

Editorial Introduction: Getting beyond Paul Lazarsfeld, at last?

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The issue of the relations (actual, potential, normatively acceptable) between academic research, and commercial or policy research has a long and troubled history. Though clearly not starting there, it was in many ways given shape by the publication in 1941 of Paul Lazarsfeld's essay 'Remarks on administrative and critical research'.¹ This essay made public a set of debates which had been developing for several years. It came out of the tensions between himself and two fellow refugees from Hitler's Germany, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, from the Frankfurt School of critical sociology. The latter two, although welcomed to America by Lazarsfeld, found the intellectual atmosphere and lack of critical politics seriously debilitating. They saw all around them the dominance in the USA of a crassly commercial capitalist culture, imbued into popular culture and propped up by marketing and advertising. Lazarsfeld – by then ensconced at Columbia University, and there developing his Bureau of Applied Social Research (which was doing just the kinds of research that Horkheimer and Adorno disliked) – hoped to smoothe relations. This essay, with its distinction and relation between 'administrative' and 'critical' research, was his attempt. He didn't succeed – but he set in train a long series of debates, which are still continuing, seemingly hardly altered. In important ways, this whole topic has remained American-focused, with key definitions, concepts, methods and uses of communication research providing focus. As recently as 2015, the International Communication Association sponsored Panels at its San Juan conference on the topic. What is striking is that the eleven questions they posed could have been derived, almost unaltered, from the terms Lazarsfeld laid down in his original essay.²

Arguably, this was a step back. In 1983, the (again, very American) *Journal of Communication* sponsored a substantial debate around this topic, in a special issue. A total of 35 essays were published on what was then felt to be a 'Ferment in the Field'. The context was significant. The 1970s had seen a substantial deepening of the critique of the role of communication research in America. The early excitement over the potential of Uses and Gratifications Research had waned (not least because in certain key respects a lot of the work done under its aegis turned out to be just as individualistic as its most 'behaviourist'

alternatives, but also because it replaced the apparent ‘passivity’ of mainstream research with a vacuous ‘activity’). In other parts of the world, there were stirrings of whole alternative approaches. In the Nordic countries, a new kind of reception research was emerging. In the UK, and spreading out, cultural studies was asking different questions and developing new models. In the Journal, although only a couple explicitly cite Lazarsfeld’s essay,³ more than twenty of them draw in some way on the idea of a distinction between ‘administrative’ and ‘critical’ research. Some openly equate the former with survey-dominated, quantitative research. While some authors on the American side insisted that their scholarship had long gone past linear and ‘magic bullet’ assumptions, others – with an almost audible snort – suggested that the same underlying models still predominated – just allowing a few more ‘variables’ to complicate it. And it is the refusal by ‘administrative’ researchers to look at larger frameworks which still bothers their ‘critical’ opponents. So, those advocating critical research insisted on the need to address structures of ownership, cultures of production, circulation processes, and the ideological functions of media output.

What is particularly striking, though, is the absence of actual reflection on what Lazarsfeld said in 1941. For an essay that has been so influential over such a long period, it is in truth very peculiar. When you read it, one of the striking features is its very odd construction. More a quarter is given over to a long quotation from Harold Lasswell, who would become within a few years the source of the ‘linear model of communication’ that would dominate American thinking about communication for at least a generation. In Lasswell’s long ‘Let us suppose ...’ sketch, some newspaper editors and government representatives suddenly realise that, quite accidentally, they have stirred up bad anti-‘alien’ feelings that they never intended to. Wanting to do something about it, they hire in scholars to discover how the Press has its ‘effects’, and what kinds of story, and editorial materials might undo these unfortunate effects. Surely, asks Lasswell, this cannot be a bad thing? But waiting in Lazarsfeld’s wings to say in what ways this might be bad are Theodor and Max, with the trumpet of ‘critical theory’.

A critical student who analyzes modern media of communication will look at radio, motion pictures, the press, and will ask the following kinds of questions: How are these media organized and controlled? How, in this institutional set-up, is the trend toward centralization, standardization and promotional pressure expressed? In what form, however disguised, are they threatening human values? He will feel that the main task of research is to uncover the unintentional (for the most part) and often very subtle ways in which these media contribute to living habits and social attitudes that he considers deplorable. (p.10)

Notice several things about this. First, there is the wonderful notion – smuggled in here in that passing phrase ‘unintentional (for the most part)’ – that these newspaper editors just didn’t mean anything of the kind. Good-hearted souls, they slipped up and now want to put

things right. Yeah, right. Second (and surely related to this), there is no sense of the specific forms of politics which drove Horkheimer and Adorno. Instead, we have ‘human values’, that most generic and frequently hollow concept which can attach itself (without challenging them) to almost any political position. (This sense of tidied-up politics is conveyed too in the list of likely purposes of communication research that Lazarsfeld gives (pp.2-3): ‘The purpose may be to sell goods, or to raise the intellectual standards of the population, or to secure an understanding of governmental policies, but in all cases, to someone who uses a medium for something, it is the task of research to make the tool better known, and thus to facilitate its use.’ A considerable amount of fun could be had just extending this list to flesh it out to cover *actual, known* purposes of the media: mounting campaigns; playing on the prejudices of sectors of a population; laying particular narratives on important issues; selling themselves by means of juicy scandal; and so on. Finally, and of course most relevantly to this Journal, there is no space in here for research into *actual* audiences. The task of critical researchers is to do other kinds of work. Empirical research into audiences is apparently left to the ‘administrative researchers’.

This tension is particularly apparent in one of the two essays which directly reflect on Lazarsfeld’s heritage. William Melody and Robin Mansell (1983) draw on Thomas Kuhn’s concept of a paradigm shift, to suggest that the ‘ferment in the field’ is a sign of an epistemological crisis in which two incompatible languages for depicting ‘communication’ have come to confront one another. These different languages – rooted in the ways researchers conceive their objects, the methods and apparatuses for researching them, and the value of the existing body of knowledge – are irreconcilable. But when therefore Melody and Mansell postulate what needs researching, as a result, there is no sign at all of any differently conceived audience research. Instead, it is the institutions, the political economy, and the ideological role of the media which need interrogation, all of which can only be achieved by breaking researchers’ ‘allegiance to the status quo’ (p.109).

The second essay directly referencing Lazarsfeld is in some ways even odder. Dallas Smythe (who had been a critic of American communications research for nearly two decades, and was becoming famous for his theory of the ‘audience commodity’) and Tran Van Dinh (1983) critiqued administrative research for having the implicit purpose of making capitalism more ‘efficient’, and for not exploring the ‘contradictory processes [of communication] in the real world’. This didn’t mean that critical researchers could never learn anything from such research. They could learn a bit from studies of attitudes to racial integration, and to class. But among the examples they choose to ‘learn from’ is the appalling (1968) ‘Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence’ – which blamed opposition to the Vietnam War on television – because it allowed them to wonder how American TV had got so bad ...⁴ Once again, though, actual empirical research – in whatever new form – into audiences was simply not on the cards. Instead they argue in effect for various forms of ‘resistance research’ – or, how to challenge the power of the media.

Alongside the main essays in *Journal of Communication* were reports from one or two countries – France, Hungary – on local developments, but nothing approaching even a

proposal for differently conceived audience research. It seemed like we had a choice: either do it and risk being at best ‘apolitical’, at worst apologists; or do other kinds of research altogether. So it is not entirely surprising that when more empirical research outside the American mode emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, it was not infrequently accused of ‘empty empiricism’ and ‘pointless populism’.⁵ So, what differences are introduced by the accumulated gains of three decades of evolving audience and reception studies? What can we say, or ask, now that was not possible in the 1980s?

The current picture is decidedly muddy, we think. By and large, most academic audience research is conducted purely within and for the purposes of intellectual understanding – with the added frisson in some areas of the overlapping of personal, fan and academic engagements. There have of course been cases where academics from our broad field have dared to engage with cultural producers and policy-makers. There have been a few very big and significant projects. We think of, for instance, the ‘EU Kids Online’ (2006-9) and the enormous ‘Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies’ (2010-14) projects, both funded by the European Union. Two of the Editors of *Participations* took part in funded research (in 2006) for the British Board of Film Classification. At national levels also, there have been quite a number of projects focused around museums, theatres, music venues – most, in fact, focused on areas of traditional ‘high culture’.

Meanwhile, the main areas of consumer research, advertising and brand marketing – the most evident inheritors of the ‘administrative research’ label – carry on unconcerned and with only occasional regard for the very idea that there might be ‘critical’ questions to be asked. A good indicator of this is the significant edited collection, *How Advertising Works: the Role of Research* (Jones, 1998). There is not a single reference, anywhere in the volume, to Lazarsfeld’s distinction. Not a single qualm is even hinted at, over the role of academics in involving themselves in this kind of industry. The hesitations are ours, not theirs. That of course doesn’t make them any less important.

In this issue we publish a short essay by Sarah Price, summarising her experience of the challenges of trying to span between academic and commercial spheres, in her UK Collaborative Doctoral Award working with an arts company. She discusses, among other things, the different expectations of what a research report should look like, what it should reference, and how it should present its findings. In some respects this is very ‘local’ to a particular situation in the UK. But we also see potential links back to those wider debates. And we would like to encourage more reconsiderations of this perennial debate – but perhaps attempting to update the questions (in ways that the ICA did not quite manage).

So, what sorts of questions do we believe should be asked now (beyond of course just generally reviewing the ongoing relevance and applicability of Lazarsfeld’s original distinction)? Without in any sense trying to foreclose debate on these, we would nominate the following, at least:

1. To what extent, and in what ways, have the cultural studies and reception studies (and indeed fan studies) traditions fulfilled or moved away from the outline of the 'critical' position? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this?
2. 'Administrative research': is this as unified and unidirectional as was implied by the original approach – or indeed by the deepened understanding of its political dimensions which emerged from subsequent scholarship (we are thinking of the work of people such as Willard Rowland (1983), Christopher Simpson (1994), Garth Jowett et al. (1996) and Timothy Glander (2000))? Is 'policy' ('social problem-solving' and governmentalism-oriented) research affected in the same ways as commercial research? Are there important differences between the methods and concepts of consumer and arts marketing research – or are these now coming together in new ways, perhaps as a result of the influence of notions of the 'omnivore' (Peterson & Kern, 1986)?
3. What happens when 'critical' researchers do find themselves drawn into areas of public policy? How does this affect their research? To whom is such work oriented, and made relevant?
4. As we move beyond posing Lazarsfeld's distinction in terms of an opposition between quantitative (reductionist, individualist, reificatory) and qualitative (interpretive, listening, respectful of context) research, what exactly is it about 'administrative' research that raises political hackles? What, concretely, are the problems and limitations in actual pieces of research – and what might be learnt from them, that would enable better research?
5. Large claims are being made for both the potentials (near real-time capacity and close targeting) and the dangers (massive expansion of commercialism, as well as increased surveillance, through merging of data-types) of Big Data research. How does such research fit within or modify our understanding of 'critical' and 'administrative' research? How if at all should critical researchers seek to access and use such datasets (on the rare occasions these escape proprietary ownership)?

We invite contributions of all kinds to these, and other questions, around the 'critical vs administrative' distinction. Reports, reviews, critical analyses of specific pieces of research, think-pieces: short or long, all are in principle welcome. We are not at present thinking of these as combining to a Themed Section of the Journal. Rather, we hope to carry a continuing set of contributions to this theme, over time.

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Notes:

¹ Lazarsfeld's essay is available at this web address: http://aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Lazarsfeld_1941_admin_critical_communication.pdf (accessed 13 October 2015).

² Their Call for Papers asked:

- What are the normative foundations of administrative research?
- Can administrative research ethically inform information policy?
- How can policy research be made more democratic?
- What, if any, is the role of the moral imagination in policy research?
- Can empiricism/positivism engage ethical/moral values?
- How can scholarly policy researchers (of any kind) avoid being compromised by the dominant agents of influence?
- Should critical research have a greater presence in forums directed to administrative research?
- Can critical scholarship inform policy?
- Is critical scholarship utilized enough by policymakers?
- What is and what should be the relationship of social activism to scholarship?
- What current policy issues heighten the tension between administrative and critical research?

³ The other main backwards point of reference was a 1959 essay by Bernard Berelson, in which he had bemoaned what he saw as the waning of communication studies.

⁴ On this, see Barker (2004).

⁵ There was in this period (and still remains, to some extent) a worrying tendency to conflate the two concepts 'empirical' (the structured gathering of evidence) and 'empiricism' (the philosophical belief that all knowledge derives from experience).