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978-0-521-04145-4 - Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy

Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie and Kathryn H. Fuller

Excerpt

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Introduction

THE PAYNE FUND STUDIES AND THEIR CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE FOR COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH

Among early efforts to research the effects of mass communications, the most extensive are the reports contained in eight black-bound volumes published by Macmillan, between 1933 and 1935, under the series title “Motion Pictures and Youth.” Also known as the “Payne Fund Studies” (PFS), these pioneering works were undertaken when the mass media consisted only of the press, recorded music, the movies and the radio. Of these, the movies were of greatest concern to reformers and educators because of their enormous attraction to (unsupervised) children. (Radio was not neglected, however, as Robert McChesney’s Appendix A in this book reminds us.) Hence the PFS focused all their energy on one research problem: how were movies affecting the youth of America? For its time, the research was thorough, innovative and plausible. Yet the PFS are only beginning to be accorded the recognition that are their due or studied as exhaustively as they deserve to be. By reconstructing the curious history and fate of the studies, and by publishing for the first time some of the lost materials, the present volume hopes both to explain this neglect and to restore the PFS to a place of honor in the history of communications research comparable to that accorded to Lazarsfeld and Stanton’s *Radio Research*, Hovland, Lumsdaine and Sheffield’s *Experiments in Mass Communications* and the work of Columbia’s Bureau of Applied Social Research.

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The Chicago School and the Origins of Communications Research

The PFS are important both as ground-breaking works in a new field and as examples of sophisticated social science. If they mark the beginning of large-scale mass communications research, then the cradle of that research was the University of Chicago. Strong in all the social sciences, Chicago had, according to Edward Shils, become dominant in one. He writes that between the First World War and the end of the Second, by which time it had suffered something of an eclipse, the Department of Sociology at Chicago was the “center par excellence of sociological studies in the United States.”¹ The two presiding professors during the department’s early years, Charles R. Henderson and Albion W. Small, were Baptist ministers who shared a conception of sociology as an area of social concern, an arena for civic improvement. “But a proper sociology, Small agreed with [his colleague] W. I. Thomas, aimed to substitute actions based on knowledge for actions based on feeling.”² So conceived as a scientific search for reliable knowledge on which to base social action, sociology was to become a professionalized social science simultaneously pursuing descriptive and observational research and theory, with an agenda set by theoretical and philosophical considerations rather than by public opinion. For twenty years the professorial figure dominating much of this research was the former journalist Robert H. Park.

The effort to turn sociology into a science – whether pursued through general theory or more rigorous empirical research – involved the detached and objective study of society and allowed no room for an ameliorative approach, which involved explicit normative commitments. The new research methods that Thomas and Park developed diverged markedly from the approach of the social survey movement, even though they were well aware of it.³

In circumstances to be explained in Chapter One, the Rev. William H. Short was persuaded that the children of America could be saved from the movies only if reformers’ actions were based not merely on feeling but on knowledge. It was not surprising, then, that his 1928 quest for research talent eventually drew him to the University of Chicago. Chicago’s was the largest and most prestigious sociology department in the

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United States, and features of urban life were its raw material. A modest, one-woman study of children and the movies had already been published.⁴ As historian Dorothy Ross explains, the charity and reform work in the city inspired the concrete empirical work that flourished at the university. “The inspiration . . . came largely from Hull House and the urban charity movement. Hull House widened the sympathies of its academic visitors and the writings of Jane Addams [who ran Hull House] were regularly consulted. . . . More specifically, *Hull House Maps and Papers* (1895) began the urban studies and use of maps for which Chicago sociology later became famous.”⁵

The presiding sociology professors at Chicago in the 1920s, Small, Park and Ernest W. Burgess, had focused much of the department’s research on the city. They had looked at its underside, its diversity, its changing face. As early as 1915 Park had argued that the vocations of ordinary people should be studied.⁶ Since movies were a characteristic urban phenomenon, it should not be hard to see why Park was himself among those who submitted a research proposal to Short.⁷ Urban centers seemed to be cauldrons where a new and possibly un-American social experiment was being conducted and where social pathologies were emerging that might threaten the United States that leading thinkers thought they knew. And with the growth of cinema chains and radio networks in the cities, these troubles might be exported to rural America. Instead of urban studies viewing city life as a degeneration of that in small towns and rural areas, they saw conditions in the cities as possible harbingers of what was to be visited on their country cousins.

Short found abundant talent at Chicago in sociology and cognate fields. His eventual choice for research director, W. W. Charters, taught education there, although he was soon to move to Ohio State. There were impressive younger faculty members, like Herbert Blumer and L. L. Thurstone, and outstanding students, like Philip Hauser and Paul G. Cressey. There was Frederic Thrasher, who had received his Ph.D. in 1926 with a dissertation titled “The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago,” published as a book the following year. He too moved: to New York University, where he undertook a large-scale research endeavor known as the Boys’ Club study. A movie component was eventually grafted onto it, as detailed in Chapter Two. A mass of material was accumulated on the Boys’ Club but none of it was ever published.⁸ Thrasher later recruited Paul G. Cressey to look after the movie project.

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Cressey's 1929 master's thesis, "The Closed Dance Hall in Chicago," published as *The Taxi-Dance Hall* in 1932, is one of the gems of Chicago sociology. So although the Payne Fund research was conducted at Penn State, Ohio State, Yale and New York University, much of its lineage and inspiration traces back to the University of Chicago.

Morris Janowitz, writing in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, suggests that the use of propaganda during the First World War (and its subsequent investigation by the Creel Committee) raised some questions: Were the hopes of the politicians and the fears of the public justified? Were people susceptible to persuasion by modern communications? Could these media be used to control people? Could they mold people for the worse? These questions, he claims, lay behind such early studies as the PFS.⁹ As it turned out, Janowitz opines, what the Payne Fund researchers found was not anything to exacerbate fears.¹⁰ Janowitz notes that, at this stage, mass communications research was responsive to public opinion and concern. In this respect, it only partially conformed to the trend of work at the University of Chicago and deviated from much of social science research. Mass communications research was then, and is to this day, more closely tied to the public agenda than to social science research in general.¹¹

Behind the growth of the social sciences and their research, if we follow Dorothy Ross, is the following argument. The Declaration of Independence created a unique culture. The United States envisaged itself as a society of robust and independent yeomen, largely rural, largely classless, neither Jacobin nor reactionary: an exception in the history of nations. In the post-Civil War period, the emergence of the city, the development of capitalism and the influx of lower-class immigrants shook people's faith in this exceptionalist myth. In these respects, the United States was turning out to be much like Old World countries. The underlying project of the social sciences, Ross argues, was to show that, despite uncomfortable parallels with the Old World, American exceptionalism remained intact. Adding to Ross, we may note that mass communications were, in the 1920s, the major new challenge to the exceptionalist myth, for they erupted into a republic that had not anticipated anything like them and they seemed set to disrupt it. Profit-driven and pandering, they were made in and by the very segment of society, urban immigrants, that was thought to threaten the republic's identity. Could the political system as envisaged by the founders survive the assault on the population by the mass media?

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Equally significant for the assessment of the PFS was the intellectual sophistication of the studies. Since there had been no large-scale mass communications research before, since the questions to be addressed were not new but had not previously been broken down into researchable form, the authors of these studies were pioneers both in research methods and in research design. They had to devise ways to answer intuitive questions with empirical research: Did movies affect children's sleep? Did movies teach? Did movies affect attitudes? Did movies affect conduct? Could one identify and quantify the content of movies? Was there a cause-and-effect relationship between movies and crime? Their research methods ranged from physiological studies (using such devices as the psychogalvanometer and the wired bed; see photo section), through questionnaires, to open-ended interviews, autobiographies, content analysis and statistically standardized tests. All of these research techniques, in refined forms, continue to be used today. The Payne Fund pioneers and research designers were far from flawless in their use of these new means, but it is from their errors and oversights that more cautious and reliable methods were developed.

The Eclipse of the Payne Fund Studies

Why, then, have these volumes of research stemming from a major school of social science, both informative and methodologically innovative, only begun to be accorded the recognition they deserve as excellent early mass communications research? The answer is complex and will emerge in more detail in the three chapters of Part One.

For the purposes of this introduction, we can divide the question into global aspects having to do with changes in the social sciences themselves, and localized factors having to do with the reception of the PFS by the public and by the academy.

One factor was the decline of the Chicago school by the early 1930s, as well as criticism of the school by rival institutions, who in turn promoted themselves. The social process model of society that underlay so much Chicago work came under attack and was replaced by sampling and other techniques from survey research and statistics,¹² as well as the personality and social structure approach associated with the names of Parsons and Merton at Harvard. In this approach, theory came first: to identify something as a social problem you had first to articulate your

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view of society and its processes and specify norms and expectations. It was then possible to distinguish between social problems that were integral to the social system (e.g., suicide and crime) and those alleged to have exogenous causes that could be corrected if those causes were eliminated. (Prohibitionists thought of alcohol as an exogenous cause of social ills, and nowadays the language of enforcement personnel and some politicians suggests that they view drugs similarly. Functionalists would be inclined to view both as endogenous problems of failed integration.)¹³

Functionalism was a much-strengthened version of the tendency at Chicago for research problems, despite the stress on theory, to coincide with the public agenda. In classic Chicago studies, social problems were treated as deviations from the proper course of society. The later functionalist view knew no proper course; society was an integrated and functioning system and many of its so-called problems were unintended consequences of nonproblematic parts of the system. A good example is the argument about prostitution by the Harvard-trained sociologist Kingsley Davis. Davis endeavored to show that prostitution was correlated with the strength of the family system and a regime of social status.¹⁴ A standard social problem was treated as a functional correlate of a central social institution and hence not as a problem to be ameliorated in isolation or without cost.¹⁵

By the time the first of the PFS appeared in 1933, the work had come to seem curiously untheoretical, even by contemporary standards. Perhaps this was because the functionalist notion of theory was stronger than that espoused by Park and those under his influence. A slew of empirical research had been carried out by the Payne Fund scientists operating with no agreed-upon model of society. At least, none was articulated. But theoretical questions, visions of society, were coming to the fore in the rivalries among university sociology departments just mentioned. In these disputes, the issues surrounding the socialization of children had a modest place. Much more important was the understanding of the acting adult in the institutional and psychological setting. Thus the work of Lasswell on Communist propaganda and of Cantril and Merton and Lazarsfeld on radio listening seems much more contemporary than the PFS.¹⁶ These later pioneers of communications research were already in touch with the kinds of thinking about society that began to emerge in the 1930s and that have existed to the present day.

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These changes in the social sciences partially explain why the PFS were orphaned; to complete the picture we have to add the influence of more local historical developments. First and foremost was the self-destruct device built into the studies. As the results of the research came in and were discussed, the researchers became increasingly divided between those whose prior doubts about the movies had been reinforced by the data (a majority) and those who concluded that the data gave no cause for alarm and that perhaps the entire approach they had been using was sociologically and psychologically naive.

We see emerging in discussions within the PFS what we might now take to be the standard dilemma of all social scientists researching public policy issues. It was not standard at the time. Scientific work is currently seen as the servant and not the determinant of policy. Indeed, research is supposed to strive for neutrality on policy issues. This was still a new position at the time the PFS were being made. As noted, several of the senior professors at Chicago had backgrounds of policy activism. All of the Payne Fund researchers were trained professionals. Short was not a professional but an activist. He had recruited researchers sympathetic to his views, researchers cool to his views and researchers who shared his disappointment at Hollywood's failure to make movies that were uplifting or educational. Edgar Dale, who confined his study to enhancing the positive socializing role of movies, seems to have stood a little outside the scientific discussions of the rest of the researchers. Yet it was projects developed out of his work that the Payne Fund continued to support for nearly twenty years.

These complicated divisions among the researchers were sharpened when the manuscript of Henry J. Forman's popular summary of the results was circulated for comments. Forman was a free-lance writer commissioned to produce a trade book summing up the research. What he produced was an antimovie polemic more strident than the Rev. Short's earlier Payne Fund project, *A Generation of Motion Pictures* (1927). Short and Charters, no friends of the movies, worked hard to get the Forman manuscript toned down. Scientific results were more persuasive, they felt, when presented in a somewhat lower key. Pre-viewed as articles in *McCall's*, then published as *Our Movie Made Children* (1933), this best-seller became *the* representation of the PFS in the public mind and gave the false impression that the researchers had lent themselves to a moralizing crusade.¹⁷ It diverted attention from the

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scientific achievement of the studies and forced the authors to distance themselves from Forman's opinions. As Chapter Three details, this danger had been seen too late to be averted.¹⁸

Worse was to come with regard to the standing of the work in scientific opinion. Mortimer J. Adler, who taught both philosophy and law at the University of Chicago, and who maintained a long-standing philosophical skepticism about the value of social science research for public policy, incorporated a lengthy and scathing critique of the scientific reasoning of some of the studies in his *Art and Prudence* (1937). A delighted movie industry had Raymond Moley summarize Adler's high-powered ideas in a "brochure" of 1938.¹⁹ Clearly energized by his contempt for Forman's pretensions as a moral tutor, Adler scored heavy hits on the Payne Fund reports authored by Blumer; Blumer and Hauser; Peters; Dale; Renshaw, Miller and Marquis; and Dysinger and Ruckmick. His rhetorical case was strengthened when he singled out three of the more quantitative reports – by Shuttleworth and May, Holaday and Stoddard, and Thurstone and Peterson – as exemplary social science.

But it was Adler's overall argument that was the killer: even were the facts established as thus and so, he reasoned, it did not follow that any particular course of action was thereby recommended.²⁰ As contemporary philosophers would say, no value conclusions could be drawn from facts. Although the charge that the researchers had overlooked this point was unfair, it stuck. In truth, the Payne Fund researchers were well aware that social science and social policy were different things, and they had all along hoped to distance themselves from any recommendations and conclusions.²¹ But the institutional overlap between the Research Committee, headed by Charters, and the Motion Picture Research Council, headed by Short (and only secretly funded by the politically shy Payne Fund), was too obvious. Furthermore, in the absence of an overall vision of society and a comparative perspective on the contributions of other social institutions to problems associated with the movies, the social scientists were hard-pressed to keep a safe distance from Short and Forman's campaign. After all, it was Short who had initiated the research, molded much of the approach and selected the researchers. It was not hard for Adler to identify unacknowledged value assumptions built into the research itself. Thus rival scientists could impugn the scientific credentials of the PFS work simply from its association with Short and Forman.

What had happened is very simple. The researchers were men and

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women of science but they had no clearly articulated framework in which to present their results simply as advances in science. Short and Forman were crusaders and publicity hounds. They presented the research in a moral context and as a call to action. Thus the scientific work was discussed by Adler, for example, largely in a moral context. But, unlike Short and Forman, he found it morally worthless. Thus the choice for the public seemed either to consider the work valuable and join the crusade or to repudiate the crusade and the work. Much of the social science community seems to have chosen the latter course. Shoved aside and only now being seriously contemplated are the scientific merits of the work independent of the moral context in which it was hijacked.

A contingent local historical fact but one, again, that hastened the demise of the PFS is that, during the period in which they were being prepared, the organized motion picture industry was engaged in self-reform. If the studies could be interpreted as pointing to any adverse effects, these were already moot under the reforms prompted by the League of Decency and the efforts of the Production Code Administration of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, created by Will H. Hays.²² Insofar as the Payne Fund research identified any dangers, these drastic self-censorship efforts to make movies inoffensive, or else unintelligible, to school-age children would have allayed fears. Few reformers were wholly convinced by these “cleanup” efforts, but more sophisticated thinking about how movies affected society was required if the campaign against them was to continue. The failure of the reformers to sponsor further research may help explain why the moral panic they had tried to generate subsided after 1935.

It would be controversial to argue that the failure to publish one of the key projected studies, that on the role of the movies in inner-city areas served by boys’ clubs (announced as *Boys, Movies and City Streets*), contributed to the studies’ neglect. After all, the gist of the findings had been described by both Charters and Forman. Yet that projected volume was central. Would it show that, in New York, some connection could be made between undesirable social behavior and movie attendance? The self-reporting by delinquent youths seemed to suggest a connection. When the principal researcher, Paul G. Cressey, tried to write up the material, however, he found himself unpersuaded that the research question as defined could be so answered. As the reader of this volume will see, he thought through the results and found that society simply did not work the way the original research design implic-

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itly assumed. What we publish here are his first attempt (Chapter Four) and his redesign of the problem (Chapter Five). Read with his 1938 article,²³ these texts show Cressey to be an intellectual bridge between the kind of thinking about society Chicago had sponsored in the 1920s, when the PFS project was set up, and the more modern-seeming thinking about society emerging in the later 1930s.

A final local reason for the eclipse of the PFS is that the researchers who had struggled so hard to finish the studies almost immediately turned their backs on this line of research and made their careers elsewhere. Some of the younger researchers disappeared from the social sciences.²⁴ Those who stayed in academe went on to gain fame for different kinds of work.²⁵ Perhaps the internal dissent of the group (see Chapter Two) and the studies' disastrous reception were strong signals to put the PFS behind them.

The Continuing Relevance of the Payne Fund Studies

Whether or not these are the historical reasons for the relative neglect of the PFS, the question remains, of what interest are they today? Are they of purely historical concern, or can they be profitably studied in their own right? The answer is that they are of considerable intrinsic interest. The effects of mass communication are a continuing intellectual and public policy problem, and any study of them remains far from tractable. From the past efforts of the PFS we can learn both what went right and, even more so, what went wrong. Furthermore, the Studies help us to historicize the subject of mass communications research, to demystify it by studying its painstaking and halting construction.

With concerns expressed successively about children and crooners, children and radio serials, children and horror comics, children and television, children and rock music, children and rap lyrics and children and video games, it might hardly seem necessary to make a case for the ongoing relevance of the PFS.²⁶ The nature of the socialization process remains poorly understood; the degree of its dependence on what might be termed the major or central institutions of family, school and church, as opposed to such informal pressures as peer group and mass media, is controversial. The PFS were done at a time when the difficulties were not fully grasped. These studies, including some of the material published here for the first time, showed how complex was the problem