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Why be Quantitative?

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The point of view of this book is that the study of politics can be advanced by the quantitative analysis of political discourse. Why be quantitative? In reply, it is perhaps appropriate to bring out the limitations of qualitative analysis in terms of the work of the present writer.

At the end of World War I, research on politically significant communication was almost entirely qualitative, consisting in the discovery and illustration of propaganda themes and their use. When the present writer described the propaganda of World War I in *Propaganda Technique in the World War* (1927)¹ he took note of certain common themes running through the propaganda of all belligerent powers. The themes were:

The enemy is a menace.

(German militarism threatens us all.)

We are protective.

(We protect ourselves and others.)

The enemy is obstructive.

(They block our future aims.)

We are helpful.

(We aid in the achievement of positive goals.)

The enemy is immoral and insolent.

(They violate legal and moral standards and they hold everyone else in contempt.)

We are moral and appreciative.

(We conform to moral and legal standards and we respect others.)

Source: H. Lasswell and N. Leites and Associates (eds), *Language of Politics: Studies in Quantitative Semantics*, 1949; pp. 40–52, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

The enemy will be defeated.

We will win.

The book was organized to show the form taken by these themes when domestic, allied or enemy audiences were addressed. The chapter on "The Illusion of Victory" showed what was told the home audience on the themes, "The enemy will be defeated," "We will win." The chapter on "Satanism" described how the self was presented as "moral" and "appreciative" while the enemy was "immoral" and "insolent." The menacing and "obstructive" rôle of the enemy and our own "protective" and "helpful" activity were illustrated in the chapter on "War Guilt and War Aims." Special attention was paid to "preserving friendship" (of allies and neutrals) and "demoralizing the enemy." Each chapter was composed of excerpts selected chiefly from the propaganda of the United States, Great Britain, Germany and France.

Although none of the criteria which guided the choice of quotations is stated in the book, it is obvious that some selections were made because they clearly stated a theme or developed a theme in detail. No doubt these criteria justified the citation of the extended account of alleged Entente violations of international law which had been compiled by Dr. Ernst Müller-Meiningen (pp. 85–86). In some cases, the wide dissemination of the material was no doubt a selective factor, especially in the case of *J'accuse!*, an exposé of Germany by Richard Grelling (p. 54). Sometimes the eminence of the Speaker appears to have been the deciding factor, as with the Bryce report on alleged atrocities perpetrated by the Germans in Belgium (p. 19). In certain instances, the excerpt was sample of what was distributed by (or to) a professional, locational, educational or other special group (pp. 70 ff.). No evidence is given in the book that all the material studied by the author was examined with the same degree of care. We are not informed whether the author actually read or glanced through all the copies of the principal mass-circulation newspapers, periodicals, books and pamphlets of Germany and other countries; or whether he read British, French and American material as fully as German.

Of course, the study did not purport to be an exhaustive history of propaganda during the war. It was called an essay in technique, and the hope was expressed that it would have some influence in directing professional historians toward the study of propaganda, and that the scheme of classification would prove helpful in the organization of future research. The book was to some extent successful in both objectives. Research on war propaganda, as indeed on every phase of propaganda, went forward with vigor, many monographs growing out of the original essay or attributing some degree of influence to it.²

Among the most comprehensive books on the propaganda of World War I were those of Hans Thimme, *Weltkrieg ohne Waffen* (1932)³, and George

G. Bruntz, *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire in 1918* (1938)⁴. Both historians explored archives of newspaper, magazine and other source material, the first relying chiefly upon the Reich archives and the second utilizing the Hoover War Library at Stanford University.

Whenever the propaganda message was described, the method adopted by these writers was similar to that of *Propaganda Technique in the World War*. Excerpts were chosen to illustrate what was circulated to different publics and what themes were used. The authors left unspecified their criteria of choice, although these were obviously similar to those of the earlier work. In many respects these monographs are more satisfactory than the first book, since the authors made use of new source material, and employed to advantage the accumulated results of historical scholarship on the relative importance of persons, channels and symbols in the war.

The results, however, can not be accepted as in all respects satisfactory; many relevant questions remain unanswered. Can we assume that a scholar read his sources with the same degree of care throughout his research? Did he allow his eye to travel over the thousands upon thousands of pages of parliamentary debates, newspapers, magazines and other sources listed in his bibliography or notes? Or did he use a sampling system, scanning some pages superficially, though concentrating upon certain periods? Was the sampling system for the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, if one was employed, comparable with the one for the *Manchester Guardian*? Were the leaflets chosen simply because they were conveniently available to the scholar, or were they genuinely representative of the most widely circulated propaganda leaflets?

The very fact that such questions can be raised at all points to a certain lack of method in presenting and conducting research on the history of war propaganda. In all of the books to which reference has been made no explicit justification was given of most of the excerpts chosen to illustrate a specific theme, to characterize the content of any particular channel, or to describe the propaganda directed toward or reaching any given audience. It is impossible to determine from the final report whether the same number or a comparable number of mass circulation media were read for France as for England or Germany, or whether publications were explored with the same degree of intensity at all dates, or whether certain dates were singled out for intensive note-taking.

The limitations of these monographs are apparent when anyone undertakes to follow a particular theme through various periods, channels and audiences. We know that very belligerent used "war aim" propaganda. But suppose we want to find the degree of emphasis laid upon war aims from period to period. Or assume that we ask how they differed when presented to the upper, middle or lower classes if the home population, or to neutral, ally or enemy. Was the war aim propaganda more prominent in the magazines than in the pamphlets, or the reverse? The same questions apply to every theme.

To some extent, historians of war propaganda have sought to reduce ambiguity by multiplying the number of subperiods described within the whole period. Walter Zimmerman studied the English press from the time of Sarajevo to the entry of England into the war, selecting thirty daily newspapers, eight Sunday papers, nine weeklies, four monthlies and two quarterlies, intending to cover all the important regional and social groups in Great Britain.⁵ Even in this period, however, we can not be certain of the criteria used in selecting quotations. It is obvious that Zimmerman does not summarize all thirty daily papers every day, but we are left in the dark about why he quotes one paper one day or week and omits it the next time. Even if we assume that his judgment is good, it is permissible to ask if such arbitrary selection procedures create a properly balanced picture, or whether they result in special pleading based, if not on deliberate deception, then on unconscious bias.

The same problem remains in the detailed monograph by Friederike Recktenwald, in which she restricts herself to a single set of themes having to do with British war aims.⁶ Miss Recktenwald divides the course of the war into subperiods, and reproduces or summarizes material from the British press having to do with war aims. Although this procedure gives us a plausible indication of the relative amount of attention paid to war aims at different times, not all reasonable doubts are allayed. She follows no consistent scheme of reporting. During any given subperiod only a few quotations may be reproduced; yet this may not invariably mean that there was less war-aim news or diminished editorial prominence. It may signify no more than that what was said is less interesting to the historian because the style is less vivid and quotable. We can not rely upon Miss Recktenwald's excerpts to be true samples of the total stream of news and comment reaching the British public, or even of any particular newspaper, or group of newspapers. The moment we ask clear questions that call for reliable bases of comparison, the arbitrary and dubious character of the monograph is apparent.

It is possible, however, to find studies of great technical excellence. In matters of systematic definition and historic detail, we can go back half a century to *A Study of Public Opinion and Lord Beaconsfield, 1875-1880*, by George Carslake Thompson (1886).⁷ At the beginning of that remarkable work, a series of terms for the analysis of public opinion is carefully defined. These terms are consistently applied throughout the two fact-stuffed volumes. One part of the analytical scheme names the standards applied by the British public on foreign policy questions. Among the standards were "international law," "interest," "morality," and "taste." Thompson pointed out that such standards were applied according to the public's conception of England's rôle in relation to other nations, and that these ranged all the way from "England as an island" to "England as a European or Asiatic great power."

In applying these standards and conceptions, Thompson distinguished certain broad motives – “sentimental” or “diplomatic” – that were operating among the members of the British public in their basic orientation toward foreign policy. At any given time – for instance, at the outbreak of war between Russia and Turkey – these standards, conceptions and motivations (public “notions”) were fused into public “views.” The views of the British public in 1876 were classified as “Anti-Turkism,” “Anti-war,” “Order,” “Legalism,” “Anti-Russianism and Philo-Turkism.” Such views in turn were related to corresponding policies. In this way, “Anti-Turkism” was bracketed with “emancipation,” “Anti-war” with “isolation.” The book described each successive phase of England’s reaction to the war between Russia and Turkey, and copiously illustrated every move by excerpts from a list of publications.

Thompson’s treatise is noteworthy for the unification of carefully defined abstractions with exhaustive data from the sources. Nevertheless, the outcome of all the admirable intelligence and industry that went into this treatise does not yield maximum results, because of a basic failure: the problem of sampling, recording and summarizing sources was not resolved. Hence, the entire foundation of the work rests on shaky ground. Thompson divides the five years with which he deals into subperiods, according to some predominant characteristic. One such subperiod is the “incubation period, third phase,” from the opening of the Parliamentary Session of 1876 to the Servian declaration of war. This is followed by the “atrocities period,” which in turn is divided into several parts. For each subperiod, Thompson narrates the stream of events and selects from the sources the quotations that impress him as important not only because they are conspicuous, but because they bear some relationship to his systematic scheme of analysis (standards, conceptions, motivations, views and policies). However, the critical reader is still justified in remaining skeptical of the representativeness of the quotations. He can not be sure why they impressed the author when he was reading and making notes on the sources, or organizing his chapters. An excerpt may be the only one that appeared in a given newspaper or magazine on the same subject during the period; or, on the contrary, it may be only one among a tremendous gush of news and editorial items. Thompson does not tell us. The fundamental operation – of source handling – remained highly arbitrary.

If the excellence of the Thompson study lies in system and rich detail, a few recent publications rank above it in the sampling of sources. D. F. Willcox (1900)⁸ classified the contents of a single issue of 240 newspapers according to topic (by column inches). Later A. A. Tenney, Jr., at Columbia University, interested a number of students in space measurement and initiated investigations of immediate value to world politics. Julian L. Woodward examined the foreign news published in 40 American morning newspapers and improved the technical state of the subject by

showing the effect of different sampling methods upon the result. In general, he found that a small number of issues distributed throughout the year were enough to give a reliable picture of the amount of attention usually given by an American morning newspaper to foreign news (at least during a non-crisis period).⁹

In general, these investigations were not expressly related to political science. They were made by statisticians interested in having something to count, or sociologists who were exploring the general social process. The senior author of the present work undertook to direct research toward the use of objective procedures in gathering the data pertinent to political hypotheses. Schuyler Foster, for example, examined the treatment given European war news in the *New York Times* during definite periods before our participation in the war of 1914–18. He summarized his results in tabular and graphical form, and showed that the crisis that led immediately to our entry into the war was the final one in a series of crises of ever-increasing intensity. He measured these fluctuations by recording the frequency with which different kinds of news or editorial comment were made about the war or America's relation to it. The use of quantitative methods gave precision to part of the history of America's mobilization for war, and opened up a series of questions about the relation between the ups and downs in the *New York Times* and corresponding fluctuations in *New York* newspapers reaching different social groups, and in newspapers published in cities of different sizes throughout the country.¹⁰

More exact methods give us a means of clarifying certain categories that have been at the root of many past evils in the work of historians and social scientists. For a century, controversy has raged over the relative weight of "material" and "ideological" factors in the social and political process. This controversy has been sterile of scientific results, though the propaganda resonance of "dialectical materialism" has been enormous.

Insofar as sterility can be attributed to technical factors in the domain of scholarship, the significant factor is failure to deal adequately with "ideological" elements. The usual account of how material and ideological factors interact upon one another leaves the process in a cloud of mystery. It is as though you put people in an environment called material – and presto! – their ideas change in a predictable way; and if they do not, the failure is ascribed to an ideological lag of some kind. But the relations, though assumed, are not demonstrated. So far as the material dimensions are concerned, operational methods have been worked out to describe them; not so with the ideological. We are amply equipped to describe such "material" changes as fluctuations in output or amount of machinery employed in production; but we can not match this part of the description with equally precise ways of describing the ideological. The result is that the historical and social sciences have been making comparisons between

patterns, only a few features of which are handled with precision. The other dimensions remain wholly qualitative, impressionistic and conjectural.¹¹

We have undertaken to clear up some of the confusion that has long beset the analysis of “environment” by introducing basic distinctions: the first between the “attention frame” and “surroundings,” and the second between the “media frame” and the “non-media frame.” The attention frame or “milieu” is the part of an environment reaching the focus of attention of a person or group; the surroundings do not reach the focus. The media frame is composed of the signs coming to the focus of attention (the press which is actually read, for instance). The non-media frame includes the features of an environment that, although not signs, reach attention, such as conspicuous buildings, or persons. Whether any given set of surrounding does affect the structure of attention is to be settled by observing the phenomena, not by assumption.

The fundamental nature of these relations is evident when we reflect upon the requirements for a scientific explanation of response. Two sets of factors are involved: the environment and predispositions. R (response) is a function, in the mathematical sense, of E (environment), and P (predisposition); and we have shown that the part of the environment immediately affecting response is what comes to the focus of attention (the attention frame).^{*} Information about surroundings is pertinent only to the degree to which it can be shown that the surroundings determine attention. In deciding whether any feature of the environment comes to the focus, it is necessary to demonstrate that a minimum (the threshold level) has been elicited. We do not consider that radio programs which are blacked out by static have come to the attention of an audience. A threshold level has not been reached. (The threshold is not part of the R in the formula of explanation used above; only changes above the threshold are called “effects” – response to what is brought into the attention field.)

The procedures of “content analysis” of communication are appropriate to the problem of describing the structure of attention in quantitative terms.¹² Before entering upon technicalities, it may be pointed out that quantitative ways of describing attention serve many practical, as well as scientific, purposes. *Anticipating the enemy* is one of the most crucial and tantalizing problems in the conduct of war. The intelligence branch of every staff or operations agency is matching wits with the enemy. The job is to out-guess the enemy, to foretell his military, diplomatic, economic and propaganda moves before he makes them, and to estimate where attack would do him the most harm. A principal source of information is what the enemy disseminates in his media of communication.

The Global War introduced a new source of information about the enemy – radio broadcasts under his supervision. When the enemy speaks to his home population, it is possible to listen in. We overhear what the enemy

says to his allies, to neutrals and to his enemies. At the outbreak of the Global War, belligerent governments set monitors to work, listening, recording and summarizing the output of enemy and enemy-controlled stations. In Great Britain a group connected with the British Broadcasting Corporation subjected this enormous body of material to systematic examination and began forecasting Nazi policy. These estimates have since been restudied.¹³ The same procedures have also been applied to the press and to every other channel of communication. The full plan of the enemy often appears only when the entire stream of communication is interpreted as a whole.

As we improve our methods of describing public attention and response, our results become more useful for another practical purpose – the *detecting of political propaganda*. During World War II, the U. S. Department of Justice employed objective propaganda analysis to expose and prosecute enemy agents, like the Transocean Information Service (Nazi-controlled) and “native Fascists.” The Federal Communications Commission described in Court the Axis themes recognized by experts who monitored and analyzed short-wave broadcasts emanating from Germany, Japan and Italy. Objective procedures had been applied in discovering these themes. Objective procedures were also used to analyze the periodicals published by the defendants, and to reveal the parallels between them and the themes disseminated by Axis propagandists.¹⁴

Quite apart from the use of legal action, it is important that members of the public be informed of the behavior of those with access to the channels of communication. In deciding how much we can rely upon a given newspaper, it is important to know if that newspaper ceases to attack Russia then Germany and Russia sign a non-aggression pact, and then returns to the attack as soon as Germany and Russia fall apart. Under these conditions, we have grounds for inferring a pro-German propaganda policy. By studying the news, editorial and feature material in a medium of communication under known German control, we can check on this inference. We may find that the two media distribute praise and blame in the same way among public leaders and the political parties; and that they take the same stand on domestic and foreign issues. If so, our inference is strengthened that the channel is dominated by pro-German policies.¹⁵

In the preceding paragraphs, we have said that policy may be served by objective procedures used to anticipate the enemy and to detect propaganda. Also, as scientific knowledge increases, the possibility of control improves; hence, a third contribution of objective research to policy is *skill*.¹⁶ Skill is the most economical utilization of available means to attain a goal. Appraisals of skill are among the most difficult judgments to establish on a convincing basis, since they depend upon exhaustive knowledge of concrete circumstances and of scientific relations. To say that A is more skilful than B in a given situation is to allow for all factors being “equal.”

It is not easy to demonstrate that the two sets of environing and predisposing factors are strictly comparable. The simple fact that the Nazis won out in Germany against the Socialists and other parties does not necessarily warrant the conclusion that the Nazis were more skillful propagandists than their antagonists. Or the failure of the French to hold out against the Germans longer in 1940 was not necessarily because French propagandists were lacking in skill. The "skill" factor can be separated from the others only when a very comprehensive view can be gained of the context. Did the responsible heads of state choose the most suitable personnel to conduct propaganda operations? Were the most effective symbols chosen? The most useful media? In each case, the question must be answered with reference to alternatives available in the original situation.

That content analysis has a direct bearing on the evaluation of skill is evident, since such methods introduce a degree of precise description at many points in the propaganda process. Directives can be described in detail; so, too, can material released through the propaganda agencies and disseminated through various media controlled by, or beyond the control of, the propagandist. Indeed, as we pointed out in our analysis of the attention factor in world politics,¹⁷ every link in the chain of communication can be described when suitable methods are used; quantitative procedures reduce the margin of uncertainty in the basic data.*

A fourth contribution relates not to policy as a whole, but to the special objectives of humane politics. The aim of humane politics is a commonwealth in which the dignity of man is accepted in theory and fact. Whatever *improves our understanding of attitude* is a potential instrument of humane politics. Up to the present, physical science has not provided us with means of penetrating the skull of a human being and directly reading off his experiences. Hence, we are compelled to rely upon indirect means of piercing the wall that separates us from him. Words provide us with clues, but we hesitate to take all phrases at their face value. Apart from deliberate duplicity, language has shortcomings as a vehicle for the transmission of thought and feeling. It is important to recognize that we obtain insight into the world of the other person when we are fully acquainted with what has come to his attention. Certainly the world of the country boy is full of the sights and smells and sounds of nature. The city boy, on the other hand, lives in a labyrinth of streets, buildings, vehicles and crowds. A Chinese youth of good family has his ancestors continually thrust upon his notice; an American youth may vaguely recall his grandparents. The son of an English ruling family may be reared on the anecdotes of centuries of imperial history, while the son of an American businessman recalls that there was a Revolution and that Bunker Hill had something to do with it.

The dominant political symbols of an epoch provide part of the common experience of millions of men. There is some fascination in the thought of how many human beings are bound together by a thread no

more substantial than the resonance of a name or the clang of a slogan. In war, men suffer pain, hunger, sorrow; the specific source of pain, the specific sensation of one's specific object of sorrow, may be very private. In contrast, the key symbol enters directly into the focus of all men and provides an element of common experience.¹⁸

It is obvious that a complete survey of mass attention will go far beyond the press, the broadcast or the film. It will cover every medium of mass communication. Further, a complete survey would concentrate upon the most active decision-makers, disclosing the milieu of the heads of states, the chiefs of staff, diplomats and all other groups. An exhaustive inventory would describe the entire intelligence process.¹⁹

Why, then, be quantitative about communication? Because of the scientific and policy gains that can come of it. The social process is one of *collaboration* and *communication*; and quantitative methods have already demonstrated their usefulness in dealing with the former. Further understanding and control depend upon equalizing our skill in relation to both.

Notes

1. Or, synonymously, the milieu, which is divisible into media and non-media frames.

2. There is, of course, no implication that non-quantitative methods should be dropped. On the contrary, there is need of more systematic theory and of these luminous "hunches" if the full potentialities of precision are to be realized a practice. As the history of quantification shows (in economics, for instance), there is never-ending, fruitful interplay between theory, hunch, impression and **precision.