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Paul Lazarsfeld, an Austrian-born sociologist and media theorist once described himself as a “marginal figure,” an almost entirely undeserved title based on his accomplishments. Because of the rise of Nazi power in Europe, he emigrated to the United States in 1933, where he was adopted into the academy by the Rockefeller Foundation and Princeton and Columbia Universities. In the first few years of his time in the US, Lazarsfeld and his Bureau of Applied Social Research not only raised significant research funding from both corporations and universities alike, but they produced some of the seminal works in media theory history.

Criticism for his work, especially the “two-step flow” model of communication (which states that news is filtered down from its original source through societal “opinion leaders,” who in turn pass it on to the less-informed masses), has included judgments of his funding sources, his research methods, and the theory itself.

His and his colleagues’ work shattered the pre-conceived theory of the “hypodermic” model of communication, which states that the mass media “injects” information into a passive and easily-influenced mass audience. Instead, his theory supports the notion that the public has some say in how their news is received.

I would like to propose a theory that not only is Lazarsfeld’s work relevant today, but the rise in blogs and over-saturation of media has brought the two-step flow model back to prominence as the dominant means of mass communication in the United States.

The “Marginal” Work of Paul Lazarsfeld and the Resurrection of the Two-Step Flow Model of Communication



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