

LASSWELL'S PROPAGANDA CONCEPT GOES TO COURT: HOW LATENT SYMBOLS BECAME MANIFEST AND QUANTIFIED CONTENT ANALYSIS

O conceito de propaganda de Lasswell vai a tribunal: como símbolos latentes se tornam manifestos e a Análise de Conteúdo Quantitativa

El concepto de propaganda de Lasswell llega a los tribunales: cómo los símbolos latentes se manifiestan y el análisis de contenido cuantitativa

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Abstract: This paper examines Harold D. Lasswell's early contributions to propaganda research by foregrounding the pivotal yet largely overlooked influence of U.S. legal governmental proceedings between 1939 and 1941 on the emergence of quantitative content analysis in comparative communications. Although Lasswell is widely remembered in communication studies for his post-war communication model, the paper argues that his methodological innovations to develop quantitative content analysis were first formulated in the context of US government court cases against foreign propaganda. Drawing on archival materials and existing scholarship, the paper demonstrates how Lasswell and his colleagues developed coding procedures and evaluative "tests" to determine whether periodicals, books, newspapers and magazines constituted foreign propaganda.

Keywords: Lasswell. Propaganda. Content analysis. Comparative communications. Legal cases.

Resumo: Este artigo examina as primeiras contribuições de Harold D. Lasswell para a pesquisa sobre propaganda, destacando a influência crucial, embora amplamente negligenciada, dos processos judiciais governamentais dos EUA entre 1939 e 1941 no surgimento da análise quantitativa de conteúdo em comunicação comparada. Embora Lasswell seja amplamente lembrado nos estudos de comunicação por seu modelo do pós-guerra, o artigo argumenta que suas inovações metodológicas para desenvolver a análise quantitativa de conteúdo foram formuladas inicialmente no contexto de processos judiciais do governo dos EUA contra a propaganda estrangeira. Com base em materiais de arquivo e revisão bibliográfica, o artigo demonstra como Lasswell e seus colegas desenvolveram procedimentos de codificação e "testes" avaliativos para determinar se periódicos, livros, jornais e revistas constituíam propaganda estrangeira.

Palavras-chave: Lasswell. Propaganda. Análise de conteúdo. Comunicação comparada. Casos jurídicos.

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Resumen: Este artículo examina las primeras contribuciones de Harold D. Lasswell a la investigación sobre propaganda, destacando la influencia crucial, aunque en gran medida ignorada, de los procedimientos legales gubernamentales estadounidenses entre 1939 y 1941 en el surgimiento del análisis cuantitativo de contenido en la comunicación comparada. Si bien Lasswell es ampliamente recordado en los estudios de comunicación por su modelo de comunicación de posguerra, el artículo sostiene que sus innovaciones metodológicas para desarrollar el análisis cuantitativo de contenido se formularon inicialmente en el contexto de los casos judiciales del gobierno estadounidense contra la propaganda extranjera. A partir de materiales de archivo y estudios académicos existentes, el artículo demuestra cómo Lasswell y sus colegas desarrollaron procedimientos de codificación y "pruebas" evaluativas para determinar si las publicaciones periódicas, los libros, los periódicos y las revistas constituían propaganda extranjera.

Palabras-clave: Lasswell. Propaganda. Análisis de contenido. Comunicación comparada. Casos jurídicos.

A word has appeared, which has come to have an ominous clang in many minds – Propaganda. We live among more people than ever who are puzzled, uneasy or vexed at the unknown cunning which seems to have duped and degraded them. It is often an object of vituperation, and therefore, of interest, discussion and, finally, of study. (Lasswell, 1927, p. 2)

Introduction

In these turbulent times, when we are living in the midst of new global wars and conflicts, the word propaganda is increasingly used to characterize disinformation. Propaganda has now become one of the key concerns for journalists, politicians and the public, and it should become a key concern of academic research. Hence, in this paper I argue that, in the current dangerous global geopolitical situation, the concept of propaganda once more needs our attention. Harold D. Lasswell (1902–1978) and his colleagues pioneered in propaganda research before and during World War II, but these days

Lasswell is mainly known, if at all, in the field of communication studies, as one of its pioneers, and primarily associated with his quantitative content analysis and his communication model ('who says what to whom with what effect?') (Lasswell, 1948). Unlike in political science, where Lasswell is remembered "as the first to make political symbolism the object of concerted scientific analysis who has had a lasting impact on the field" (Dittmer, 1977, p. 559), in communication studies he is mainly remembered for quantitative content analysis. In this paper, I argue here that what is forgotten is his early research on the role of symbols in propaganda, research that developed conceptually since the publication of his dissertation *Propaganda Technique in World War* (1927) and was tested later in courtrooms before and during the war preceding the period when he formulated his well-known communication model.

I have earlier divided Lasswell's research on propaganda into two periods: (1) academic qualitative period between 1927 and 1938, and (2) policy-science quantitative period between 1939 and 1943 when Lasswell directed the Study of Wartime Communications Research Unit at the U.S. Library of Congress (Rantanen, 2024). To understand the shift in his research, the academic period is included, but this paper focuses on Lasswell's and his colleagues' research on propaganda carried out in the U.S. between 1939 and 1941, when Lasswell prepared court cases against foreign propaganda. I deliberately chose this period, when a shift took place away from his early interest in the role of symbols in propaganda, drawing inspiration from psychoanalysis, to show how his research took a quantitative turn when he was working in policy science (Lasswell, 1943) and seeking to promote U.S. interests through war propaganda.

The paper draws on previously published research, including my own (Rantanen, 2024), as well as my work in the archival collections of the Harold Dwight Lasswell Papers at the Manuscripts and Archives section of Yale University Library, the War Communications Research Unit at the Library of Congress, and the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library.

Lasswell as an academic: Qualitative research period (1927–1938)

Lasswell's published Ph.D. dissertation, *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (Lasswell, 1927), completed at the University of Chicago, marked the beginning of his lifelong engagement with propaganda studies. Although he is often portrayed as a quintessential U.S. academic, a founding father” of U.S. communication studies (Berelson, 1959), it is frequently overlooked that he gathered much of the materials for his dissertation during a formative year in Europe, travelling to Geneva, London, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris. His journey began in 1923 in Geneva, where he attended sessions of the League of Nations. He then spent a term at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), followed by a period in Paris (Rantanen, 2020; 2024). In the years that followed, he continued to travel extensively, returning to Germany several times (1924, 1925, 1928–29) to observe the rise of fascism, and also visiting Soviet Russia, China, and Japan².

² Lasswell, H. D. Summary of activities. Dictated on 19 October 1951. Harold Dwight Lasswell Papers, Biographical/Memorabilia Files, 1043, Series V, Box 213, Folder 15. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Lasswell had been familiar with Freud's work since his school years, and his later encounters with leading psychoanalysts deepened his interest in psychoanalysis as a method for studying political behaviour. During his time in Vienna, he met several prominent figures in the field, including Anna Freud. He later underwent a brief period of psychoanalysis in Berlin with Theodor Reik, a student of Sigmund Freud. His engagement with psychiatry continued in the United States, where he served as an intern in a psychiatric ward in Boston and developed an academic partnership with Harry Stack Sullivan, a psychologist and psychoanalyst. Lasswell eventually became a certified lay analyst, a practitioner of psychoanalysis without medical qualifications (Rosten, 1991, pp. 280–281; Rantanen, 2024, pp. 66, 62).

By the early 1930s, Lasswell had begun to articulate more explicitly the contribution of psychoanalysis to political and social science. In a 1932 article, he argued that Freud's tripartite model of the psyche—the id, the superego, and the ego—could be applied “with no less cogency to the study of the meaning of those patterns in social life which are so deeply rooted that they deserve to be named ‘institutions’” (Lasswell, 1932, p. 532). A central element of Lasswell's theoretical contribution was his effort to connect this tripartite psychological system with processes of identification mediated through symbols. He defined a symbol of identification as one used in statements referring to an ego or a group of egos: “‘I am an American,’ ‘He is a Communist’ are identification statements; ‘American’ and ‘Communist’ [are] symbols of identification” (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950, p. 12). Lasswell argued that once attention is directed toward the unconscious elements of human behaviour, it becomes possible to manage widespread feelings of insecurity by shaping and manipulating key symbols (Lasswell, 1935,

p. 25). Recognising the importance of both private and collective symbols, Lasswell also distinguished between their manifest and latent content (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950, p. 104).

Berelson later underscored the interpretive difficulty inherent in this distinction, noting that there is no guarantee “that the meanings in the ‘manifest content’ are the same as the meanings actually understood by the different readers or intended by the writer” (Berelson, 1952, p. 19). In this sense, only latent content can be said to exist wherever meaning is involved was already implicit in Lasswell’s original formulation. Lasswell then linked symbols to propaganda, defining propaganda as relying on “symbols to attain its end: the manipulation of collective attitudes” (Lasswell, 1935/1969, p. 3). In Lasswell’s view, propaganda intensifies during periods of crisis, particularly military conflict:

The war crisis proceeds by redefining the world of acute impending dangers.... All symbols of states, nations, and classes are called into the focus of publicity; incidents are excessively elaborated, and stern calls for firm protest on behalf of collective honor, interest, and security abound (Lasswell, 1935, p. 83).

Lasswell did not adopt a moral stance toward propaganda. For him, propaganda was a neutral instrument: “propaganda as a mere tool is no more moral or immoral than a pump handle” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 234). He further argued that “the only effective weapon against propaganda on behalf of one policy seems to be propaganda on behalf of the alternative” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 234), suggesting that moral objections lose force in a world where all actors engage in persuasive communication. As he put it, “every government on the globe, whether despotism or democracy, whether at war or at peace, relies upon propaganda—more or less efficiently harmonised with strategy, diplomacy and economics—to accomplish its ends” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 206).

By 1938, when Lasswell left the University of Chicago, he had already spent more than two decades writing about propaganda, teaching courses on the subject, and contributing to committee work that produced major reference tools such as *Propaganda and Promotional Activities* (Lasswell, Casey and Smith, 1935/1969). During this period, he developed a substantial body of theoretical work on propaganda, drawing heavily on psychoanalysis to understand propaganda's psychological mechanisms. What remained largely absent, however, was a systematic methodological and empirical programme for studying propaganda in practice. This gap began to close only when he entered what later became known as his policy science period. As he moved into roles shaped by government and policy-oriented research agendas (Lasswell, 1943), he gained access to institutional resources, empirical data, and research environments that had not been available to him during his earlier, more theoretically driven years. These settings, closely aligned with state priorities, created the conditions in which he was potentially able to operationalise the concept of propaganda.

Lasswell's quantitative policy-science period (1939–1943)

After leaving the University of Chicago, Lasswell maintained his longstanding interest in symbols. In a 1940 memorandum he observed that “central to any theory of communication is a classification of symbols, and the development of reliable techniques of classifying them”. His later, widely cited formulation “who says what to whom with what effect?” (Lasswell, 1948) had already been articulated in the 1930s using the concept of a symbol as:

- 1) Who communicates;
- 2) What symbols;
- 3) By what channels;
- 4) To whom;
- 5) With what effects.

Hence, in this early definition of his formula, Lasswell still used the concept of the symbol. However, there is a shift. As he explained, “we have no common word that includes words, pictures, music, and all other kinds of communication. A symbol is a word or word substitute.”³: This marked a significant shift from his earlier conceptualisation of symbols.

Between 1940 and 1943, Lasswell directed the Experimental Division for the Study of Wartime Communications at the Library of Congress, a major research initiative funded, like many other wartime projects, by the Rockefeller Foundation (see Gary, 1999; Simpson, 1994). His influence as a “mentor” to a generation of political scientists has been widely acknowledged (e.g., Almond, 1987). However, the project’s significance for the development of content analysis has received considerably less attention. I have previously written about the World War II period, when Lasswell worked closely with émigré scholars, second generation migrant scholars, and policy scientists. I have shown how his work was influenced by European thinking, and how émigré scholars brought their theoretical contribution to the

³ Project: To Establish a National Bureau of Communications Research (no date). Office of the Vice-President Papers, Records 1937-1946, Lasswell, Harold 1937-1938, Box 39. Hanna Holborn Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

research group, mainly using theories of psychoanalysis and creating two lines of research: qualitative and quantitative (Rantanen, 2024). However, the main task for the research group was, according to Lasswell's own testimony, "to develop certain technical procedures for the analysis of propaganda (notably content analysis and organizational analysis). It was also desired to provide a training ground for technical personnel, in case, as was anticipated, the U.S. would become more actively involved in propaganda and intelligence activities"⁴. This statement shows his strong commitment to policy science, with a clear mission of helping the government in its efforts to analyse enemy propaganda.

The earliest methodological statements produced within the Library of Congress project date from 1941–1942⁵. This series, prepared by the Experimental Division for the Study of War-Time Communication, was never formally published but circulated in mimeographed form. It concluded in 1945 and ultimately comprised sixty issues. I have not been able to locate the full set, but the contributors included Irving Janis, Morris Janowitz, Abraham Kaplan, Paul Kecskemeti, Siegfried Kracauer, Nathan Leites, Ithiel de Sola Pool, and others who later became influential figures in their respective fields. Some of their research was subsequently published in *The Language of Politics* (Lasswell & Leites, 1949). In that volume, Lasswell strongly promotes the value of quantitative content analysis for policy science, emphasising its potential for both scientific and practical gains (Lasswell, 1949a, p. 52).

⁴ Lasswell, H. D. Summary of activities. Dictated on 19 October 1951. Harold Dwight Lasswell Papers, Biographical/Memorabilia Files 1043, Series V, Box 213, Folder 15. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

⁵ See, for example, Leites, N. C., & de Sola Pool, I. (1942). *On content analysis*. The Library of Congress, Experimental Division for the Study of War Time Communications. September 1, 1942. Document No 27. Harold Dwight Lasswell Papers, General Files 1043, Series V, Box 57, Folder 790. Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

Yet the earliest attempts to apply quantitative content analysis predate the war: in 1939 and 1941 Lasswell adapted the method for use in legal proceedings. One chapter of *The Language of Politics* (Lasswell, 1949b) discusses these court cases, in which content analysis was employed to examine propaganda. As early as 1939, Lasswell had adapted content-analytic techniques for use in a series of court cases in which his conceptualisation of propaganda was subjected to legal scrutiny. These engagements began before the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941 and formed an important, though largely overlooked, foundation for his subsequent methodological innovations during the war. This paper focuses on two notable cases: (1) *United States v. Bookniga, Inc., et al.* (1939); and (2) *United States v. Friedrich Ernst Auhagen* (1941) but there were also others.

To provide proof of foreign propaganda in court

By the late 1930s, Lasswell appeared increasingly supportive of governmental intervention against foreign propaganda, even while insisting that “thoughtful citizens will examine themselves to see if they have inadvertently been dupes of antidemocratic propaganda” (Lasswell, 1949b, p. 175). He nevertheless argued that public opinion required legislative protection. As he wrote:

In the period of crisis, it is peculiarly necessary to identify enemies of democracy, and to stimulate the members of the public to be on guard in evaluating what is said” (Lasswell, 1949b, p. 175).

Legal action against foreign propaganda had been enabled by two key pieces of legislation: the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) of 1936, also known as the McCormack Act, which required foreign agents to register in the United States, and the Anti-Propaganda Act of 1940—also known as the

Voorhis Act—which mandated the registration of organisations under foreign control with the Department of Justice (Smith, 1942; Lasswell, 1949; Gary, 1999). Between 1939 and 1944, the Department of Justice successfully prosecuted more than fifty cases (Gary, 1999, p. 211).

Lasswell played a significant role in several of these proceedings (Gary, 1999; Ribuffo, 1983; Lasswell, 1949c). He was commissioned by the Department of Justice to analyse documents suspected of containing propaganda and was occasionally called to testify as an expert witness. His research group also developed a series of “tests” designed to identify propaganda content, which he hoped would become standard tools in court proceedings (Lasswell, 1949b, pp. 177–178).

- 1) The Avowal Test. Explicit identification with one side of a controversy;
- 2) The Parallel Test. The content of a given channel is compared with the content of a known propaganda channel. Content is classified according to themes;
- 3) The Consistency Test. Assesses whether a stream of communication aligns with the declared propaganda aims or official instructions of a political party or organisation;
- 4) The Presentation Test. Evaluates the balance of favourable and unfavourable treatment given to each symbol or statement within a controversy;
- 5) The Inner Test. Identifies a disproportionate reliance on one side of a controversy as the primary source of material;
- 6) The Concealed Source Test. Detects the use of material from a particular source without attribution, especially when such material shapes statements within a controversy;

- 7) The Distinctiveness Test. Examines persistent modifications in vocabulary that reflect linguistic patterns characteristic of one side of a controversy;
- 8) The Distortion Test. Identifies systematic modification of content in a direction favourable to one side, including omission, addition, or selective emphasis of statements.

The first case, *United States v. Bookniga, Inc., et al.* (D.D.C., December 27, 1939), centred on the activities of several officers of the Bookniga Corporation, Boris Nikolsky (president), Ilila Illyan (secretary), and later Morris Liskin (president), Raphael Rush (Rusz) (vice president), and Norman Weinberg (secretary-treasurer) (*Bookniga heads convicted by jury*, 1941). Liskin and Rush were naturalised U.S. citizens, and Weinberg was U.S.-born (Steinhardt, 1941). Bookniga, a Soviet publishing company, disseminated books, periodicals, and other printed materials in the United States. As a subsidiary of a foreign government (the U.S.S.R.), it was required to register under U.S. law but had failed to do so.

For this case, Lasswell, together with Louis Nemzer, Charles A. H. Thomson, and Jesse M. Macknight, prepared a study for the court in 1939. The Bookniga representatives were charged with violating the McCormack Act requiring the registration of agents of a foreign government. The indictment alleged that they had “wilfully omitted material facts from their registration statement concerning the contracts of Bookniga, Inc., with its foreign principal, Mezkhniga.” Within an hour of the indictment being returned, Nikolsky and Illyan appeared in court and pleaded guilty. Bookniga, Inc. and Nikolsky were each fined \$1,000, while Illyan received a \$500 fine. However, In 1941, Liskin, Rush, and Weinberg were sentenced to up to two years in prison (Department of Justice, 1940; *Arguments begin in Bookniga trial*, 1941; *Bookniga officers get prison terms*, 1941).

The purpose of Lasswell's study, prepared for the court, was to determine whether "certain periodicals and books published in the Soviet Union can correctly be called *political* propaganda". For this study, Lasswell defined political propaganda as "the dissemination of words (and word equivalents like pictures) as means of influencing attitudes on controversial matters".⁶ Lasswell noted, however, that it was extremely important to keep distinct the objective description of content from inferences about intention or effect.⁷ The periodicals under study included *Moscow News*, *Sovietland*, *International Literature*, and *USSR in Construction*, along with 76 books in English and 132 in Russian, all published in the Soviet Union (Lasswell, 1949b, p. 177). The team also conducted an analysis of advertisements from 1930 to 1938, using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis to examine 243 advertisements. The materials for the study were initially read and systematically described using qualitative analysis. They were then categorized as 'plus' (favourable), 'minus' (unfavourable), or 'zero' (neutral). (Table 1) According to Lasswell, "the main advantage of using objectively defined categories is that it enables one to describe changes over any given period in a meaningful way. By counting the frequency with which articles or items correspond to a given category, they could construct curves that illustrate the quantitative fluctuations in the content of specific communication channels"⁸.

⁶ Lasswell, H. D. (no date). Propaganda, detection and the courts. War Communications Research Unit, Box 23. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

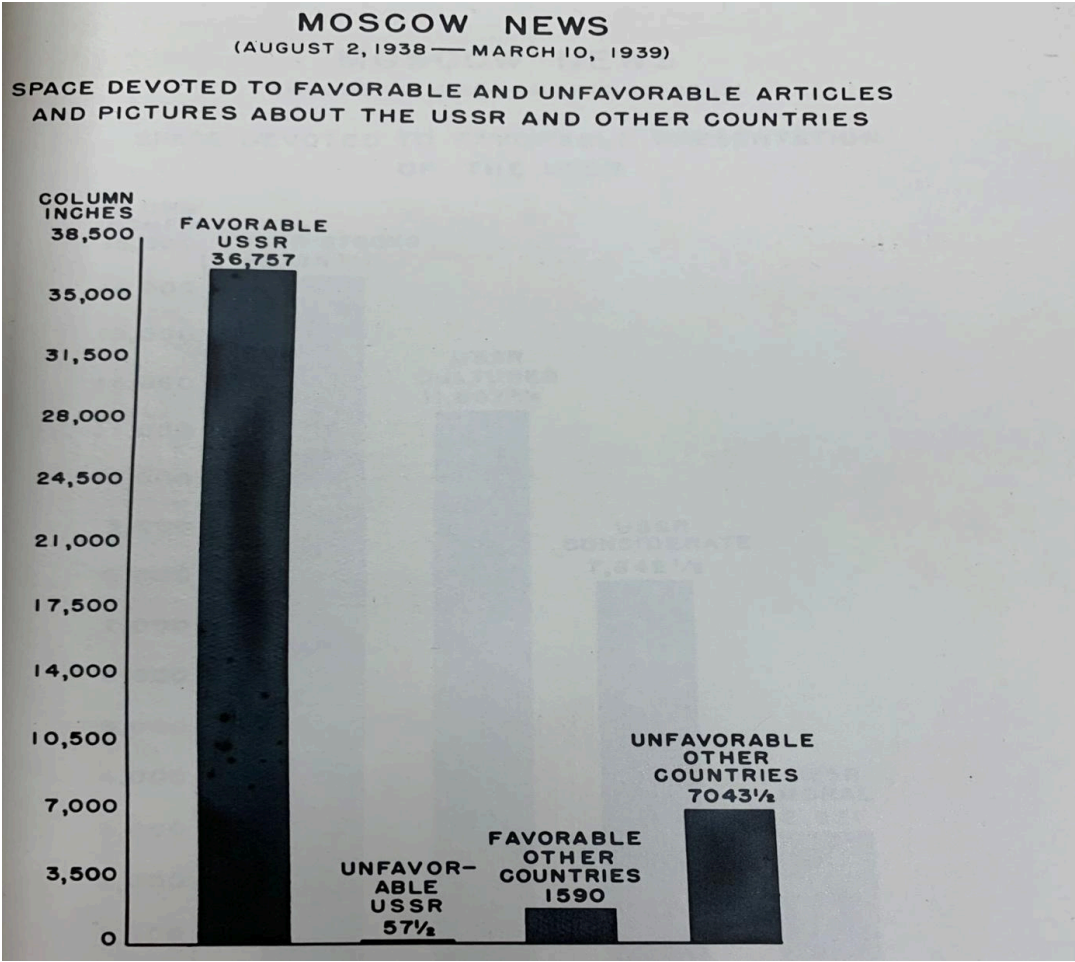
⁷ Lasswell, H. H. (no date). Report an analysis of the content of certain periodicals and books. Memorandum B. War Communications Research Unit, Box 2. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

⁸ Lasswell, H. H. (no date). Report an analysis of the content of certain periodicals and books. Memorandum B. War Communications Research Unit, Box 2. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

The two most general themes identified were: (1) the Soviet Union is a success, and (2) Communist doctrines are correct. This led to two major findings: (1) the periodicals served as political propaganda for Communism and the Soviet Union, and (2) many of the books also functioned as political propaganda for Communism and the Soviet Union. The group also discovered that Soviet periodicals portrayed Russia almost entirely as a country where democracy had been achieved, while the U.S. was depicted almost invariably in a negative light. It is evident that the purpose was propagandistic, aiming primarily to undermine the unity of the United States⁹.

⁹ Lasswell, H. H. (no date). Report an analysis of the content of certain periodicals and books. Memorandum B. War Communications Research Unit, Box 2. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

TABLE 1:
Moscow News (August 2, 1938—March 10, 1939). Space Devoted to Favourable and Unfavourable Articles and Pictures about the USSR and Other Countries



Source: Lasswell, H. D. (no date). Propaganda Detection and the Courts. War Communications Research Unit, Box 23, Library of Congress Archives.

The second case, *United States v. Friedrich Ernst Auhagen*, 39 F. Supp. 590 (D.D.C. 1941), was adjudicated from July 1 to July 11, 1941. Dr. Auhagen, a former Columbia University professor, was found guilty by a jury of five women and seven men in a District of Columbia court of acting as a German agent and distributing Nazi propaganda in the United States. The indictment revealed that Auhagen had lectured, organized meetings, and written articles for payment since September 1938 to create a favourable impression of Hitler's regime. He had also attempted to contact numerous individuals who could assist him in his aim. On July 11, 1941, he was convicted on three counts of failing to register as an agent of the German government and distributing propaganda. He was fined \$1,000 and sentenced to two years in prison. In addition, following the formal declaration of war with Germany in December 1941, Auhagen was designated a 'dangerous enemy alien', denied the right to appeal, and held in custody until April 1947 (Auhagen convicted as propaganda agent, 1941).

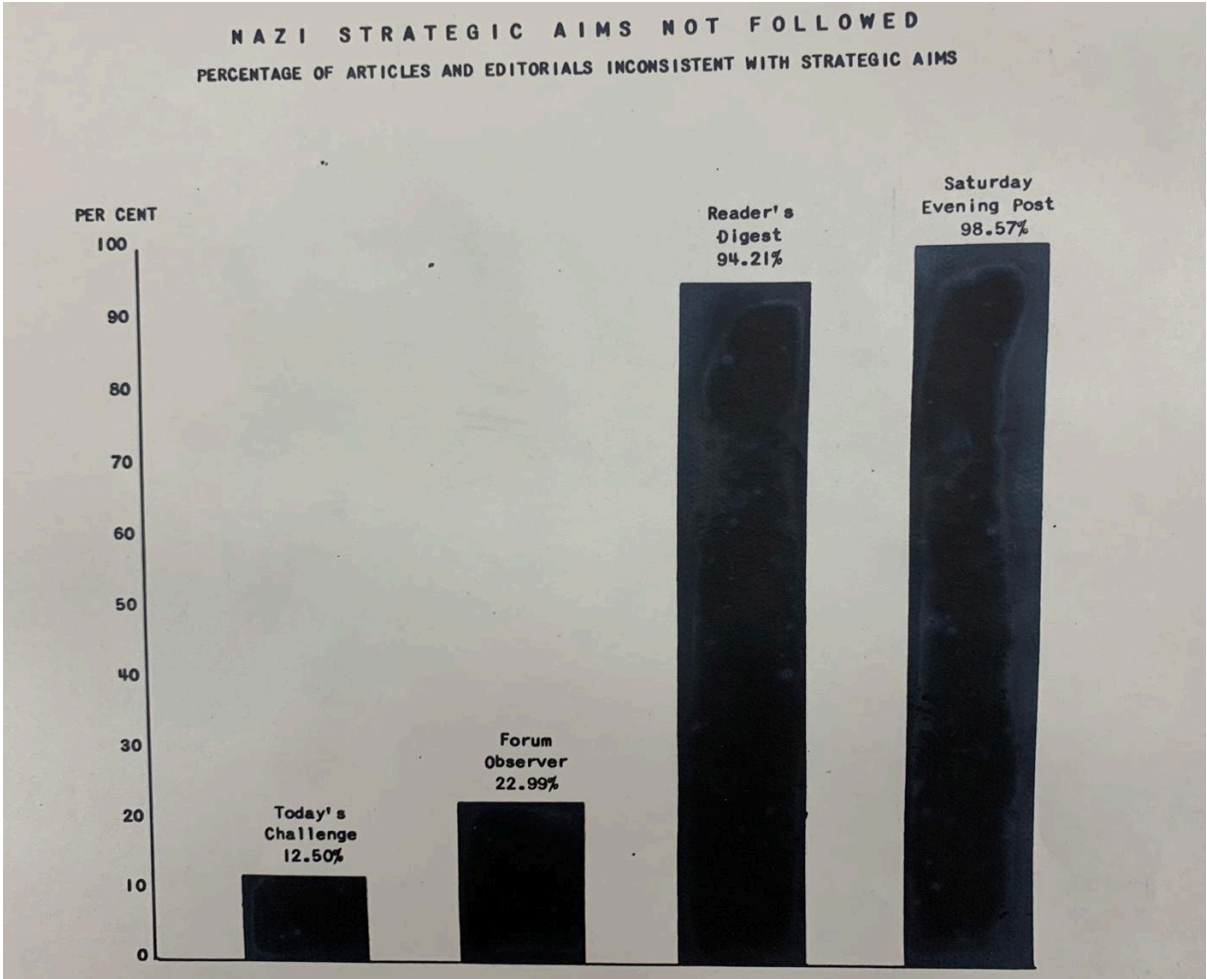
Auhagen's establishment of the American Fellowship Forum and its magazine, *Today's Challenge*, were cited in the indictment. During the trial, Lasswell was called as a witness on the basis of the study he and his colleagues had conducted. The Auhagen study involved research on a small number of issues, published over a few months in 1939 and 1940, of the magazines *Today's Challenge*, *The Forum Observer*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. *Today's Challenge* was the official organ of the American Fellowship Forum, an antisemitic organization that sought to keep the U.S. out of the war and promote the idea that the interests of the U.S. and Germany need not conflict. It was later superseded by a newsletter called *The Forum Observer*, which was also studied. To estimate the relationship between these publications and mainstream U.S. magazines, comparisons were made with *Reader's*

Digest and *Saturday Evening Post*. *Reader's Digest* was selected for two reasons: first, *Today's Challenge* was modelled after it, and second, it provided a cross-section of magazine opinion. *The Saturday Evening Post* was chosen on the presumption that, as an extreme isolationist publication, it came closest to Nazi ideology.

Lasswell and his team conducted a comparative analysis of what they termed “declared Nazi strategic aims” by examining Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* alongside the content of various magazines, assessing their alignment with the stated strategic objectives of German or Nazi propaganda. The strategic aims were: “(1) to demonstrate the war guilt of Germany's enemies and the peaceful intentions of Germany; (2) to expose the deceitful propaganda of Germany's enemies while highlighting the truthfulness of German propaganda; (3) to reveal the weakness and decadence of Germany's enemies in contrast to the strength, morality, and superiority of Germany; and (4) to portray the global threat posed by Jews and plutocrats, juxtaposed with the virtues of non-Jews and non-plutocrats”. Lasswell’s study found that these four strategic aims were not consistently followed in *The Forum Observer* (22.9%), *Today's Challenge* (12.5%), *Reader's Digest* (94.2%), and *The Saturday Evening Post* (98.6%)¹⁰. (Table 2)

¹⁰ Lasswell, H. D. (no date). Propaganda, detection and the courts. War Communications Research Unit, Box 23. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

TABLE 2:
Nazi Strategic Aims Not Followed. Percentage of Articles and Editorials Inconsistent with Strategic Aims



Source: Lasswell, H. D. (no date). Propaganda Detection and the Courts. War Communications Research Unit, Box 23, Library of Congress Archives.

Both cases demonstrated that both academics and policymakers aimed to develop quantitative content analysis to study propaganda for their respective purposes. They provided an opportunity to align policymakers' interests with those of Lasswell, an emerging policy scientist eager to contribute. Lasswell combined the resources from his project at the Library of Congress to develop categories for quantitative content analysis and to create visual representations of his findings using charts and graphs. By comparing U.S. materials with non-U.S. materials, he pioneered comparative communication studies. However, Lasswell overlooked the potential bias in U.S. media. During the trials, criticism of his 'results' was voiced by defendants' lawyers and civil servants¹¹:

The analysis of these two court cases demonstrates how Lasswell and his team began developing quantitative content analysis while preparing studies on propaganda for use in courts. Many of its later key features, such as attempts to categorize news into positive, negative, and neutral, were already developed at this stage. Although Lasswell was willing to testify in trials against defendants, numerous ethical questions arise regarding the role of academics in processes where new laws were used to limit freedom of speech.

Conclusion

Lasswell's early theoretical point of departure was the concept of the symbol in propaganda. Until the late 1930s, this focus, particularly on latent symbols, remained central to his work, shaped by his

¹¹ H. Harris to H. D. Lasswell (1941, May 15/29). Semi-final report on Transocean. Memorandum. War Communications Research Unit, Box 24. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Archives.

engagement with psychoanalytic theory. He sought to understand why propaganda succeeded, why ordinary people accepted it, and why psychology was essential for explaining its power at a time when strong ideologies such as fascism and communism were gaining influence. His interest in psychoanalysis made him a pioneer, alongside several members of the Frankfurt School (Rantanen, 2024, p. 56). Deeply influenced by European intellectual traditions, Lasswell argued for their importance within political science in the U.S. as early as the 1930s.

When Lasswell's academic career at the University of Chicago ended, and his collaboration with Stack Sullivan concluded, Lasswell entered his policy science phase by assisting the U.S. government in prosecuting individuals and companies accused of disseminating foreign propaganda. This was, and remains, an unusual path for an academic, raising significant ethical questions. Yet it also provided Lasswell with remunerated work at a time when he no longer held a university position. Beyond financial considerations, he saw no contradiction in this new role: he believed he was defending democracy rather than serving the government, particularly by analysing publications deemed to be foreign propaganda. In his view, he was protecting citizens who lacked the capacity to distinguish fact from propaganda.

In developing tools for analysing propaganda, both in legal contexts and in wartime, Lasswell and his colleagues attempted to operationalize the concept of the symbol so that it could be quantified for rapid analysis. In this process, symbols were reduced to countable words, and the original, theoretically rich notion of the symbol was left underdeveloped. As a result, the study of latent meaning was largely abandoned. This was one of the casualties of policy science, where rapid results were often required.

Nevertheless, Lasswell's achievements were significant: he established methodological foundations for future comparative communication research, particularly in international communication, which emerged as a subfield in the United States after World War II. His innovations included collaborative group work, the integration of researchers with diverse linguistic and cultural expertise, the use of quantitative content analysis as a central method, and the pursuit of funding from foundations and international organizations such as UNESCO (Kayser, 1953) and the International Press Institute (1953).

A major limitation of this tradition is its insufficient theoretical development as argued by many before me (see, for example, Chang, 2015). Lasswell himself acknowledged this, albeit only in a footnote, observing that “there is need of more systematic theory and of more ‘luminous’ hunches if the full potentialities of precision are to be realized in practice. As the history of quantification shows (in economics, for instance), there is never-ending, fruitful interplay between theory, hunch, impression and decision” (Lasswell, 1949a, p. 51). With the quantification of symbols, the conceptual “baby” was indeed thrown out with the bathwater, a loss that had long-lasting consequences for comparative communication research and for international communication relying heavily on quantitative content analysis.

Finally, in reflecting on the legacy of early propaganda research, we must ask how far we, as academics, would be willing to go in defending a democratic system. Lasswell took his concept of propaganda into the courtroom, developed quantitative content analysis into the most widely used method in media and communication studies, and then never returned to its theoretical foundations. Whether we would make similar choices remains an open and indeed pressing question.

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