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Ideological Steering of US Media Research: The Role of Redbaiting in the Early Communication Field

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ABSTRACT

The early US communication field took root during the 1930s and '40s upon a rapidly shifting ideological terrain. These years saw several critical threads of communication research rise and fall, while other less critical approaches ascended to become the dominant paradigm of communication research, emphasizing social science methods that consistently found only limited media effects. Although typically narrated as an intellectual/methodological interplay between critical and administrative approaches, early tensions in the field were also ideological, swaying research down a particular trajectory. To understand how certain types of research fell from favor, while others were more readily embraced, it's instructive to consider an especially effective set of tools used to discipline the discipline that loosely fell under a general strategy: redbaiting.

KEYWORDS

Ideology; media history;
media reform; political
economy; redbaiting

The early US communication field took root during the 1930s and '40s upon a rapidly shifting ideological terrain. These years saw several critical traditions of communication research rise and fall, while other less critical frameworks became the “dominant paradigm” of communication research, emphasizing social science methods that consistently found only “limited” media effects.¹ Although typically narrated as an intellectual/methodological interplay between critical and administrative approaches,² early tensions in the field were also *ideological*, swaying research down a particular trajectory.³ To understand how certain types of research fell from favor, while others were more readily embraced, it's instructive to consider an effective set of tools used to discipline the discipline that loosely fell under one broad strategy: redbaiting.

Redbaiting is a general term, but can best be explicated as the process of discrediting—and ultimately silencing—particular groups and individuals by associating them with left-wing ideologies. Such articulations work to both delegitimize left-wing ideas and stigmatize those who espouse them. How I'm mostly using the term here is more broadly at the level of insinuations and suggestions rather than overt accusations. Nonetheless, while many ideological steering mechanisms were relatively subtle and fell outside narrow definitions of redbaiting, it's useful to see their connections within a broader ideological orientation that rendered certain types of research illegitimate, impermissible, and unworthy of funding.

While redbaiting served as a convenient means of discrediting certain types of research, only rarely was it explicitly deployed. Rather, this ideological policing was typically more implicit, often conducted by proxy, yet no less consequential in molding the early contours of communication research. Under this expansive definition, such redbaiting tendencies should be seen as a contributing factor, offering at least a partial explanation for how certain progressive and left-leaning research agendas were marginalized within an increasingly acritical field.

Thus far, little scholarly attention has focused on the role of redbaiting during the communication field's early formation. While I've discussed some of the larger ideological struggles that defined 1940s media scholarship in previous writing—and I continue to develop this work for a larger book project—in this essay, I begin to sketch the often-invisible and subtle role that various kinds of redbaiting played in shaping communication research agendas and steering the field toward less critical analyses. This broader ideological context is necessary, I argue, to understand the curious disappearance of early critical threads in the communication field such as the Institute for Propaganda Analysis and other media reform initiatives in the 1940s and beyond.

Communication Research's Rightward Lurch

US society emerged from the 1940s on a different political trajectory compared to many of its contemporaries. Until the mid-1940s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal project appeared to be guiding the US down the same social democratic path that many countries were following, with robust public sectors and generous welfare programs. The importance of a mixed economy under Keynesian economics was largely commonsensical, a general paradigm that recognized systemic market failures and assumed that many public services should remain in the public sector. To varying degrees, scholars within the nascent communication field reflected much of this thinking, sensitized by the Great Depression and World War II, and suspicious of fascist formations, unfettered capitalism, and linkages between the two.⁴

At this time, critical intellectual formations emerged in the field around Frankfurt School scholars who came to the US (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer), critical political economy (Dallas Smythe), critical media policy studies (Charles Siepmann), and critical media sociology (C. Wright Mills). These key figures maintained, if not total opposition, a decidedly skeptical perspective toward nascent commercial media industries, especially in how well they could serve the democratic needs of society. While never dominant, these research programs were fairly established at the dawn of the communication field. By the late 1940s and through the mid-1950s, however, most of these currents were being pushed to the margins if not banished from the field altogether.

Christopher Simpson has written the authoritative history on how the field was reshaped by an early allegiance to the US government's anti-communism and Cold War national security imperatives.⁵ But relatively little research has illuminated how advertising and media industries—and capitalist power relationships writ large—shaped the field's origins. While early propaganda research reflected at least implicit criticism of commercial media, various intellectual and ideological currents in the 1930s began to orient communication research around noncritical analyses, including the assumption that good social science is always politically neutral and quantitative. Research that "raised questions pointing to

possible reform,” one historian of the early communication field observed, was judged to be “nonscientific and academically peripheral,” and therefore critical analyses were increasingly avoided.⁶

A subtle, but no less material, means of steering research in particular ways was based on funding decisions and stipulations. Arguably, the clearest case of this ideological policing via funding revolved around the Rockefeller Foundation, which underwrote seminal research for the nascent communication field. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation expressly forbade that its financial support for the Princeton Radio Research Project be used to question American radio’s structural design as defined by private/commercial ownership—a remarkable constraint given how anomalous the American broadcasting system was compared to the predominantly publicly funded systems being established around the world such as the BBC.

As this “American Media Exceptionalism” became further naturalized,⁷ assailing the American system’s commercial foundations was increasingly deemed “off limits.”⁸ To give one example of how this unfolded, Sproule recounts that Hadley Cantril, the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA) president, wrote to the IPA secretary, Clyde Miller, that it would be imprudent for him to sign an article included in the IPA’s bulletin that compared the American broadcasting’s private ownership to British and German public systems.⁹ Even implicit questioning of the American structure, Cantril suggested, would be “embarrassing” since he had recently applied to the Rockefeller Foundation for the renewal of a \$67,000 grant for radio research.

Similarly, reflecting on his experience working within the Princeton Radio Research Project, Adorno observed how critical social research was made exceedingly difficult because the project’s charter, as defined by the Rockefeller Foundation, “expressly stipulated that the investigations must be performed within the limits of the commercial radio system prevailing in the United States. It was thereby implied that the system itself, its cultural and sociological consequences, and its social and economic presuppositions were not to be analyzed.”¹⁰

While non-critical analyses were stipulated by a major funder, pro-industry funding seemingly flooded the zone. Most of this industry-funded work—for example, Lazarsfeld’s survey research sponsored by the National Association for Broadcasters, which found that Americans generally loved commercial radio¹¹—was less critical and less threatening to the status quo, especially compared to work that might draw attention to corporate radio’s commercial excesses and the threats such profit-driven oligopolies pose to a healthy democratic society.¹²

The Redbaited

These early discursive and material biases within the academy coincided with a period of vicious redbaiting across the US that undercut media reform efforts and marginalized left-leaning scholars. One such example was the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), a highly respected reform-minded research institution based at Columbia University that studied disinformation in the late 1930s from a critical perspective and advocated for what we would refer to today as “media literacy.” Increasingly struggling to find sufficient

funding and venues for publishing its work during a rightward shift in the American political landscape, the organization floundered.

Drawing from archival records, Schiffrin notes that “Miller and the IPA became victims of the anti-communist sentiment of the 1930s and 1940s” including attacks “by the red-baiting press.”¹³ Ultimately, Miller was pushed out of the academy due to his activism, and the IPA was essentially defunded and ultimately ceased operation altogether due to insufficient support, especially after being harangued by the infamous US House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) for its purported lack of patriotism and later condemned as a communist front organization.¹⁴

Other examples of redbaiting were even more overt. Robert Brady, a Berkeley economist who was an intellectual forebear of the antifascist/critical political economic tradition of communication research, was ruthlessly redbaited by the Congressional Dies Committee in the early ‘40s for, among other things, being associated with progressive groups like the Consumers Union, which he co-founded. Brady was also singled out during a 1947 Congressional hearing for purported connections to “communist front organizations” and for his warning of the “fascist threat to democracy”—presumably guilty of so-called “premature anti-fascism”—which he published in 1938.¹⁵ These relentless redbaiting attacks contributed to Brady’s poor health and a shortened academic career.¹⁶

Brady’s student and fellow political economist, Dallas Smythe, was first redbaited in the mid-1940s while serving as the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) first chief economist. He was redbaited again in 1948 before even setting foot on campus at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign to begin his long academic career. Smythe had reason to surmise, later, that his departmental chair and a founder of the communication field, Wilbur Schramm, had surveilled him for the FBI while he was on faculty at the University of Illinois’s Institute of Communication Research.¹⁷ A substantial, heavily redacted FBI file, which accused Smythe of being part of a “Marxist study group” and “Communistically inclined,” seems to support this claim.¹⁸

Charles Siepmann, a British-born early media policy scholar and founding director for one of the first PhD-granting communication programs in the US, was also redbaited. Despite his proven expertise—serving as an early BBC programming director, authoring several respected books, and mentoring numerous PhD students who went on to successful careers in academia and public service broadcasting—Siepmann remained outside the mainstream of the field.¹⁹ Previously, he had been harshly redbaited for authoring the FCC Blue Book, which attempted to establish meaningful public interest protections within commercial radio—for which he was accused of, among other subversive activities, trying to “BBC-ize” American radio.²⁰

Other redbaited figures were adjacent to the field but committed to various kinds of media reform. For example, the historian Stephen Bates chronicles the case of Milton Stewart, an early media reformer who worked with Lazarsfeld and other prominent figures in the field and endeavored to, in Stewart’s words, establish “democratically controlled communication in America.”²¹ At a very young age, Stewart had begun to make positive changes at the FCC, but his career was derailed by an FBI investigation into alleged communist ties, and he would never again return to media reform activism.

Such pervasive Cold War politics set the stage for widespread political oppression that caused generational violence against innumerable individuals connected to media. Beyond

communication scholarship and media reform initiatives, the media industries themselves were relentlessly redbaited, devastating many talented individuals' careers in film, radio, television, and print who were blacklisted by publications such as *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*.²²

Given this context and disparate examples, it's safe to presume many other cases of intellectual repression, the vast majority of which we likely will never know. Countless ideological casualties registered in ways that were barely visible then and even less so now. While many redbaited individuals didn't lose their jobs, they were nonetheless stigmatized and dissuaded from engaging in certain kinds of work and political activism, leaving lasting marks on the future of media reform and communication research. The cases of redbaiting that tend to dominate public memory, Bates reminds us, suggest that politically motivated investigations were "highly visible, career-ending, and rare" when, in fact, "nothing could be further from the truth."²³ Various forms of redbaiting tended to be banal and commonplace, steering the communication field in subtle ways. We're likely still experiencing the legacy of those ideological struggles to this day.

Recuperating a Radical Critique

The communication field's earliest days were shaped by confrontations *with* and accommodations *to* commercial media industries. These confrontations left a lasting imprint on the field that relegated structural critique of American media industries—and commercial media's systemic limitations in serving democratic needs—to the margins of intellectual inquiry. This acritical turn in communication research was aided by various kinds of subtle redbaiting, especially during the anticommunist hysteria of the 1940s and into the early '50s.

As the US sits at the precipice of a new era of intellectual oppression, increasing attention is turning to this earlier episode—the so-called "second" Red Scare—when many left-of-center individuals, groups, and social movements were stigmatized. Beyond the awful tragedies of countless careers, families, and lives being devastated, larger patterns and consequences emerged from this period that impacted all of society, including the communication field. As historians of the Red Scare have demonstrated, such oppression exceeds individual harm to cause long-term effects on public memory, subsequent policy trajectories, and long-lasting discursive deficits—in this case, academic discourse within communication research.²⁴

Such discursive effects on the field—discouraging political-economic critique, critical/structural analysis, and media reform activism—continues to narrow the scope of academic inquiry at a time when democratic society has been waylaid by a cluster of structural crises: the collapse of local journalism; a proliferation of mis/disinformation and low-quality information in both social media and mainstream news; informational redlining and market censorship; runaway media consolidation; and the rise of a new cohort of right-wing media and tech oligarchs. A field more attuned to structural vulnerabilities in commercial media systems, especially those caused by capitalist logics, may have been better positioned to confront such threats to democracy.

More work is needed to reckon with this history and recuperate critical traditions. At the very least, deserving a more central place within the field are structural analyses that expose how hyper-commercialized media systems are beset with

endemic failures in serving democratic societies. By now, it should be abundantly clear to all that to combat fascism, we must grapple with concentrated capitalist power over our core media institutions and infrastructures. Any hope for democracy depends on it.

Notes

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Disclosure Statement

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