

Glittering Generalities: Reconsidering the Institute for Propaganda Analysis

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Political communication and journalism studies scholars have focused on how present conditions have resulted in the epistemological crisis known as “post-truth.” This new push toward mis/disinformation studies parallels a movement during the Interwar era, when early mass communication scholars began studying the perils of propaganda. Among media historians, there has been renewed interest in the U.S.-based Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), a short-lived progressive educational initiative concerned with teaching the public how to spot and not be swayed by propaganda campaigns. This article contends that the IPA’s public-facing messaging against propaganda masked its own propagandistic aims. Using scientific language and claiming to be above the political fray, the IPA unwittingly exacerbated the problem it claimed to combat. This article concludes by drawing lessons for contemporary communication researchers invested in understanding and counteracting mis/disinformation.

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Since 2016, right-wing populist movements around the globe have shaken public confidence in a universally shared sense of objective reality. As a result, political communication and journalism studies scholars have turned their attention to how present conditions have resulted in the epistemological crisis known as “post-truth” (e.g., Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). The related push to establish a subfield of misinformation/disinformation studies parallels a similar scholarly inquiry during the Interwar era, when early mass communication scholars began studying the perils of propaganda (Bauer & Nadler, 2021; Gary, 1999). Among media historians, this trend has resulted in renewed interest in the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (IPA), a short-lived educational initiative concerned with teaching the public how to spot and not be swayed by propaganda techniques. Following the footsteps of J. Michael Sproule (1987, 1989, 1997), who reframed the IPA as the paragon of a long-lost progressive tradition of propaganda research, scholars have continued to laud the IPA as pioneers in the study of disinformation and media literacy (Fondren, 2021; Schiffrin, 2022).

Historians have treated the IPA far kinder than its contemporaries did. In 1942, sociologist William Garber wrote, “What the Institute seemed not to realize is that understanding does not necessarily follow the breaking-down of a statement and the dispassionate examination of each part” (p. 243). Drawing on

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primary research with the IPA's archived papers at Brooklyn College and the New York Public Library, I contend that the group's public-facing messaging against propaganda masked its own propagandistic aims. By using scientific language and claiming to be above the political fray, the IPA conflated its progressive political ideals with democracy itself. Their conceptualization of propaganda rendered mere political disagreement an epistemological threat—unwittingly exacerbating the problem it claimed to combat. This essay reconsiders the IPA as a cautionary tale and concludes by drawing lessons for contemporary communication researchers invested in understanding and counteracting mis/disinformation.

Origins

The idea for the Institute originated in conversations between businessman Edward Filene and Clyde Miller, an associate professor of education at Columbia University's Teachers College, in the spring and summer of 1937. Initially, Filene asked Miller if, in his "studies of propaganda and other efforts which are made to mislead the masses of the people you have made studies of large organizations like the chambers of commerce and how they are controlled" (Brown, 1937, para. 1). Miller (1937a) replied by detailing his work developing social studies curricula and asserting that "no-one has published anything to reveal how the masses of the people can spot propaganda and what antidotes they can apply" (para. 2). This piqued Filene's interest, and by May 1937, he had drafted a proposal that would set the would-be Institute's mission.

While Miller's focus on propaganda was rooted in his convergent scholarly and activist interests in developing progressive pedagogical methods, Filene was an outspoken crusader for the New Deal ("NRA Foes Called 'Tories' by Filene," 1933; "Smith-Hoover Ticket Suggested by Filene," 1936). He saw the nation's newspaper publishers and many of its bankers and other business elites as colluding to turn public opinion against President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the National Recovery Administration ("Filene Sees Press Unfair to New Deal," 1935). Concerned with the "evil effects" of these special interests on the public, Filene (1937a) envisioned the Institute as the second in a two-part strategy designed to combat the propaganda of groups who "lack social interest" (para. 6). The first approach, which Filene would task to his foundation, the Twentieth Century Fund, would be the development of counterpropaganda campaigns. He described the second approach as an "educational" corollary to the first:

If we can change the basic form of education of the present, which is based on teaching *what to think*—if this can be changed to *how to think* then the masses of our people will not be so susceptible to the pressure of propaganda groups. (Filene, 1937a, para. 8; emphasis in original)

While teaching people *what* to think involves persuasion, teaching people *how* to think involves inculcating common standards of judgment. For Filene, it was not enough that the public might be persuaded to support his progressive ideology; he desired a public for whom progressive ideological agreement was the self-evident conclusion of logical thought.

Filene's concern with propaganda was not exclusive to left-wing or liberal thought at the time. By the fall of 1937, just as the IPA was issuing its first newsletters, its mission was antithetically resonating in

the pages of *American Mercury*, then under the ownership of anti-New Deal conservative Paul Palmer. The *Mercury* published a three-part exposé by managing editor Gordon Carroll (1937a, 1937b, 1937c) of the propaganda techniques utilized by the Roosevelt administration. Whereas Filene saw business propagandists colluding to stifle public support for the New Deal, Carroll pointed out the significant public relations infrastructure of the New Deal itself. Carroll saw promotional campaigns by New Deal agencies as impractical and unnecessary state responses to economic depression, as did Filene, but also as an effort to “spread the doctrine of collectivism,” as well as a “crusade of personal adulation for Franklin D. Roosevelt and his associates in the Democratic Party, to the end that they may remain in office *ad infinitum*” (Carroll, 1937a, p. 2; emphasis in original). If Filene imagined a public whose interests were necessarily aligned with the New Deal, only to be led astray by private propaganda, Carroll and his sympathetic readers envisioned a “gullible” public at risk of supporting massive government expansion against that public’s best interests because of the manipulative efforts of the Roosevelt administration. While the first two pieces of Carroll’s exposé focused on New Deal agencies, the final installment focused on how White House and Democratic Party propaganda filtered through seemingly unaffiliated periodicals, radio programs, and motion pictures. The analysis included a cameo by none other than Edward A. Filene, whom Carroll cited as a proponent of “class-war propaganda” and accused of “dispensing governmental publicity” (Carroll, 1937c, pp. 324–325).

The same issues in which the *Mercury* exposed Roosevelt’s domestic propaganda initiatives also featured a series of interlocutory essays concerning dissent against New Deal liberalism, the growing popularity of radical ideologies, and the public’s capacity for discernment. Ernest Boyd critiqued popular front liberals for obliquely aligning with totalitarian ideologues while professing belief in freedom of thought. He wrote:

In a world half-mad with fear and hatred, in which all intellectual, spiritual, and esthetic values are being destroyed, our ears are deafened by the discordant cries and the irreconcilable claims of sects, parties, races, and nations, whose zealots and their cowed devotees profess to be in possession of absolute Truth and Justice and demand that the world recognize the special superiority thereby conferred onto them. (Boyd, 1937, p. 277)

Boyd was concerned that totalitarians were exploiting the crisis of meaning attendant with modernity—characterized by a proliferation of publicly circulating perspectives and a decline in traditional forms of cultural and informational gatekeeping (see Arendt, 1954/1994a). His *Mercury* essay was followed by commentary from the right-libertarian critic Albert Jay Nock. Nock used his monthly *Mercury* column to praise Boyd’s assessment and to naturalize his conclusions. Totalitarianism, according to Nock, capitalized on the slippage of meaning attendant with modernity, as well as the flaws within human nature itself: “Without exception the human being has always found it easier to feel than to act, and both much easier than to think” (Nock, 1937, p. 358). According to Nock, only a privileged few were endowed with the capacity for reflective thought. One year earlier, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Nock had named these privileged few “the Remnant”: An assemblage of right-thinking individuals whose ears are not attuned to techniques of mass persuasion, but rather to the prophetic voice that imparts principles necessarily resultant in “the humane life.” Nock saw the Remnant as ultimately responsible for the salvation of the masses, which, on their own, were fundamentally incapable of proper discernment (Nock, 1936).

What distinguished Filene and the IPA from their anti-New Deal counterparts, then, was neither propaganda consciousness nor concern with the importance of nurturing clear thinking amidst the crisis of meaning attendant with modernity and exacerbated by the emergence of totalitarianism (for more on this crisis of meaning, see Arendt, 1954/1994b). Both viewed politics as rooted in epistemological conflict over what constituted truth, knowledge, and meaning, as well as the proper standards of political judgment. While they differed in their ideological ends, they also differed in their respective beliefs about the public's capacity for discernment. Whereas Nock placed his faith in the Remnant, Filene placed his faith in exposure (see Sedgwick, 1997)—that revealing the hidden methods and motives of propagandists enabled a properly discerning public by allowing it to think according to an immanent progressive logic, which private propaganda was thought necessarily to disrupt. That Filene was not concerned with the advancement of some abstract notion of critical thinking but with thinking toward the ends of progressive ideology was made abundantly clear in a letter he wrote to Miller in June 1937:

I am interested in this movement only from the practical side. If it turns out that this is going to be largely a "scientific" movement instead of real "propaganda" to meet and beat, if possible, the ... dangerous propaganda of pressure groups that the country is enduring at the present, then I imagine that my future contributions will be limited. (Filene, 1937b, para. 3)

The tension between the Institute's scientism and its progressive ideological ends, apparent to Filene from its very outset, would only be exacerbated as it began its work.

While Filene died unexpectedly a month before the publication of the Institute's first monthly newsletter, *Propaganda Analysis*, his assumptions about the characteristics of a properly discerning public, its susceptibility to manipulation by propagandists, and its capacity for immanent progressive logic, if properly informed, remained central to the Institute's work ("Edward A. Filene, 77, Dies in Paris," 1937). Defining propaganda neutrally as the "expression of opinion or action by individuals or groups deliberately designed to influence opinions or actions of other individuals or groups with reference to predetermined ends," the Institute nonetheless immediately concerned itself with differentiating between "good or bad" propaganda. "Good" propaganda, according to the first issue of *Propaganda Analysis*, conforms to "American principles of democracy" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 2). The authors defined these principles according to a distinctly progressive and egalitarian vision of U.S. constitutional and statutory protections, including positive freedoms: "to vote on public issues," "to work and to participate in organizations and discussions to promote better working standards and higher living conditions for the people," to "worship, with separation of church and state," and negative freedom "from oppression based upon theories of superiority or inferiority" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 2). Meanwhile, "bad" propaganda, with which the Institute was most concerned, "alters public opinion on matters of large social consequence often to the detriment of the majority of the people" ("Announcement," 1937, pp. 1–2). Here, the Institute's operative theory of the public is illuminated. The public is thought to possess an innate capacity for discernment that, though presumably aided by "good" propaganda, necessarily results in affirming the nation's democratic principles. As Miller, perhaps the staunchest defender of the Institute's scientific bona fides, put it in a 1942 column lamenting the IPA's closure, "The Institute has been biased in favor of democracy from its very inception" (Miller, 1942, p. 4).

Propagandizing Against Propaganda

By uncritically defining the nation's democratic principles according to its own progressive ideological aspirations, however, the Institute elided some of the most contentious political fault lines of the New Deal era. Far from a given, collective bargaining had received statutory protection only two years earlier with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. White women had only been eligible to vote for 17 years when the Institute was founded, and African Americans were still widely disenfranchised. Meanwhile, the NAACP was involved in a decades-long uphill fight for federal anti-lynching legislation—the Institute's presumption that racial inequality was to the "detriment of the majority of the people" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 2), while ethically laudable, was based upon a naive unwillingness to reckon with the long and ongoing legacy of White supremacy in the United States.

In accounting for the necessary persistence of political disagreement in a society lacking transcendent standards of judgment, while maintaining its belief in an innately progressive public, the Institute required a source of conflict exogenous to the public itself and found it in propaganda: "America is beset by a confusion of conflicting propagandas, a Babel of voices, warnings, charges, counter-charges, assertions, and contradictions assailing us continually through the press, radio, and newsreel" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 1). After listing various sources of this barrage, from labor unions to business organizations, the introductory essay continued: "If American citizens are to have clear understanding of conditions and what to do about them, they must be able to recognize propaganda, to analyze, and to appraise it" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 1). Propaganda, here, is understood to be a *cause* of political disagreement, rather than one of its many effects. The public's capacity for proper discernment and, thus, the conditions necessary for progressive political agreement are thought to be inhibited by the proliferation of mostly private (i.e., "bad") propaganda, which, unbeknownst to the public that they necessarily influence, obliquely vie for its attention and support. The result is a confused, disorganized public opinion incapable of achieving a common understanding or originating a shared meaning of the world in which it is constantly called upon to make political decisions.

In offering propaganda analysis as a basis for shared public meaning, the Institute relied upon faith in exposure—the public's inability to discern between or even recognize competing propagandas was understood to result from a lack of adequate information. In particular, the Institute assumed that the public was unaware of seven common rhetorical "devices" by which propagandists "fool" it: from "name calling," "a device to make us form a judgment without examining the evidence on which it should be based" (see the Institute's use of the term "bad propaganda"); to "transfer," "by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept" (see the Institute's use of the term "science"); to "glittering generalities," "by which the propagandist identifies his program with virtue by use of 'virtue words'" (see the Institute's use of the term "democracy"; "How To Detect Propaganda," 1937, pp. 5–8).

Upon exposure to these common rhetorical strategies utilized by propagandists, as well as facts pertaining to their undisclosed motivations, the Institute presumed that the public would necessarily think and act differently, making decisions in line with the Institute's own idealized standards of discernment. This presumption of immanent logicity was justified by the Institute's stated belief that its propaganda analysis

mirrors the scientific method, seeking the end of truth, rather than successful persuasion: "Propaganda differs from scientific analysis. The propagandist is trying to 'put something across,' good or bad, whereas the scientist is trying to discover truth and fact" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 1). The Institute further differentiated between the scientific pursuit of truth and the propagandistic pursuit of persuasion by relying on a strict distinction between reason and emotion. Describing the "chief danger" of propaganda, the newsletter authors wrote, "It appeals to emotion, and decisions made under stress of emotion lead to disaster when the emotion crowds out cool, dispassionate thought" ("Announcement," 1937, p. 3). If propaganda disorients the public by using emotional rhetoric, as an antidote, propaganda analysis is thought to necessarily result in dispassion (as opposed, for example, to outrage at having been duped). This clarifies the Institute's faith in exposure—not only will the revelation of new information change how the public thinks, but it will also cause the public to think objectively. Despite the Institute's stated interest in promoting rational thought, its internal correspondence revealed less concern with the mechanics of syllogism than with its aesthetics.

Before the formation of a "publications committee" in 1941, Miller submitted most IPA articles to the entire board of directors for review. Although not all board members offered comments, the collaborative editorial process provoked considerable discussion within the organization about matters of tone and its relationship to the Institute's scientism and political positioning. Miller was especially concerned that the Institute's newsletters remained tonally neutral, reflecting the disposition that the IPA was attempting to instill in the public. Writing to board member Frank E. Baker in January 1938, Miller noted that some sympathetic readers had found the Institute's newsletters "weak and innocuous" and admitted: "I understand why some feel this. I would like to have the letters stronger but believe we should not give the impression that we are simply de-bunkers and publishers of sensational exposés" (Miller, 1938a, para. 2). Miller's fear that the Institute's analysis might be misconstrued as sensational underscores the extent to which the scientism of his propaganda analysis relied more on aesthetics than on method.

Miller's concern with striking a dispassionate tone set the scope and content of the Institute's first several newsletters, which focused more on outlining the IPA's method of propaganda analysis than on revealing the methods of specific propaganda campaigns. Despite acknowledging the "weakness of the academic presentation" contained in the early newsletters, and especially their emphasis on "logical processes," Miller (1937c) saw the Institute's disinterested tone as strategically valuable in achieving its poorly concealed ends of promoting progressive standards of judgment, which he conflated with rational-critical thought (paras. 3–4). Writing to board member Charles Beard in November 1937, Miller anticipated that the Institute would begin to tackle specific examples of propaganda within the first few months of 1938: "By that time, readers who have followed carefully the earlier letters—and especially the more conservative readers—will be more willing to accept on a rational basis analyses which otherwise might cause unfavorable emotional reactions" (Miller, 1937c, para. 5).

Miller's (1937c) acknowledgment of "more conservative readers" (para. 5) further qualifies the Institute's faith in exposure. On the one hand, admitting that some readers might fail to react dispassionately, or even approvingly, to the Institute's mode of analysis is a rare acknowledgment of political disagreement, the existence of which undermines the Institute's idealized conception of a progressively inclined public. Then again, by describing conservative readers as tending toward "emotional reactions,"

Miller suggests that they had already succumbed to the influence of “bad” propaganda. He leaves no room for conservatives to rationally disagree with the analysis, only room for emotional rejection. This, once again, reduces political disagreement to an effect of emotional stimuli exogenous to the otherwise rationally discerning public. Miller hoped that a dispassionate tone would imbue propaganda analysis with enough self-evidence to affect conservatives in the same way that he expects mere exposure of information to affect those without prior ideological dispositions.

A renowned progressive historian and Columbia University professor, Charles Beard was the Institute’s most ardent tone policeman. Although he would later express doubt that propaganda analysis could be “reduced to anything like a ‘science’” (Beard, 1938, para. 1) in a June 1937 letter accepting a position on the Institute’s founding board, Beard (1937a) wrote of the need for “scientific scrutiny of opinion making” (para. 1) and made his acceptance conditional on Miller’s guarantee as to “the thoroughness and objectivity of the studies made and the releases given out” (para. 2). Beard’s (1938) vision of the “true function” of propaganda analysis was akin to the method of an investigative journalist:

Who is engaged in spreading beliefs, ideas, and doctrines? Who is paying for it? Who expects to get something tangible or intangible out of it? What is the nature of the arguments employed? ... These are questions that can be answered out of knowledge, if the data are available. (para. 1)

Given that in its early months, the Institute was less concerned with investigative reporting than with parsing and classifying rhetorical strategies, Beard’s concern with “objectivity” was quickly channeled into a concern with aesthetics. Reviewing materials drafted in the summer before the Institute’s founding, Beard (1937b) wrote:

Somebody should go over it with an [icicle] and chill the heat-words. ... It is about on the level of a Communist party tract, with some small-farmer demagoguery thrown in. It is pretty clear that you do not have some head control in your office that can distinguish between propaganda analysis and propaganda. Your reports should be as colorless as a telephone book. (para. 2)

Here, Beard seems to admit that the difference between propaganda and propaganda *analysis* is primarily a matter of tone.

Beard’s concern with tone also led him to vigorously criticize the Institute’s belief in “good or bad” propaganda. In handwritten edits on an early draft article of the Institute’s first newsletter, Beard (1937c) lambasted Miller’s first attempt at a definition of the term “propaganda,” which concluded, “Thus, any person who expresses his opinion is a propagandist” (p. 2). In the margins, Beard wrote: “My God—So is science then!” (p. 2). He then attached comments that read, in part, “Your definition of propaganda will not do at all. No. Nor will *good* and *bad*. You are not *God—Conformity* or *not* to democratic principles is *The Test*—the only Test for us” (Beard, 1937c, para. 2; emphasis in original). It was Beard, then, who first suggested “democratic principles” as the standard of judgment against which the Institute would evaluate propaganda,

but despite his attempt to temper the organization's moralism, he only leant it definition, ideological distinction, and rhetorical flair.

Criticism and Disavowal

That the Institute's rhetorical machinations and transparent moralism undermined its claim to scientific credibility did not go unnoticed by critics at the time. Public relations pioneer Edward Bernays devoted a fall 1937 issue of his newsletter *Contact* to criticizing the Institute. Calling the IPA's approach, "superficial and unscientific," Bernays (1937, p. 5) starkly portrayed Edward Filene's dream of teaching the public "how to think" as a quixotic misadventure: "There is a common error, even among wise men, that absolute truth can be separated from special pleading just as simply as wheat from chaff; that you can use a sieve and drain away propaganda, leaving nuggets of truth" (Bernays, 1937, p. 1). As an avowed propagandist, Bernays remained adamant that there was no truth outside of persuasion, but nonetheless offered constructive criticism, suggesting that the Institute's time would be better spent promoting more empirical efforts in the study of public opinion. On one point, however, Bernays (1937) agreed with the Institute's premise, if not its method:

Democracy may be in danger from the conflicting ideologies that are competing with it for the interest and support of the public... Might it not even be a sound procedure to carry on a campaign to establish a greater validity for the symbols of democracy with the public directly? (p. 5)

Bernays' question invited the Institute to engage in the politics it publicly disavowed, but it also leant too much credence into the Institute's claim that it was not already engaged in just such a campaign. Responding to Bernays directly, Miller (1937b) admitted the absence of transcendental standards of judgment—writing, "In the first place, who knows what 'absolute' truth is?" (p. 1)—but nevertheless defended his Institute's scientism, name dropping prominent board members Hadley Cantril, Charles Beard, and James Shotwell, and arguing, "Our board, I believe you will agree, does include men who have an unmercenary devotion to the quest for new truths, new facts, and new implications and syntheses of known facts" (p. 2). That, in defending his Institute against the charge of being "unscientific," Miller saw it fit to deploy a propaganda device ("transfer") instead of simply elaborating on the Institute's supposed "scientific" methodology, is further evidence that the Institute's scientism referred less to its mode of analysis than to its method of persuading the public as to the self-evidence of the Institute's conclusions.

The gap between the social scientific credibility of the Institute's board and the starkly unscientific character of the Institute's analyses was not lost on at least one *Propaganda Analysis* subscriber, who in February 1938 complained that its early issues were full of generalities and avoidance of controversial subjects: "by the use of an impressive string of well-known names you have induced us suckers to underwrite the publication of this worthless stuff" (Callender, 1938, p. 1). In forwarding the complaint to the attention of Miller, then Institute president and Princeton University professor Hadley Cantril noted that a fellow social psychologist, Floyd Allport, had offered similar criticisms and lamented "there is enough truth in what he says to hurt. I am beginning to feel that we had better hurry and take up something contemporaneous and specific if we are to keep the respect of the 'intelligent citizen'" (Cantril, 1938a, para.

1). Miller, for his part, agreed with the criticism, blamed insufficient funding for the Institute's early silence on controversial issues, and noted that a few case studies were in the pipeline (Miller, 1938b). But Cantril's unease persisted. Weeks later, commenting on an article Miller had commissioned on business propaganda opposing the New Deal, Cantril (1938b) expressed his concern that "we are wearing the seven propaganda devices to a frazzle" (p. 1). Cantril (1938b) wrote:

I am afraid we will get more and more criticism from intelligent readers, and will become only a thin sheet, useful for the student in the elementary school who will be forced by some well-meaning teacher to read our broadcasts. (p. 2).

As a solution, Cantril advised a more journalistic approach, akin to that recommended by Charles Beard, focused more on uncovering details about the motivations behind specific propaganda campaigns. With its scientific aesthetic failing to establish the conditions of self-evidence required for the public to adopt the Institute's analysis as a basis for political discernment, the Institute's leaders shifted their emphasis to the revelation of facts.

The Institute's focus on labeling propaganda devices soon faded into the background. While its teaching initiatives continued to emphasize the "seven devices," *Propaganda Analysis* increasingly became an outlet for journalistic case studies of propaganda campaigns, offering not only rhetorical analysis but also contextual information geared at illuminating the propagandists' ulterior motives ("Let's Talk About Ourselves," 1939). While the Institute would cover a wide range of topics, from the use of propaganda by public relations specialists and chain stores to the state propaganda of Britain, Japan, China, and Spain, its most sustained focus was on fascist propaganda campaigns, both foreign and domestic. The Institute's first case study, published in May 1938 and still structured around the "seven devices," was an extended analysis of the propaganda techniques of German fascism ("Propaganda Techniques of German Fascism," 1938). By early 1939, however, when the Institute turned its attention toward the propaganda efforts of domestic fascist groups, the labeling of devices had mostly fallen out of its analysis, as had its commitment to a dispassionate tone. In "The Attack on Democracy" (1939), the Institute reported that there were some 800 fascist or pro-Nazi organizations in the United States and wrote that while some of those organizations made appeals to constitutional democracy, "all sing the same tune" (p. 1) written by Adolph Hitler and composed by Joseph Goebbels:

That song bewitched the German people, as the song of the Lorelei bewitched the mariners of antiquity; it lured them headlong onto the reefs of fascism. It can be sung with variations, but always the refrain is "Jew!" and "Communist!" (p. 1)

While the Institute noted that fascist usage of the terms "Jew" and "Communist" amounted to "card-stacking," the newsletter's analysis consisted primarily of a litany of groups and individuals guilty of Jew- and red-baiting toward fascist ends, accompanied by the occasional debunking of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and myths that Jewish people controlled the banks and newspapers.

The Institute's reduction of fascism to a mixture of antisemitic and anticommunist rhetoric continued in its later exposé of Father Charles Coughlin, the Catholic priest whose radio tirades against the

New Deal between 1934 and 1936 had brought him fame and notoriety, and whose return to the air in 1937, after a brief hiatus, made him a primary target of the IPA (Brinkley, 1983). The Institute not only devoted an issue of *Propaganda Analysis* to exposing Coughlin, it published a book-length rhetorical analysis of his speeches, unpacking his use of each of the Institute's seven devices ("Father Coughlin," 1939; Lee & Lee, 1939). In his forward to the book, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, Miller framed the Institute's rhetorical analysis of Coughlin's speeches as emblematic of the IPA's unique and effective contribution to the prevention of totalitarianism in the United States. He wrote:

Others would meet dangerous propagandas with direct counter-attacks—with co-called counter-propaganda—but the result of this would be flattering in most cases to those attempting to undermine American civilization. It would focus unwarranted attention on their utterances. It would stimulate rather than counteract their influence. (Miller, 1939a, p. ix)

If *unwarranted* attention *stimulates* the influence of totalitarian propaganda, the IPA sought to *counteract* that influence through presumably *warranted* attention to the utterances of totalitarian propagandists. In exposing rhetoric as rhetorical, rather than reflective of reality, the Institute sought to defuse propaganda's presumed inhibitory effect upon public discernment. However, Miller's fundamental misunderstanding of totalitarianism—which he considered to be a radical form of political disagreement, as opposed to a radical attempt to foreclose political disagreement (see Arendt, 1954/1994a)—led him to presume that totalitarianism was itself an *effect* of propaganda on the public. This explains his hesitancy to engage in explicit counterpropaganda efforts, which he feared would only elevate the emotionalism he presumed to be the source of public confusion, political disagreement, and support for fascism.

Miller's resistance to engaging in overt counterpropaganda efforts was also likely informed by growing political headwinds against the popular front coalition of liberals and social democrats, including Miller and many IPA board members. Early on, Hadley Cantril (1939) expressed concern at what he described as "constant criticism" from "people like Gallup" (para. 3):

regarding the so-called bias of the Institute in analyzing only the reactionary propaganda. Although as you always point out, this type of propaganda constitutes at least 90% of the total barrage we experience, it seems to me, from a long time point of view, that the Institute would be extremely foresighted in getting out some releases on New Deal propaganda, C.I.O., or Communist propaganda. (Cantril, 1939, para. 3)

In admitting his and Miller's particular attunement to the ill effects of reactionary propaganda, Cantril bolsters the bias claims he nevertheless seeks to hedge against. And hedge, the Institute did. One month after Cantril's letter, *Propaganda Analysis* published an extended look at Communist propaganda campaigns within the United States ("Communist Propaganda," 1939). The decision to publish the anticommunist piece was contentious among the Institute's board members. Yale psychologist Leonard Doob vehemently opposed the "Communist Propaganda, U.S.A. 1939 Model," arguing at length with the Institute's staff in an unsuccessful bid to prevent its publication. "I know that the Institute's reputation demands such an analysis," Doob (1939) wrote to Miller, "but I feel that we

will be playing into the hands of the Dies committee and others who at this moment like to identify anything progressive or liberal with Communism" (para. 4).

As the Cantril and Doob letters suggest, domestic politics in the United States became increasingly distorted by totalitarian threats from abroad during the Institute's four brief years of existence. In May 1938, the same month the Institute issued its first case study on the propaganda techniques of German fascism, the U.S. House of Representatives appointed Texas Democrat Martin Dies to head a special investigative Committee on Un-American Activities. While the Dies Committee was initially charged with identifying the propaganda efforts of U.S.-based pro-Nazi groups, it became increasingly concerned with domestic communist subversion ("House Will Delve into Propaganda," 1938). The IPA was initially sympathetic to the Dies Committee's mission. In May 1939, Clyde Miller wrote directly to Congressman Dies, sharing tips on sources the Institute had uncovered in its own analysis of domestic fascist groups and drawing his attention to the IPA's work. "You have our permission, of course, to make use of any of the material in this or in any of the other Institute bulletins," Miller (1939b) wrote (para. 3). He went so far as to solicit information from Dies concerning Charles Coughlin's citizenship status in advance of the Institute's *Propaganda Analysis* exposé of the reverend and even offered to show Dies the galley proofs before its publication in June 1939. However, the Institute's support of the Dies Committee would prove short-lived; by January 1940, it had published an analysis of the Committee's anticommunist bias in conducting its investigations ("Mr. Dies Goes to Town," 1940).

While the Dies Committee would turn its investigative sights on the Institute by February 1941, "to find out what this organization really stands for" ("Dies Scrutinizes Propaganda Study," 1940, p. 1), the IPA first faced redbaiting from one of its own supporters on the left. In January 1941, Alfred M. Bingham, the editor of *Common Sense*, an anticommunist magazine with democratic socialist leanings, alerted Clyde Miller that Clyde Beals, whom the Institute had recently hired to serve as its editorial director, was likely a communist. The accusation stemmed from Beals' former work as an editor of the *Guild Reporter*, the publication of the Newspaper Guild, which Bingham suspected of communist links. Bingham (1941) wrote, alluding to the conservative journalist Westbrook Pegler, "It is not necessary to be a Pegler to believe that the *Guild Reporter* has followed the party line, and those who edit it and control it are necessarily under suspicion of Communist connections" (para. 1). Bingham (1941) continued, appealing to the IPA's putative objectivity: "The Institute should be free to analyze Communist propaganda as impartially as anti-Communist propaganda" (para. 1). While Miller admitted that Communist Party members were active in the Newspaper Guild, he defended Beals' reputation and invited Bingham to present evidence to substantiate his accusations so that the Institute might properly respond (Miller, 1941a). Rather than doing so, Bingham published a note in the February 1941 issue of *Common Sense* denouncing the Institute for succumbing to the "'Little War' being waged within America between the proponents of different foreign policies" ("Propagandists' Battle," 1941, p. 50). The unsigned brief concluded:

It is too bad that there is no truly objective agency for analyzing the propaganda battle. The Institute for Propaganda Analysis, once highly promising, is now under the executive charge of the former editor of the *Guild Reporter*, which was controlled by the left-wing New York Newspaper Guild and generally followed the Communist Party line; the Institute, long charged with being itself a subtle propaganda agency, may now be expected to live up to that reputation. ("Propagandists' Battle," 1941, p. 51)

Decline

Officially, the IPA dissolved in the wake of the United States' formal entry into World War II. In a farewell issue of *Propaganda Analysis*, the Institute stated that it was suspending its analysis for the duration of the war effort:

The publication of dispassionate analyses of all kinds of propaganda, "good" and "bad," is easily misunderstood during a war emergency, and more important, the analyses could be misused for undesirable purposes by persons opposing the government's efforts. On the other hand, for the Institute, as an Institute, to propagandize or even to appear to do so would cast doubt on its integrity as a scientific body. ("We Say Au Revoir," 1942, p. 1)

Unofficially, the Institute appeared not to have the money to continue operations. Writing in response to a draft of the Institute's final newsletter, which had evidently been drafted following a contentious late-October board meeting, Clyde Miller protested the official explanation of the Institute's hiatus, expressing his belief that propaganda analysis was even more necessary in wartime. However, citing the newsletter's rapidly declining circulation because of the nonrenewal of subscriptions, he lamented, "The simple fact is that the Institute does not have the money to continue publication of bulletins" (Miller, 1941b, p. 1). Unexpired subscriptions to *Propaganda Analysis* were "fulfilled by another publication of similar aims" ("We Say Au Revoir," 1942, p. 7). That publication was *Common Sense*, which months earlier had accused the IPA of being a "subtle propaganda agency" ("Propagandists' Battle," 1941, p. 51).

That the Institute proclaimed its "integrity as a scientific body" ("We Say Au Revoir," 1942, p. 1) until the end, despite a tumultuous final year in which it faced charges of bias from left and right, underscores the extent to which the Institute's vision of reality was conscribed by its conception of the public and the problems besetting it. Imagining a public innately capable of discernment according to an immanently politically progressive logic, the Institute rendered political disagreement suspect. The Institute identified private propaganda, those oriented toward any end other than a distinctly progressive vision of democratic principles, as exogenous emotional stimuli distorting the public's capacity for rational discernment. In doing so, the Institute transformed political disagreement into an epistemological threat. Albert Jay Nock and his colleagues at the *American Mercury* were not merely opposing the New Deal; according to this reasoning, they were distorting the truth and denying reality. Similarly, external criticism of the Institute itself, insofar as it expressed disagreement with the Institute's political orientation, fell into the category of propaganda to be analyzed. Such criticism was not met with acknowledgment of the political particularity of the Institute's conception of democracy, but rather with efforts to bolster the self-evidence of the Institute's analysis—appeals to its scientific bona fides and political impartiality.

Political disagreement among the Institute's own board only grew as war loomed. Some believed that propaganda analysis would impede war efforts. In his letter resigning from the board, former president E.C. Lindeman admitted that he found himself in "complete accord" with President Roosevelt's interventionism, writing, "I have become a partisan and as such my usefulness to the Institute has come to an end" (Lindeman, 1941, para. 1). Others, like Miller, thought the government ought to be held accountable

to progressive democratic principles, war or not. While the interventionists prevailed, the board achieved no full consensus, and the Institute dissolved into the political disagreement it could no longer disavow.

Conclusion

While contemporary proponents of media literacy and opponents of disinformation remember the IPA fondly (Fondren, 2021; Schiffrin, 2022), my research suggests a more cautionary reading. According to its own definitions, the IPA was involved in “good” propaganda, not anything resembling scientific analysis. As I have shown, internal deliberations within the group included considerable tone policing and calculated negotiations of the Institute’s position and reputation within a dynamic and increasingly complex political terrain. The real political headwinds facing the IPA are often cited as explanations for the group’s demise. I show that those political considerations were present within the Institute from its outset and in constant tension with its stated scientific and educational purposes, limiting its claims to impartiality and undermining the epistemological assumptions of “propaganda analysis” itself. To its credit, the IPA was a major influence on the progressive media reform movement of the 1940s, including press critic George Seldes and Dorothy Parker’s Voice of Freedom Committee (Bauer, 2017; Pickard, 2014). However, from a humanistic social sciences perspective, the IPA is a case study of under-examined priors—of how a lack of reflexivity in research design and pedagogy can lead to muddled and ineffective results.

Sproule (1987) describes the IPA as the culmination of a propaganda studies paradigm that emerged during the Interwar years because of increasing journalistic and scholarly concern over the power of governments, political parties, and corporations to manipulate public opinion to serve their ends. As we saw with the IPA, that paradigm was severely hampered by the second red scare, when many popular front-aligned academics (including, eventually, Clyde Miller himself) were rebaited to the margins of public life (see Schiffrin, 2022). As Sproule (1987) notes, this politically engaged propaganda studies paradigm (reflected in the IPA) was ultimately eclipsed by what has since grown into the media effects tradition of communication studies. That tradition’s apolitical emphasis on methodological innovation, not to mention the commercial utility of its findings, attracted foundation and corporate funding while critical approaches to analyzing propaganda were increasingly marginalized within the broader academic field of communication (Gitlin, 1978; Sproule, 1987).

Tensions between media effects and critical traditions of communication studies are nothing new, but the parallels between the era of their schism and our contemporary academic and political climate are remarkable. Journalists and scholars largely blamed the 2016 U.S. presidential and UK Brexit elections on highly effective mis-and-disinformation campaigns. Foundation and government money poured in, helping to establish what is now a robust subfield of misinformation/disinformation studies. As journalist Joe Bernstein (2021) has noted, this mis/disinformation framing dovetailed with the political and business imperatives of tech companies, allowing them to externalize the blame for the ill effects of their platforms while indirectly demonstrating to potential advertisers those platforms’ power to influence. However, if the seeming conceptual neutrality of the mis/disinformation framing initially appealed to corporations and technocrats who sought apolitical solutions to the conditions that gave rise to right-wing populism, they soon realized its crypto-normative limitations. Under the Biden administration in 2022, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security briefly established a Disinformation Governance Board, but was forced to shudder it

amidst intense Republican Party opposition and a conspiracy-laden harassment campaign spearheaded by conservative media (Przybyla, 2023). Lest the field (like propaganda studies before it) be pushed toward the apolitical and methodological imperatives of the media effects tradition, critical mis/disinformation scholars have recently called for thorough reevaluations of the field (e.g., Camargo & Simon, 2022; Lenoir & Anderson, 2023).

My reconsideration of the IPA aligns with growing critical scholarship that thinks beyond the extant mis/disinformation paradigm. This approach, exemplified in the work of Rachel Kuo and Alice Marwick (2021), calls for a historical and contextual view of disinformation that appreciates how regimes of truth are contingent, as well as socio-politically and culturally constructed. Importantly, they urge disinformation scholars to maintain and express “explicit commitments to justice and equality” (Kuo & Marwick, 2021, p. 2). The IPA’s flaw was neither its concern with propaganda nor its desire for egalitarian democracy. The IPA erred in hiding its political ideological commitments behind “glittering generalities” like science and truth, in presuming its definition of democracy was universally accepted. It claimed impartiality and lacked the epistemological sophistication to comprehend that political disagreement is not reducible to propagandistic rhetoric (nor, I would argue, is it reducible to disinformation). Learning from the IPA’s legacy means leaning into political disagreement—studying it while openly engaging in it. We must acknowledge and defend the political visions and values that drive our work. However, we must also recognize that our visions and findings are particular, not universal. We must seek their broader adoption through ardent persuasion and political engagement.

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