "got out of control and it got in the control of a lot of liberals and a lot of what I call, 'people that I don't agree with" (Ford II, 1973: 5).

Yet, it seems that by 1952, Ford II was beginning to wrest back control of his foundation. Robert Hutchins' original plan envisaged a reformist TAC, possibly chaired by former FCC chair Wayne Coy. In April of that year however, Henry Ford II made it clear that he would only agree to fund the TAC on the condition that the commercial television industry was willing to support it (Ford Foundation, 1952: 2). Lazarsfeld's appointment to the chair was therefore an attempt to reconcile the two very different approaches of Hutchins and Ford II. His name had been suggested by Frank Stanton, of CBS, who assured Ford II of Lazarsfeld's credibility with the industry. But Lazarsfeld had also been involved with the earlier development of educational broadcasting, and therefore remained acceptable to Hutchins and his reformist agenda.

The report that was eventually published by the TAC is of little significance, but the process of writing the report provides valuable insight into Lazarsfeld's relationship with the media reform movement after the Allerton House seminars.

His appointment to chair the TAC was an attempt to ensure that the committee retained some credibility with the reformers, yet his relationship with them - as illustrated in some of the correspondence that emerged from the project - shows a Lazarsfeld that is less sympathetic to their cause, and arguably less progressive, than the man portrayed in Balas' work.

On his appointment to the chair of the TAC, Lazarsfeld convened an informal group of advisers, which included long-established friends and collaborators, both from the world of academia and from the commercial television industry. Some of these advisers had been involved in the media reform movement of the 1940s, including Robert D. Leigh, Wilbur Schramm, and particularly Charles Siepmann.

In correspondence between Lazarsfeld and his advisers, we soon see two clear views emerging. Siepmann, Schramm, Leigh, Fiske, and Lowenthal are clearly supportive of Robert Hutchins' original vision. They argue for a permanent commission for the study of television with broad critical aim - what Lowenthal called “an organized top-level body of public conscience on television” (Lowenthal, 1952: 1).

These views were countered, however, by Lazarsfeld's other advisers, who had closer ties to the commercial television industry - including Frank Stanton himself, the industry lawyer Sidney Kaye, and Herta Herzog. Stanton wrote to Lazarsfeld in June 1953 expressing concern that Siepmann, Leigh, and Lowenthal were involved with the project, arguing that "few things...will coalesce industry opposition more than the thought that Siepmann will have a hand in the output of this project" (Stanton, 1953). Lazarsfeld's response to Stanton's letter is significant in that he expresses his own concerns about Siepmann's involvement in the TAC, saying that Stanton's concerns were "completely justified," before going on to assure him that Siepmann would be kept under control (Lazarsfeld, 1953a: 2).

Further correspondence between Lazarsfeld and Stanton on this issue is not included with Lazarsfeld's papers, but we can surmise that Lazarsfeld succeeded

in tempering the zeal of the reformers. The TAC's final report (Implementation Committee on Television, 1954), submitted to the Ford Foundation, addresses some of the aims first articulated by Hutchins, but only in the most superficial manner. At heart, the vision it contains - for a commission to guide the development of television - is far more limited, and much more amenable to commercial interests.

Hutchins had envisioned a new commission that could question the fundamental direction of television policy, discussing "problems of organization, management, control, regulation, and finance" (Hutchins, 1952), offering guidance to government, and proposing new regulation and legislation. Lazarsfeld's recommendations, however, take a very different view, cautioning against placing a regulatory burden on commercial television, by warning of the effect that this could have on free speech. In fact, the final report explicitly stated within its pages that "[t]elevision as a private business has not been questioned" (Implementation Committee on Television, 1954).

Both Balas (2011) and Shepperd (2013) are clear that while Lazarsfeld contributed to the development of educational broadcasting, he did not position himself within the mainstream of the media reform movement. He criticized its "autocratic" tendencies, and made it clear that he found some of the criticisms of commercial broadcasting to be ill-founded and rooted in snobbery. On the other hand, Lazarsfeld was also keen to see American broadcasting develop more cultural programming. He saw his research on audiences as a vital tool that could be used to guide both broadcasters and regulators, as they sought to improve their offering. When engaging both with the media reformers and commercial broadcasters, Lazarsfeld was a forceful advocate for the ordinary viewer, and stood up for working-class and marginalized Americans.

However, there is little doubt that Lazarsfeld's progressive credentials are dented by his work on television policy at the Ford Foundation. Particularly damaging to his reputation is the undermining of his friend and colleague, Siepmann, in order to placate the commercial broadcasting industry. This will only reinforce the view that he was – as he put it himself – "a skunk and a henchman for the industry" (Lazarsfeld, 1949). Yet this represents only a part of the story, and should be seen

in the context both of Lazarsfeld's sincere desire to collaborate in a meaningful way with reformers like Hutchins, and also reflecting the internal politics of the Ford Foundation in the early 1950s. Lazarsfeld was appointed to a project in an attempt to bridge a growing chasm between Hutchins and Henry Ford II; supporting Siepmann and the other reformers could have antagonized Ford II, and led to the withdrawal of foundation support. By compromising his relationship with the media reform movement, Lazarsfeld may well have prolonged the life of a project that while ultimately unsuccessful, was potentially transformative to both the study of communications, and the American broadcast landscape.

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