

# Research on the Characteristics of American War Communication Practice and the Impact on Communication Study

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**ABSTRACT:** Communication now covers every aspect of our lives, and the widespread availability of communication media such as WIFI and mobile phones has led to air becoming intermediation[1]. The unprecedented interest of scholars in new media has overlooked the coherent and complete set of roles and histories behind the act of communication as a necessity of human civilization. To better understand the interaction between communication and society, it is useful to look back at it from a historical perspective as a way of grasping this complex and changing human communication practice. The main object of this study is war in American history, including famous communication events from the American War of Independence, Civil War, World War I and World War II as examples focusing on the application and characteristics of communication in the American war history and how it has influenced the study of communication in the United States through a brief review of American war communication. The analysis of major events is seen as a useful method for communication studies. Through review and analysis, we can see three main features of American communication about the war: rationalized war, civilian narratives, and political pragmatism. These characteristics have also profoundly influenced the direction of communication studies, with pragmatism, political service and elitism becoming prominent characteristics of American communication studies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Born in the United States, communication studies became a separate subject in the 20th century. As a discipline closely linked to society, modern American society has influenced the birth and development of communication studies. However, in terms of the study of the history of communication, the focus of most scholars has been concentrated on post-historical studies. Through review and analysis, we can see three main features of American communication about the war: rationalized war, civilian narratives, and political pragmatism, which means that there are some gaps in the pre-historical part of the history of communication. This article includes an analysis of the American War of Independence and the Civil War, focusing on the use and characteristics of communication through a historical review. This study expands the horizons of the study of the history of communication, complementing the intersectional research horizons of communication and history, and helps think about the relationship between communication and society from a new perspective.

## 2. COMMUNICATION IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

This section looks at the major communication events of

the American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I and World War II, and it is clear that communications played an important and irreplaceable role in the American war effort.

### 2.1 Communication in the American War of Independence

During this war, communication constantly struggles between freedom and control to spread revolutionary ideas. Before the American War of Independence, press publications were suppressed by the colonial government. The struggle for freedom of the press then intensified with the publication of Cato's letter by two English journalists in a London daily newspaper in 1720, which was widely reprinted in American newspapers in revolt against the suppression of freedom of expression by the colonists. After the famous trial of John Peter Zenger, the struggle for freedom of expression and publication in the United States began. As newspapers increased, more and more revolutionaries used them to spread their revolutionary ideas in defiance of the colonial government. At the same time, the widespread use of pamphlets made them accessible to ordinary people and established a revolutionary base in the population's minds[2] Thomas Paine's Common Sense is a pamphlet that has had a significant impact. It offers a radical critique of the monarchy, appealing to the necessity of republicanism for

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American society and the reasons why America must secede from Britain. It sold 100,000 copies in its first year[3] and contributed significantly to the American War of Independence outbreak.

## **2.2 Communication in the American Civil War**

Communication at this stage has taken on a more instrumental character. As literacy rates increased and journalism grew, cheaper newspapers called penny press began to dominate the American press market. Photographic images and illustrations are widely used, and working-class and immigrant curiosity is high. Americans' enthusiasm for the press also led to a boom in partisan newspapers. With both Democrats and Republicans paying particular attention to the importance of this medium for disseminating political ideas, the partial application of communication for power struggle was particularly evident at this stage. In the case of Abraham Lincoln, his use of communication to shape his image and create public opinion through the Chicago Press and Tribune is seen as key to his election to the presidency[5].

Also important is the use of the radio. Not only was it a significant improvement in the speed of news delivery, but it was also the first time that radio was used in warfare. The Northern Government employed over 12,000 telegraphers and laid 15,000 miles of wire[5], which allowed them to gather information and make decisions directly from the battlefield. Victory in the information war also contributed in part to the triumph of the Northern Army throughout the war.

## **2.3 Communication in the United States during World War I**

The use of communications dramatically changed the role of the United States in World War I. As the Wilson administration prepared to enter the war, he was confronted by Americans in an isolationist atmosphere. The government thus began to use communication to change the nature of this unwilling war. After establishing the Committee on Public Information (CPI), the Four Minute Man became an essential measure for the U.S. government to promote the justification of war. The Four Minute Men are speakers across the United States. The U.S. government commissions the latter to deliver the government's pro-war message and rally American support for the war effort by giving short speeches whenever and wherever they can[6]. In addition to the speeches, many pictures, posters and songs were widely distributed, linking the war with the family[7]. All Americans were expected to participate in this war. The CPI's work in influencing public opinion has become increasingly influential and has been key to enacting the Espionage Act and the Sedition Act[8-9]. This suppression of anti-war speech was not alleviated until the Schenck v. United States decision.

## **2.4 Communication in the United States during World War II**

At this stage, communication had become part of the US strategic deployment in the war, and the use of communication was becoming increasingly scientific and mature. At the government level, the Roosevelt administration established the United States Office of War Information (OWI) after the outbreak of war. In a desperate attempt to avoid repeating the controversies of the CPI during WWI, the government avoided using the word propaganda and instead emphasized the function of providing information. Within the United States, OWI has expanded its advocacy into film, using film as a critical tool for internal advocacy, such as the famous documentary *Why We Fight*. Also of interest is the use of radio, a series of talks by Roosevelt that can be called a classic example of opinion leader communication. Propaganda abroad in the USA can be seen as a tactic, using leaflets, radio and other tools to demoralize the enemy. Many scholars have begun to explore the role of public opinion and how to influence it. Scholars such as Lizardsfield, Lasswell and Hovland have all studied communication from wartime propaganda, and the focus on disciplinary studies has led to a more practical and scientific approach to the communication techniques used in the United States.

## **3. THE CHARACTER OF COMMUNICATION IN THE AMERICAN WAR**

This section summarises the characteristics of American war communications, which always share some similar features, regardless of the war, including rationalized warfare, civilianized war narratives, and a strong political pragmatism. These three features are closely aligned with and play an important role in American war communication practice.

### **3.1 Purpose of rationalizing war**

Historical review shows that communication in warfare has a long history, and naturally, so has the United States. One of the aims of war propaganda is the need to idealize the aims of war[10]. In wartime, American communication has always focused on mobilizing for war and building consensus, particularly justification and rationality. Before the War of Independence, some politicians, such as Franklin, began to use pamphlets to promote resistance to the colonists. Communication was used in both the North and South during the War of Independence to gain the support of a wider population. This feature was particularly evident during the First World War. The CPI, founded by the Wilson administration, used communications to sell the war to Americans. Ubiquitous propaganda succeeded in raising anti-German sentiment in America and contributed significantly to the sale of war bonds[11]. To emphasize its legitimacy, CPI does not refer to its actions as

"propaganda" but instead as an information dissemination exercise designed to keep Americans well informed of the facts. From a CPI perspective, propaganda is a word that has to do with deception and corruption, a term associated with an adversary[12]. American propaganda in World War II portrayed the war as a struggle for human freedom, again with the same aim.

### **3.2 Means of communication for civilian narratives**

Civilian narratives are a distinctive feature of American war communication and equally crucial to its success. By understanding the majority of society, society as a whole can be fully mobilised to join the war, and it is clear that American war propagandists have been successful in this regard. They knew how to use the most common medium to make ordinary people understand, support and even participate in the war through straightforward, simple statements. The communicators of the War of Independence era were closely associated with the paper, some famous cases being Franklin's cartoon *Join or Die* published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Their names indicate the distinctly civilian narrative, a straightforward presentation of the reasons and necessities of war to all, and this same directness allowed these propaganda materials to be widely spread. Communication in the Civil War seems to have emphasized civilian communication. Comics became the most popular form of communication during this period. Comics are cheap to disseminate, attractive enough to the reader and can quickly inform the communicator of their purpose[13]. Also of note is the communication of songs such as *The First Gun is Fired*. As the first song written for the Civil War, it was a great confidence booster for northern supporters. By the time of World War I, speeches by four-minute men covered almost the entire United States, and they were asked to use accessible methods to rally the public to the war effort[14]. This interpersonal approach to communication, although more costly, allowed for more precise and targeted communication with different groups, which was extremely valuable to the Wilson administration. In addition, the CPI began to reach out to a broader public with more media, including newspapers, films and posters, one of the most famous of which was the Uncle Sam recruitment poster. The exaggerated images appeal straightforwardly to the reader's patriotic feelings. With the American media industry boom, American communications began to work with the film and television industry during World War II. Hollywood and Disney all produced films and animations for the war. Captain America's comics also included an anti-Nazi storyline[15]. It can be said that American WWII communications carry out the civilian character of the narrative in an entertaining way.

### **3.3 Political pragmatism in communication: fake news, stigmatization and suppression of speech**

The development of American communication is closely

related to political pragmatism. It is also a weapon of public opinion that American politicians are extremely good at. When it comes to waging war, politicians will discredit their opponents in various ways. Examples include fake news, stigmatization and speech suppression. The people still talk about the fake news that Franklin created to promote British atrocities in the War of Independence. Franklin faked an issue of the *Boston Independent Chronicle*. He mentioned the massacre of Native Americans by the British and even collected the scalps of children and women to show off[16]. This fake news not only inspired a revolt in the United States but even changed the attitude of Europe towards Britain[17].

The American Civil War was an apparent manifestation of pragmatism. Cartoonists close to the South in the Civil War would tend to depict the targets of their attacks as the black race, maligning their images to oppose the abolition of slavery[13]. As the leader of the North, Lincoln was naturally the target of Southern attacks. For example, the image of Lincoln was associated with the devil in cartoon masks and faces to promote the legitimacy of the Southern struggle. For the North, more propaganda cartoons exaggerated the image of Lincoln as reliable and tremendous and brought to the fore the oppression of enslaved people in the South. The newspapers were also full of exaggerations and attacks. During World War I, to encourage Americans to agree with the government's plans for participation in the war, the government began to suppress opposing speech.

On the one hand, strict censorship was imposed, and every available medium, from films to newspapers, was used to promote the war. The propaganda for the war was fraught with the stigmatization of Germans and people of German descent. Germany became associated with bloodshed and barbarism, the teaching of German in schools was banned, and even attacks on German-Americans began. At the same time, America was promoted as the saviour who would save the world order. On the other hand, the Espionage Act and Sedition Act were enacted to silence opposition and keep the country's views on the war unified. World War II was equally a just war for the United States. Having gained enough experience in spreading it, the United States began to see it thoroughly as an essential part of the war. The impact of communication becomes an even broader and more imperceptible influence. The media of radio, film, animation and leaflets have spread the image of American justice throughout the world. It is worth noting that the United States, during this period, was sufficiently aware of the impact of communication to begin funding communication research and to try to initiate some change with communication. In response to domestic food shortages in the United States, the population was encouraged to use bovine offal, which led Lewin to the gate-keeper theory. And in an attempt to boost military morale, Hovland's research on persuasion and attitudes explored the impact of military films on confidence.

### **3.4 Warfare and communication studies**

The interplay between warfare and communication studies

in the United States presents a mutually reinforcing relationship. It is easy to see from the previous analysis that the constant practices of communication applications in the United States during the war laid enough of a foundation for the discipline that the emergence and development of a systematic field became inevitable. On the other hand, the continuous development of the profession has also promoted practical applications in warfare, increasing the influence of American psychological and public opinion warfare.

First is the concern for communication effectiveness. The urgent need for practicality during the war brought a desire for effectiveness in communication studies, which also became the key to American communication studies becoming an empirical school of thought[18]. As the scholar who first proposed the communication paradigm, Laswell's Model of Communication[19] is typical of the American school of communication. He divides the communication process into five steps: communicator, content, medium, audience and effect. This implies an attitude that communication is done for a purpose and to achieve a specific outcome. Confidence ineffectiveness has led scholars to believe that mass communication is like a magic bullet[20]. Audiences cannot escape the influence of mass media if the methods are correct.

Secondly, there is a close collaboration between communication studies and the US government. Indeed, during the war, many communication scholars became associated with the government in one way or another. Bernays, a leading American propagandist, served on the Committee on Public Information during the First World War and has been a consultant to political clients on many occasions. The famous journalist Lippmann had also served directly as Wilson's advisor and was appointed to head the war propaganda effort. There is a direct employment relationship between academics and government and a relationship akin to a win-win partnership. Some research foundations serve as a link between the two, with academics receiving funding to conduct research in some foundations and the government funding the foundations with funds. For example, the Rockefeller Foundation's support of some research institutions was funded by the CIA[21].

Thirdly, there is the distinct elitism of communication studies. A certain degree of elitism in American communication studies is, in fact, a necessity. The impact of the war on communication studies has led most scholars to try to solve specific problems for the government, and the discipline that has developed from the top down is naturally elitist. The relationship between communication and democracy has likewise been debated by scholars, one of the most famous debates being that between Lippmann and Dewey. Lippmann refers to the public as a phantom and emphasizes the role of experts and elites in communication. Dewey, on the other hand, favoured a participatory democracy for all. But it seems that there has always been an overwhelming tendency towards elitism in the study and practice of communication, especially before the advent of social media. In the case of communication studies during the war, for example, both Hofland and Lewin have been engaged in the study of

persuasion, that is, how to persuade civilians to act on the ideas of politicians and elites. The research and development of advertising and public relations reinforced the spread of elitism for persuasive purposes in the United States. Many scholars have criticised this elitism, particularly those critiques of the Frankfurt School. Influenced by Marxism, critical scholars have attempted to establish a more democratic culture and method of communication in response to the control of mass culture over the general public. However, it must be admitted that their pessimism about the public's agency has made their views somewhat elitist.

## 4. CONCLUSION

America's wars required the use of communication, and communication studies evolved in the process, moving from practice to discipline and specialisation. A pragmatic vision has always been embraced in American communication studies, enriched by a central drive for political purposes. American communication in warfare includes three features of rationalised war, civilian narratives, and political pragmatism. It also influenced the study of communication, like focus on pragmatism, a close relationship with government and elitism influences. This essay is a simple vertical review of the intersection of the history of communication and the history of warfare. It does not delve into the study of specific historical events. Also, the fact that the literature has not been collected in great depth is a limitation that cannot be ignored. But it's a good place to start, and as a discipline at a crossroads, communication studies can think more about the intersection of research and other social sciences in the future.

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