

# The Chicago School of Sociology and Mass Communication Research: Rise, Rejection, Incorporation and Rediscovery

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## Introduction: Situating the Chicago School of Sociology

The Chicago School of Sociology is perhaps best known as a home-grown American attempt at understanding the relationship between individuals, communities and societies. In charting its importance for mass communication research, this chapter grapples with a seemingly paradoxical question: Why is it that the Chicago School is so frequently invoked as an ancestor for our field when its methodological approaches and substantive concerns have so little in common with most of what counts as mass communication research today?

The chapter argues that while the Chicago School has subtly but profoundly shaped and influenced the direction of scholarship on mass media, the history of its engagement with mass communication researchers is also a history of missed connections and opportunities. On the basis of these complexities, at least two different stories can be told in tracing the legacies of the Chicago School on work in media studies. One is a tale of triumph: The Chicago School has had a significant impact on scholarship in the field, in its normative assessment of the media's role in society and its empirical work in understanding it. Another is a tale of loss and marginalization, witnessed by the decline of the socially engaged and often qualitative approach of the school,

and its diminishing presence within the collective conscience of the discipline today. Both of these stories are true, and witness to the difficulty of making totalizing claims about history. Either way, it is the case that the Chicago School arose out of a particular moment, with its companion preoccupations and anxieties, but that its contributions subsequently fell to the wayside in the face of profound epistemological shifts. These conditions notwithstanding, the Chicago School gave voice to the idea that media and communication have a central role to play in shaping individual and collective lives, and in cementing identities and communities. This idea has helped to justify and solidify the notion that we cannot understand society without understanding how we communicate with each other and how the media shape our social bonds and social worlds.

The chapter first examines the interests of the Chicago School and its intersections with the study of mass communication, and then looks at how mass communication scholarship has since evolved in ways that have both drawn on and departed from the Chicago School. In particular, the chapter examines different strategies of the field, describing these in terms of incorporation, rejection and rediscovery. First, it touches on the well-known reasons for the *rejection* of the methods, insights and ontology of the school among the communication scholars who institutionalized the discipline. Secondly, it examines in detail the little-discussed *incorporation* of the Chicago School into the work on propaganda and public communications during and following World War II. Thirdly and finally, it briefly discusses the *rediscovery* of the work by several prominent critical and cultural studies scholars, demonstrating how it has sustained its influence in the subfield of journalism studies.

These strategies of rejection, incorporation, and rediscovery have been shaped by a variety of factors, including the influence of political, social and economic circumstances, the

vagaries of institutional support or indifference, and the initiatives of particular individuals. The chapter ultimately argues that the Chicago School, despite its limited influence on the field today, has nevertheless been claimed as an ancestor and an inspiration. In fields of scientific inquiry characterized by ever-increasing specialization and fragmentation, the fate of the Chicago School therefore has much to tell us about disciplinary politics and development.

The chapter assumes that any historical account is essentially a metanarrative which reveals as much about the story-teller as it does about the story. The tales we tell about ourselves as scholars dramatize our disciplinary anxieties and self-understandings; by including some traditions, individuals and theoretical and methodological approaches and excluding others they make heroes and villains out of scholars and schools as a way of designing an institutionally and normatively desirable image of a discipline (e.g. Park & Pooley, 2006, see also Dervin, Grossberg, O'Keefe, & Wartella, 1989). As James Carey put it in his own account of the Chicago School, the history of mass communication research is a

[S]elf-conscious creation (and now an endless recreation) that sifts, sorts, and rearranges the accumulated literary debris into a coherent narrative. The narrative that emerges serves ultimately a variety of purposes: principally to focus, justify and legitimize a twentieth-century invention, the mass media, and to give direction and intellectual status to professional teaching and research concerning these same institutions. But it is hardly an innocent history, for it was invented with a political purpose: an attempt to cast loyalties, resolve disputes, guide public policy, confuse opposition, and legitimize institutions (Carey, 1997, p. 15).

Disciplinary histories play a central role in the maintenance and production of

knowledge: They both hail disciples and enforce disciplinarity. More than anything, disciplinary histories provide the leverage for particular understandings of rationality, or of what we understand as valid approaches to scholarly work (cf. Aronowitz, 1988, p. 8). Lyn Lofland (1983) insightfully remarked:

‘ . . . the ‘Chicago School’ is a kind of projective device; descriptions of it seem to reveal as much about those doing the describing as about the phenomenon itself ’’ (p. 491, cited in Pooley, 2007, p. 471).

For those who have embraced the Chicago School as central to the myth of disciplinary origins, such an understanding has enabled the grounding of a cultural studies approach to mass communication in the American experience (e.g. Pauly, 1997).

### The history of the Chicago School

The University of Chicago, founded in 1892, prided itself on belonging to a new breed of American universities, modeled on the German tradition of excellence in higher education that emphasized research and graduate training (cf. Rogers, 1994, p. 38; Bulmer, 1984, pp. 14-15). What is commonly described as the “Chicago School” refers to scholars representing a number of disciplines, most prominently sociology and philosophy, who left a lasting imprint on the social sciences and humanities in highlighting the centrality of interaction and communication – between people and through mass media. Here, I will provide a brief and necessarily partial history of the Chicago School with particular attention to its roots in urban sociology, analyzing how this context defined its engagement with media and communication. My story pays particular attention to Robert Ezra Park, the figure most commonly associated with the Chicago

School among communication scholars, as someone who more than anyone demonstrated the relationship between the philosophy of pragmatism, and the fascination with social interaction, mass media and communication.

### *The rise of the Chicago School*

The Chicago School of Sociology was founded in 1892 by Albion Small. Small has consistently been described as a discipline-builder and administrator rather than a necessarily a strikingly original thinker in his own right (e.g. Smith, 1988, Bulmer, 1984). He not only established Chicago as the most important center for sociological study in the United States, but also founded the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1895, edited the journal until his retirement in 1925 and was a prolific contributor to its pages (Smith, 1988, p. 76).

From the beginning, Small and his colleagues envisioned sociology as a social science engaged with tangible problems of urban life, and determined to make a difference (cf. Bulmer, 1984, p. 23). As the University of Chicago emerged as a major centre for scholarship in the emerging discipline of sociology, it began to attract core scholars who have since been associated with the Chicago School. Known as the birthplace of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, the Chicago School has been seen as the dominant force in shaping the institutionalization of sociology, particularly in the period from 1915-1930 (cf. Bulmer, 1984), even if at its outset it “served as something of a refuge of outcasts, radicals and misfits who wanted to ask critical questions about the nature of modern society” (Peters and Simonson, 2004, p. 16)

The key figures usually associated with the school include Robert Ezra Park, W. I. Thomas, Charles Burgess, and George Herbert Mead, but other scholars who moved through or influenced those working at the school are frequently linked to it. Among these were Charles Horton Cooley, who taught George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, who taught Robert Park and spent a number of years at the University of Chicago, though outside the sociology department and associated more closely with the fields of education, psychology and philosophy (e.g. Rogers, 1994, pp. 150-163).

As the chapter later discusses in more detail, the school also encompassed prominent scholars whose work has strongly influenced the course of research on mass communication, but who have not been associated with either a pragmatist philosophy or symbolic interactionism. Sociology was a new kid on the scientific block when the Chicago School began the work for which it is known today. As vividly described by Matthews (1977):

In 1913, the growing academic field of sociology was a partly institutionalized alliance of three separate activities: formal speculation about the nature of society, Christian philanthropy and exhortation, and descriptive studies designed to display the magnitude of social problems to an educated and morally homogenous citizenry (pp. 1-2)

This new field was viewed with suspicion and disdain by more established disciplines (cf. Smith, 1988) and while the Chicago School was influenced by these established sociological activities it also did much to cement the recognition of sociology as a legitimate and rigorous discipline. Albion Small made no small contribution in this regard. He was a productive scholar who set out to introduce the work of German scholars such as Knies and Schäffle to American audiences (see Hardt's chapter in this volume) and worked conscientiously to define the field of

sociology in organic and interactionist terms representative of the Chicago School. As he wrote in a 1912 piece:

We now say that human experience is chiefly an affair of associatings between persons, in their copings with the physical and psychical conditions to which they are subject. That is, presupposing the physical factors, and also the consciousness of factors into which personality may be resolved (both of which groups of factors are in the first instance problems not of general sociology at all but of other disciplines), "experience," which presents the problems of sociology, is the phenomena of the lives of persons in the course of developing and using their endowment as sentient beings. Experience then is never strictly solipsistic. It is always social. (Small, 1912, p. 209)

Small's discussion here is by no means unique, but rather characteristic of the strain of thought associated with the Chicago School. It is given expression in the work of Charles Horton Cooley, often credited as the father of symbolic interactionism. Cooley spent his entire career at the University of Michigan but taught George Herbert Mead, and was a student of John Dewey (Czitrom, 1980, pp. 91-92). Introducing the idea of the "looking-glass self", Cooley suggested that the "self" can only come into being through interaction and communication with others (e.g. Czitrom, 1980, p. 98).

Nevertheless, in the work of Small and other Chicago scholars, this emerging preoccupation with social interaction as the foundation of self and community was tailored to the circumstances of its conception: The Chicago School was born in a unique, complex and compelling environment; that of a city home to a bewildering variety of ethnic and national diversities. Between 1840 and 1890, the city's population soared from 4,500 to over a million (Bulmer 1984, p. 13), and by 1900, it was estimated that half of its 1.7 million inhabitants were

foreign-born, with a particularly significant influx of Europeans, compelled to cross the Atlantic by poverty, unemployment and war in their home countries. Such a diverse and rapidly growing population gave rise to anxiety, exhilaration and – in the case of the Chicago School – inspiration. Lincoln Steffens famously described Chicago as “first in violence, deepest in dirt, loud, lawless, unlovely, ill-smelling, new; an overgrown gawk of a village; a teeming tough among cities” (cited in Bulmer, 19842, p. xvi). To the Chicago sociologists, the city became, in the words of a key figure, Robert Ezra Park, a “social laboratory” for scholars interested in diversity.

Park has been seen by many observers as the anchor of the Chicago School of Sociology throughout its glory years (e.g. Pooley, 2006, 64-66). His view of the city as his laboratory, and his interest in the role of media within it, were hugely influential to his colleagues and students, but also representative of the world view underpinning the Chicago School as a whole. Before arriving at Chicago in 1913, not long before his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday (Smith, 1988, p. 112), Park had worked as a newspaper reporter throughout the country and as a publicist for African-American leader Booker T. Washington, among an eclectic variety of professions. In an autobiographical note, he traced his interest in sociology to his reading of Goethe’s *Faust*: “Faust was tired of books and wanted to see the world – the world of men” (Park, 1950, p. v). His interest in newspapers was premised on “the discovery that a reporter who had the facts was a more effective reformer than an editorial writer who had merely thundered from his pulpit, no matter how eloquently” (Park, 1950, p. vi). To Park (1950, p. vii), the sociologist was a “super-reporter” who could improve conditions by understanding and communicating the actual lived realities of social life. As Lindner (1996) put it, much of Park’s work prior to his entry into sociology “seem to act like the conveying of systematic knowledge for the purpose of acquiring knowledge from



experience” (Lindner, 1996, p. 37). These reflections revealed Park’s positivist, progressive and pragmatist orientation, expressing the conviction of practice as the foundation of human knowledge; of the intimate relationship between knowing and doing (e.g. Smith, 1988, p. 60).

In an early essay on the city, which set out an ambitious research program that occupied him and his students for the next generation, Park opened with this spirited mission statement:

The city, from the point of view of this paper, is something more than a congerie of individual men and of social conveniences....something more...than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices. The city is, rather, a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitude and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who comprise it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature.”

(Park, 1916, p. 577)

Park, Small and other Chicago sociologists were heavily inspired by organic conceptions of sociology, such as those evident in the work of Herbert Spencer and Georg Simmel, and took much inspiration from ecology. In Park’s case, such a view also chimed with his romantic self-understanding, derived from his upbringing in the rural Midwest: Despite long years as a newspaper reporter during which he “covered more ground, tramping around in cities in different parts of the world, than any other living man,” he proclaimed his love of “the common things, earth, air – the song of the robin and the great herds of common people, simple and natural as cows” (cited in Matthews, 1977, p. 11) Park valorized “the natural” and his research practice reflected this.

At the heart of the Chicago sociologists' preoccupations, however, was a distinctly normative and often moralistic project which was aimed not merely at understanding and describing difference but also at taking an active role in ensuring social cohesion and the upholding of moral values. Such a direct engagement was not out of place in the Progressive Era, characterized by a desire for social reform and the belief in the ability of science to deliver it. The sociologists' engagement with social problems was based on the view that the social science researcher can both objectively observe and describe events and phenomena through the use of scientific methods (cf. Park, 1922, p. 15) and actively participate in the improvement of society. Key members of the Chicago School like Albion Small, Robert Park, and Ernest Burgess participated in local civic organizations and charities designed to help the underprivileged, and work in the department was closely tied to Jane Addams' Hull House, a tenement house for European immigrants which drew on sociological ideas to advance social cohesion (cf. Peters and Simonson, 2004, p. 25). Chicago scholars practiced the sociology of the underdog, the misfits and the marginalized -- what Park (1928) called the "marginal man." It took from progressives and investigative reporters like Upton Sinclair an interest in uncovering the life of seemingly marginalized groups in the city -- youth gangs, marijuana users, hoboes, and taxi dancers -- who nevertheless displayed their own complex forms of social organization, whether (cf. Gallaher 1995).

Perhaps the most famous product of the Chicago School was Thomas and Znaniecki's epic account of the experience of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, published between 1918 and 1920. One of five volumes looked at the role of popular Polish papers on the basis of the assumption that "through the paper the individual as well as the community enters into relation with the external world" (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958, p. 150). The centrality of

newspapers was representative of the sense of communication as the cement of social life. As Park and Burgess wrote in the *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, which became a foundational text in the discipline, referred to by students as the *Green Bible*:

History has been variously conceived in terms of great events, epoch making personalities, social movements, and cultural changes. From the point of view of sociology social evolution might profitably be studied in its relation to the development and perfection of the means and technique of communication. (Park and Burgess, 2004, p. 34)

To Park, Burgess and their colleagues at Chicago, questions about how to improve newspapers and other media were central to this process, as they went about studying how the ethnic groups who shared Chicago sought to make sense of and survive there.

Park was interested in questions of communication throughout his career. Rogers (1994) suggested that he chose sociology because “the scholarly study of communication was not available at universities” (p. 176). However, it could also be argued that Park viewed media and communication as integral to the functioning of society viewed in organic terms, but as necessarily part of a larger set of questions around cultural and social processes (e.g. Park, 1938).

One well-known example illustrates how Park’s views of the media were tied to issues of social integration: Before joining the University of Chicago, between 1889 and 1992, Park famously collaborated with the journalist Franklin Ford and John Dewey on a much-discussed (but ultimately failed) experiment to launch an experimental newspaper, *Thought News* (e.g. Carey, 1989; Peters 1989). The idea behind *Thought News* was that it would be a monthly, subscription-based newspaper based on reporting the findings of sociological research for the betterment of society – or a newspaper reporting on “thought” (Pinter, 2003):

[It] shall treat questions of science, letters, state, school and church as parts of the one moving life of man and hence of common interest, and not relegate them to departments of merely technical interest; which shall report new investigations and discoveries in their net outcome instead of in their overloaded gross bulk; which shall note new contributions to thought, whether by book or magazine, from the standpoint of the news in them, and not from that of patron or censor (cited in Czitrom, 1986, p. 107).

This mission statement, co-written by Ford and Dewey (Czitrom, 1986, p. 107), revealed the holistic and organic view of communication, and the authors' implicit critique of shortfalls in conventional news reporting. *Thought News*' conception was based on the founders' dissatisfaction with the ability of existing newspapers to create community bonds in the rapidly growing urban environments of their time. To those associated with the pragmatist tradition, there was a strong belief in conveying not merely the "facts" but also the "meaning about the facts" (e.g. Dewey, 1954, p. 3) – based on the premise that truthful and contextualized information could cure social ills by allowing intelligent individuals to make sense of the world around them. As Peters (1997) compellingly put it, *Thought News* was grounded in the belief that "what society lacks (a sense of community or spiritual unity) new forms of communication will supply. They thought the losses in face-to-face communication in the great society could be compensated by new mechanisms of distance communication" (p. 10).

The project failed – it proved to be simply too expensive and administrative complex to be a commercially viable proposition. But it profoundly shaped the thought of John Dewey and Robert Ezra Park. Dewey, another figure closely linked to the Chicago School, was already well known for his ideas around the need for the press to play an active role in the creation of community life – ideas which were resonant with contemporary European thinkers (e.g. Peters,

1989). These ideas reflected anxieties around the consequences of urbanization and, in Tönnies' terminology, the consequent victory of the *Gesellschaft* over the *Gemeinschaft*, or of impersonal, distant contractual relations over closely knit community bonds based on sociality.

Dewey's concerns for the health of public life later gave rise to his debate with Walter Lippmann over a perceived crisis of public communication and citizenship.<sup>1</sup> In his book *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey, 1954); first published in 1927, Dewey once again expressed his faith in the ability of information to create communal ties. "Unless local communal life can be restored, the public cannot adequately resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself" (p. 216), Dewey wrote in his diagnosis of the problems. He argued for the primacy of face-to-face communication because to him, "the winged words of conversation in immediate intercourse have a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech... But it and its results are but tools after all" (p. 218). He nevertheless emphasized the importance of studying the media of mass communications with an effort to improve them because of their importance in complex and urbanized mass societies.

Park proceeded with this project. To him, the *Thought News* incident provided "much of the fundamental theoretical framework through which he came to observe and interpret the flux of events" (Matthews, 1977, p. 23). The experiment spurred him on in the pursuit of his interest in public life and social organization, and after the failure of the *Thought News* project he went to Germany to study with some of the most prominent sociological thinkers of the era, including Georg Simmel (Park, 1972, p. 3).

His doctoral thesis, *The Crowd and the Public* (1977) -- originally titled *Masse und Publikum* -- was submitted in 1904 to the University of Heidelberg and written under the supervision of Wilhelm Windelband. It was a theoretical treatise which sought to understand the

formation of “The General Will.” Through it, Park distinguished between the crowd and the public as forms of collectivities. To Park, the public is driven by rationality and reason, the crowd by emotion and impulse (p. 80). He thus argued that only “in the crowd does anarchy in its purest form exist. As members of a public, people are at least controlled by the norms of logic” (p. 81). Park’s discussion was influenced by prevailing German social thought, but also contributed to an understanding of social organization in the context of the formation of public opinion. He returned to these themes in a more concrete form towards the end of his career, when, in an essay on “News and the power of the press,” he highlighted the centrality of shared meaning to the creation of public opinion. Drawing on the language of pragmatism, he wrote that “there can be no public opinion, except where there is some fundamental agreement and understanding as to what events, as they happen, are likely to mean, and events have meaning only as one knows what to do about them” (Park, 1941, p. 1).

After taking up his appointment at the University of Chicago in 1915, Park wrote a series of articles on race relations and urban sociology, but in all of this work, communication was central. In setting out his research agenda for work on the city (Park 1916), he singled out the importance of advertising and publicity as forms of social control that could secure efficiency and good government, anticipating the research agendas which were later to become so central to mass communication scholars. His major work on the newspaper, *The Immigrant Press and its Control* (Park, 1922) advanced, on the basis of empirical research into the widely varied immigrant newspapers in Chicago, the thesis that the reading of papers in their native languages allowed new arrivals to adjust to life in the US and therefore ultimately operates as a means of integration. Park (1922) found evidence to support editors’ claims that “their press is not merely

a medium for the communication of news, thus initiating the immigrant into American environment, but is likewise a means of translating and transmitting to him American ways and American ideals” (Park, 1922).

In a later essay on the “Natural History of the Newspaper”, Park (1923) spelled out his vision of the newspaper’s role in community creation:

The motive, conscious or unconscious, of the writers and of the press in all this is to reproduce, as far as possible, in the city the conditions of life in the village. In the village everyone knew everyone else. Everyone called everyone by his first name. The village was democratic. We are a nation of villagers. Our institutions are fundamentally village institutions. In the village, gossip and public opinion were the main sources of social control. (p. 277)

Like other Chicago scholars, Park’s fascination with urban life was married with a deep-seated nostalgia for small-scale, pre-urban rural communities. To Park and Dewey in particular, the celebration of such communities -- where knowledge was transparent, and cultural meanings shared – informed attempts at making sense of rapid social change.

### *The Chicago School, mass communication research and disciplinary narratives*

Park’s concern with the media’s role in structuring social relations was shared by other Chicago scholars and informed their participation in the famous Payne Fund studies, which sought to assess the effects of motion pictures on young people, at a time of great concern about the vulnerability of audiences and the alarming potential for moral corruption represented by this emerging medium, which began to attract significant audiences among the young during the 1920s. It was consistent with the group’s interest in using “social science as a weapon” (Jowett,

Jarvie & Fuller, 1996) in outlining and problematizing the central role of motion pictures in American society. The Payne Fund Studies involved Chicago scholars such as Herbert Blumer, Philip Hauser, and L. L. Thurstone. The studies resulted in ten books on the basis of their findings, based on surveying thousands of children and youth during the 1929-1932 period of the study (Rogers, 1994, p. 191). Herbert Blumer's contribution was particularly influential in highlighting the perceived dangers of movies. As Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller (1996) pointed out, "Blumer felt that since Hollywood films were produced outside the circle of the child's moral guardians (home, school, church)...they held far more potential for bad influence than for good" (p. 79). More than anything, the Payne Fund initiative, in drawing on scholars from a variety of social scientific backgrounds signalled an emerging methodological and epistemological tension between those, like the Chicago School, who were committed to qualitative modes of inquiry and drew on interviews and life histories and others, most notably psychologists like Thurstone and Stoddard, who drew on statistical data collection (Jowett, Jarvie and Fuller, 1996). To Rogers (1994), the Payne Fund research, though heavily involving Chicago scholars known for their qualitative research and symbolic interactionist perspectives, heralded a new age of media effects research based on a more rigorous conception of the social sciences.

However, for the Chicago sociologists, mass media were just part of a complex set of social institutions that shaped human interactions. As Katz and Pooley (2008) put it: "Admittedly scattered, the Chicago School's reflections on communication were fundamental to its broader reflections on social order" (p. 768).

Indeed, the relatively broad interests and approaches of the Chicago School are often neglected in accounts focused on identifying it as the ancestral home of symbolic interactionism and ethnographic methodology (e.g. Buxton 2008, Platt, 1995). Here, disciplinary traditions of



story-telling have left their imprint on our myths of origins: The diversity of the Chicago School's interests and approaches has often been underplayed because of a neglect of the work of scholars like Burgess, Ogburn, Thurstone and Stouffer, as well as the more quantitative strains in the work of key figures like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess. As Martin Bulmer (1984) writes, among quantitative scholars there has been:

[L]ess desire to examine the roots of the subject and a marked tendency to dismiss the relevance of the history of such methods for present practice. The antihistorical orientation of quantitative methodologies, coupled with the fragmentation of the history of methodology between different disciplines, results in major lacunae (p. xv)

Among mass communication scholars, by contrast, much of the impetus in creating disciplinary histories, genealogies and myths of origin has come from scholars representing the quantitative tradition. Steve Chaffee and Everett Rogers were central to this disciplinary story-telling, basing their accounts largely on biographical approaches, celebrating the work of key individuals who cemented communication as an empirical, quantitative social science. At the same time, such accounts have been inclusive in embracing the Chicago School of Sociology as an influence on the trajectory of the field (e.g. Chaffee, 1997; Rogers, 1996; Rogers & Chaffee, 1994).

Nevertheless, the Chicago School's "multi-method" approach, combining ethnographic and life history methods with large-scale quantitatively oriented ecological mapping projects to achieve a holistic picture of complex social relations in the city is gaining increasing recognition (E.g. Buxton, 2008; Rogers, 1994, p. 182). In their celebration of the community, and their study of the citizens and city institutions that made them, Chicago school sociologists' interests were in the macro-level questions of social organization or *disorganization*. They studied the nitty-gritty

textures of urban life, from the personal letters of Polish peasants to the life histories of taxi dancers, but their ultimate aim was to understand what makes society work. In this focus on larger questions of social cohesion, conflict and control, they were well equipped for a Progressive era of reform-minded social science but their tools were of much less use in tapping into emerging agendas of propaganda and psychological warfare.

## Rejection

The rise of a positivist, empiricist approach to the study of mass communication and other social sciences has been widely documented among historians. In the field of sociology, the empirically rigorous, quantitative and more narrowly focused research projects of the Columbia School of Sociology won a victory over the socially conscious, often qualitative and normatively inflected approaches of Chicago. As Gusfield (1995) memorably put it, by the postwar years of the late 1940s and early 1950s, “Chicago was an aging giant, only beginning to be conscious that the eastern barbarians had surmounted the gates of their once impregnable midwestern fortress” (p. 3).

This transformation was driven by a range of factors, some of which have been traced by what Pooley (2006) refers to as the “new historians” of mass communication research, among them Timothy Glander (2000) and Christopher Simpson (1994). Simpson and Glander make similar arguments: In the political climate of the Cold War, the economics of research were increasingly shaped by the largesse of foundations and government agencies with distinctively ideological agendas. As Simpson (1994) argued, the psychological warfare effort of the American government during the Second World War and beyond shaped the communication

research community and determined "which of the competing scientific paradigms of communication would be funded, elaborated, and encouraged to prosper" (p. 3).

After the end of World War II, according to these accounts, such efforts gradually solidified into funded research projects aiming at perfecting propaganda techniques to win the Cold War (cf. Pooley, 2006, p. 48). Simpson (1994) suggested that:

At least half of all the important centers of US communication research depended for their survival on a handful of national security agencies. Their reliance on psychological warfare money was so extensive as to suggest that the crystallization of mass communication studies into a distinct scholar field might not have come about during the 1950s without substantial military CIA and US Information Agency intervention. (p. 53).

While the accounts of Simpson and other "new historians" have been criticized for their often conspiratorial and, particularly in the case of Simpson, openly politically inflected tones (cf. Pooley 2006), they nevertheless provide clear evidence that the political economy of mass communication research had shifted towards encouraging what Lazarsfeld (1941) referred to as "administrative research", designed to solve particular practical problems in the aid of interested funders. This meant that research on mass communication irreversibly diverged from the normative theorizing of the German scholars who first carved out a path for researching media (cf. Hardt in this volume), as well as from the socially engaged and methodologically eclectic social science of the Chicago School. Katz and Pooley (2008, p. 768), perhaps somewhat harshly, observed about the emerging dominant field of research on public opinion, that: "The first and most obvious distinguishing trait was its intellectual fixation on method and technique to the effective exclusion of any overriding substantive concerns." Nevertheless, the Chicago School had itself contributed to the "scientization" of the field of sociology and mass

communication research more specifically, and had trained many of the scholars who became defining proponents of the new paradigm (Rogers, 1994, pp. 192-193).

Closely related to and intertwined with this political economic explanation, another version of the eclipse of the Chicago School relates to the rise of communication research as a distinctive and institutionalized discipline. This development was in large part driven by the energetic institutionalising efforts of Wilbur Schramm. Schramm, who started his career as a journalist and writer, began his discipline-building work at the University of Iowa where, in addition to starting the now –legendary creative writing program, he became the Chair of the Journalism Department, founded the first PhD program in communication in 1943, and opened a research center in the area (Rogers, 2004, p. 8). Subsequently, he moved on from Iowa but continued his efforts at opening research-oriented communication programs within already-existing journalism schools at prominent universities. First, he started the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois in 1947, then moved on to Stanford University in 1955, where he took charge of the Institute for Communication Research (cf. Rogers & Chaffee, 1994, p. 5). By the 1960s, through the efforts of Schramm and emerging colleagues in the burgeoning field, communication studies had been thoroughly institutionalised as a discipline in its own right, and young scholars interested in mass media (Rogers, 2004, p. 8) now routinely pursued doctorates in communication rather than sociology or other disciplines for which media were a secondary interest.

Incorporation<sup>ii</sup>

Where the received narrative of mass communication research thus tells the tale of an increasing dominance of the Columbia Bureau of Social Research over the Chicago School in the post-World War II era in the discipline of sociology, and a growing institutionalization of communication studies in its own right, this is not the only way to describe the shifting power relations and preoccupations of scholars interested in communication.

A little known episode demonstrates that the preoccupations of the some of the remaining figures of the Chicago School of Sociology – including Harold Lasswell, Bernard Berelson, Herbert Blumer, Morris Janowitz, Samuel Stouffer, and Louis Wirth) jumped on board the propaganda ship, following prevailing trends in the field, and occasioned by the ever-shifting political economy of the academy. Starting in 1942, the University of Chicago became home to the first degree-granting program in communication inspired by these concerns. The foundation of the program was spurred on by the interest in wartime propaganda and spearheaded by a figure who is little known to most communication scholars but central to this story: Douglas Waples, a professor in Chicago's Graduate Library School. In a 1979 obituary, Bernard Berelson accredited Waples with "the birth of the academic field of mass communications" (Berelson, 1979, p. 1). From the moment he arrived at Chicago in 1928, Waples launched an ambitious program of mass communication research, mostly focused on reading studies, but also branching out into radio and film. Waples' expertise in areas relevant to the propaganda effort earned him the job of consultant to the Office of War Information during World War II (cf. Richardson, 1982, pp. 52-54). Under the auspices of this office, Waples participated in the Rockefeller Foundation seminars, and worked alongside other key figures in the field, including Harold Lasswell and Wilbur Schramm. Waples' commitment to the propaganda efforts of the U.S. government before, during and after World War II existed alongside his belief in the importance

of democratic media. His career embodied the dynamic that gave birth to the field of mass communication research. As Berelson put it, Waples was a “man of peace who spent years of his life in a military uniform” (Berelson, 1979, p. 2).

In late 1941, Waples submitted to the University of Chicago’s Chancellor, Robert Maynard Hutchins, a proposal for a permanent communication research institute -- an institute tied to government propaganda and public relations activities, yet one which could span a range of research areas and disciplines and would be focused on the “clarification of values imputed to typical communications for designated social groups“ (Waples, 1941). While Waples' proposal for a full-fledged communication institute failed to gain purchase, Hutchins approved a *committee* on communications and public opinion. The committee was formed immediately for the purpose of providing training and research in the field, and was probably the first degree-granting unit in the field of communication.

Beginning in the summer of 1942, the University of Chicago offered courses through the Committee on Public Opinion and Communication to "qualify for professional service a student holding an approved Master's degree in political science, sociology, economics, or other social science" (University of Chicago, 1942, p. 2).

The activities of the committee were geared toward the war effort in an attempt to address the government's needs for communication during "different phases of national emergency." (Waples, 1941). However, the committee's schedule of instruction reflected an interest in defining communication research as broadly as possible. The courses ranged from the study of semantics and rhetoric, to journalism, law political theory, urban studies, and the statistical techniques that constituted the know-how of social science research methods. The

committee drew on the courses of scholars who were famous for their methodological knowledge and became closely involved in the World War II propaganda effort, including Herbert Blumer, Louis Wirth, L. L. Thurstone, and Samuel Stouffer.

All courses could be reconciled with the patriotic impulse to educate communication administrators and propagandists. The program of instruction was "intended to train men and women for professional activities in the field, and especially for service with federal and other agencies now undertaking to unite public opinion in full support of the war" (Communications and Public Opinion, 1942, p. 1). The committee, designed as a temporary effort, appears to have ended its work at the close of World War II. Waples, however, articulated a vision for a future for the committee which demanded a more sustained commitment to communication research on the university's part. He suggested that the services of a community of communication scholars would be most useful "if and when the end of hostilities permits formulation of more democratic policies for the administration of press, radio, and film than the monopolistic corporations have thus far been forced to accept" (Waples, 1941, p. 2). Waples thus foresaw a future for communication study closely aligned to questions of democratic media operation, but grounded in the problems of propaganda and persuasion that were so fundamental to the field as he saw it.

Douglas Waples remained true to his word, and immediately after the end of the war, in September 1945, he wrote Hutchins, suggesting that he would "like to talk over the chance of cross-fertilization between your Freedom of the Press Commission and the sort of research set-up in the public communications and public-opinion field when the war broke it up" (Waples, 1945). Waples recast the activities of the terminated committee in terms of "public communications and public-opinion," downplaying the close link between the committee and the

propaganda work of World War II, and setting the scene for a more lasting inquiry into questions of media and mass persuasion.

### The Committee on Communication, 1947-1960

Though the membership of the second communication committee overlapped with the first, its ambitions and the activities were entirely different. The Committee on Communication was formed in late 1947, with a mission was to study problems of mass communication in modern society from an academic and critical perspective, and a special emphasis on public communication and international communication. Starting in 1948, the committee offered a two-year master's program through the Division of Social Science, but also initiated a range of research and publishing projects.

The committee attracted a range of individuals who would become prominent in the field. Among those who started their careers in the committee were Elihu Katz, whose first faculty position was at Chicago, and Morris Janowitz, who was finishing his Ph.D., teaching on the committee and conducting research here. Michael Gurevitch and Herbert Gans gained their MAs from the committee, which was run by scholars including Bernard Berelson, David Riesman, Douglas Waples, and Kenneth Adler. It represented one of the first institutionalized programs focused on mass communication research, and its approach to the study of media was distinctive. In its pursuit of interdisciplinarity, the committee cast its net as widely as possible. It drew on methods ranging from ethnography and textual analysis to survey research and content analysis.

The Chicago scholars who were interested in communication research concentrated their efforts on understanding the place of media in democratic societies. In 1948, committee member and sociologist Louis Wirth wrote, in tones reminiscent of the Chicago School, that in "mass communications we have unlocked a new social force of as yet incalculable magnitude" which "has the power to build loyalties, to undermine them, and thus by furthering or hindering consensus to affect all other sources of power" (cited in Hardt, 1992, p. 81). As a logical



consequence of the committee's antecedents, its emphasis was on long-term research programs to understand the relationship between mass media, power and social life -- a set of interests whose roots could be traced to both the Chicago sociologists and to the wartime propaganda research tradition. At the same time, the committee remained firmly grounded in the approaches that had shaped the wartime research. The committee continued to work on topics of propaganda and mass persuasion in the context of creating a consensus around government policies. For example, Bernard Berelson was hired by the Graduate Library School in 1946 on the promise of conducting research on "communications and public opinion on the [atomic] bomb and related issues" (Richardson, 1982, pp. 52-54). The committee received considerable funding from the State Department and the Department of the Army "to do research in intelligence and psychological warfare matters (Janowitz, 1949; see also Glander, 2000, p. 164). Although the committee was in most respects a product of its times, it also enabled experimentation and innovation in the methods and problems of research. The committee flourished at a time that has been characterized by other historians of mass communication research as the heyday of the quantitative social science paradigm (e.g. Hardt, 1992, p. 86). This approach was not, however, shared by the scholars of the committee on communication. For instance, David Riesman, the author of works such as influential books as *The Lonely Crowd*, and one of the first scholars to combine interests in popular culture and psychology, was a key figure on the committee, both as a teacher and as an administrator. He taught the required course on popular culture, and is also remembered by students in the program as a mentor for qualitative research projects. However, most students have pointed to Bernard Berelson as the anchor of the committee, and it was he who was responsible for what was perhaps the most lasting contribution of the Committee on Communication: Berelson and Janowitz co-edited the committee's the reader *Public Opinion and Communication* (1950), which became highly influential in defining an emerging field. The majority of this reader consists of work by University of Chicago communication and Columbia Bureau of Social Research scholars, hinting at the links between the two schools, as well as their prominence in the new-born field. The editors' interest in mass communication research, we

learn, was based on "conditions of modern life" such as secularization, industrialization, urbanization, and democratization (Berelson & Janowitz, 1950, p. ix); research questions akin to those asked by Chicago School sociologists (cf. Hardt, 1992, p. 94). As Hardt (1992) pointed out, the reader:

represents an attempt to create intellectual conditions for dealing with public opinion and communication with its bias toward the need to understand theoretical developments, its inclusion of a variety of cultural or historical considerations, and its appreciation of communication not just as a process, but as a necessary condition for the existence and survival of a democratic society. (pp. 94-95)

The central preoccupation with the media's role in democracy was representative of the broadening of interest from the first committee to the second. As the course bulletin for the Committee on Communication proclaimed:

in all its phases communication exerts a crucial effect upon public and private information and insight, upon the capacity for rational decision and action, upon public taste and aesthetic standards, upon moral judgment, upon group loyalty and group disintegration, upon personality development, upon initiation of and adaptation to social change. (University of Chicago, 1950, p. 19)

These diverse interests, which reflected a growing desire to situate communication in its social context, are also evident in another major contribution of the committee: The journal *Studies in Public Communication*, the first volume of which came out in 1957. The journal was founded to publish Committee on Communication seminar papers by faculty and promising graduate students. It offered itself as a publication for cutting-edge research. It was in this journal that Elihu Katz first introduced the "uses and gratifications" paradigm as a way of making sense of the relationship between mass media and popular culture (Katz, 1959). As one of the first journals to have the word "communication" in its title, *Studies in Public Communication*

represented a much-needed outlet for scholars in the field. It remained inclusive in its interdisciplinary and multi-methodological approach. The preface to the third volume introduces the journal as presenting “diverse approaches, both social scientific and humanistic, to the study of the media of public communication... Among its concerns are studies of popular culture and the mass media, the social structures and the sociological and psychological processes governing media impact, and the political and economic framework within which the media function” (Studies in Public Communication 3, p. i). More than anything, the committee reflected the dynamism and the relative lack of definition of the young field.

At the same time, the University of Chicago School of Sociology continued its investigation in matters of communication albeit in a broader context: In the post-World War II era, what Gary Alan Fine (1995) and others have characterized as the “Second Chicago School” gave rise to the symbolic interactionist tradition, often associated with figures such as Everett Hughes, Erving Goffman, Herbert Blumer and Louis Wirth. Some of these scholars, whilst not necessarily studying mass communication in their own right, continue to be widely read in the discipline. For example, Herbert Blumer’s (1948) essay critiquing the construction of public opinion through polling methods remains a standard reference among political communication scholars today. He called attention to the problems of “sampling with its implicit imagery and logic in the study of a matter which, like the process of public opinion, functions as a moving organization of interconnected parts” (Blumer, 1948, p. 45), recalling the organic conceptions of society underpinning the philosophy of symbolic interactionism. The lasting engagement with Blumer’s critique witnesses a forceful intellectual continuity between the interests of the Chicago School and the preoccupations of those who take a critical approach to conditions of mass democracy. The “rediscovery” of the Chicago School among mass communication scholars has

been driven by this continuity and reflect the lasting importance of the ideas that were first articulated around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Rediscovery

Indeed, the Chicago School is often central to disciplinary histories, and its work is celebrated as canonical and foundational to mass communication research. For example, its work is included in Elihu Katz and his co-editors' collection of canonic texts in media research (2002), where they are identified as one of five foundational "schools" defining the field.

Much of the credit for the centrality of the Chicago School in disciplinary narratives, however, should probably go to James Carey (e.g. Munson & Warren, 1997; Carey, 1992). Carey has drawn extensively on the work of the pragmatist strand of the Chicago School, reclaiming their work on the importance of media for community cohesion as well as the underlying ontology of symbolic interactionism. Carey sums up the importance of the pragmatists in celebrating their:

[E]xpansive view of an actual social process, an intense interest in its phenomenology, and a historical understanding of how the media of communication enter a ceaseless temporal process of change (rather than a static snapshot of having or not having an effect) is the important but forgotten episode in the standard history of mass communication research (Carey, 1997, p. 32).

Carey's much-reproduced definition of communication cast it as the "actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used" (1992, p. 30). On the basis of his affinities with this pragmatist view, Carey has suggested that we may more

helpfully view communication as a ritual. This entails seeing that news “is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it” (1992, p. 21).

James Carey’s work has reverberated throughout the ranks of mass communication research, and his ritual view of communication has empowered American cultural studies researchers to take up new research agendas. His work has been taken up in particular by the emerging field of journalism studies. There is an easy affinity and confluence between the work of scholars who take news media seriously – whether in the contexts of production, texts or reception – and the Chicago sociologists who viewed news, if sometimes often overly romantically, as a means of community creation.

More broadly, the Chicago School’s brand of constructionism and symbolic constructionism has reverberated around the world. The tradition of British cultural studies has been profoundly influenced by its theoretical and methodological approach, and has contributed to a broader scholarly restitution and popularization of its insights. As Hall and his colleagues recognized in their book, *Resistance through Rituals*, work by Mead and other Chicago School sociologists influenced the emerging cultural studies approach in its focus on questions of meaning and its emphasis on the experience and agency of social actors (Hall and Jefferson, 1993, p. x):

This tradition included a range of work: symbolic interactionist studies, influenced by G. H. Mead, which attempted to recover the subjective or ‘symbolic meaning’ of action for actors; well-focussed, closely-observed ethnographic case studies...and the related

methods of participant observation borrowed from social anthropology, which used informants and active participation by the researcher as a means of delineating cultural worlds from the ‘inside’ (Hall & Jefferson, 1993, p. x).

More broadly, the idea of “representation,” as described by Hall and others working in the cultural studies tradition, entails the understanding that we construct what we ostensibly describe through processes of representation, and that this social construction of meaning has profound ideological consequences (e.g. Hall, 1997). In large part as a result of the insights of cultural studies scholars, the idea that symbols and their use in the media is so central as to be an implicit and invisible assumption of much work done on media today, absorbed into the language of scholarship.

The pragmatist approach of Mead has also left an imprint on another strain of hugely influential thought in communication in shaping Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action and his development of a discourse ethics (e.g. Habermas 1984, 1987, 1995). Habermas’ project – that of recovering rationality in the structures of intersubjective communication as a normatively desirable framework for social organization – is grounded in Mead’s understanding of symbolically mediated interaction (e.g. Habermas, 1987, p. 4), and in setting out his discourse ethics he draws centrally on Mead’s notion of ‘ideal role taking’ – the process by which an individual is able to see a situation from the viewpoint of the ‘generalized other’ and thus is able to achieve a universalized insight central to the justification of norms (Habermas, 1995, p. 65).

The Chicago School, then, has contributed the irreversible understanding that communication matters profoundly and shapes who we are and how we live.

## Conclusion

The Chicago School is central to most accounts of the history of mass communication research. But that does not necessarily mean that it has had a profound structuring influence on the work most scholars in the field do today. Rather, there is a great deal of sympathy for its preoccupations, coupled by a relative neglect of its actual work and methods.

Disciplinary histories are weapons of epistemological policing and warfare, determining the way things should be based on the way they have been and are. Mass communication research is like a Rorschach test: It is whatever you see in it and make of it. The disciplinary boundaries of mass communication research are so poorly defined that the choices we make about what disciplinary territory to annex are profoundly normative. Here, I have traced the interconnections between mass communication research and the Chicago School of Sociology, placing the account in the context of prevailing historical narratives. What I have suggested is that although communication was central to Chicago scholars' theory of society – foundational, as it was, to the symbolic interactionists – the study of media, though a substantial strand of their research, was just one of many avenues for understanding society. In their holistic and often exhaustive and exhausting research projects, Chicago sociologists sought to open up for a view of communities as living, breathing and complex organisms which cannot be reduced to its parts and components.

Such a view stood in sharp contrast to the scholarly paradigm that subsequently structured mass communication research, in part a product of wartime and Cold War propaganda efforts, and in part the result of the victory of quantitative, positivist social science – a development to which the Chicago scholars themselves contributed. Nevertheless, after 1930,

Chicago came to play second fiddle to the Columbia Bureau of Social Research in the disciplinary hierarchy of the sociological discipline. Columbia took a much narrower view of communication, focusing on its effects through quantitative measurement techniques, and shaped the subsequent development of sociological research in the United States. At the same time, the institutionalization of communication studies as a discipline in its own right contributed to the eclipse of Chicago as a center for scholarly endeavours focused on the social role of mass media.

Here, however, I have argued that while the dominant narratives of mass communication research convincingly describe the rejection of the Chicago School's concerns and methods, another story that could be told is a more complex one, which also involves the incorporation of the Chicago School into the propaganda work of the World War II and Cold War eras, and the rediscovery of the school by mass communication scholars eager to connect with normative and substantive agendas around the role of media and communication in the making of communities and societies.



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<sup>i</sup> Though note that Sue Curry Jansen (e.g. 2009) has suggested that the widely reproduced and received account of a conflict between Lippmann and Dewey is the product of historical reconstruction from the 1980s and onwards, and that in fact, they represented closely aligned schools of thought.

<sup>ii</sup> The following section draws extensively on Wahl-Jorgensen (2004), which provides more details on archival and interview sources used.