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The Bureau of Applied Social Research and Comics Studies in the 1940s

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The Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) was an agency specialised in mass communication research established in 1944 and initially directed by Paul F. Lazarsfeld. From 1945 to 1946 it ran four research projects on the reception of a series of cartoons and comics aimed at spreading an antiracist, anti-antisemitic and pro-union message in the USA. To do so, they deployed different techniques to test audience reception, including a survey and focused interviews. Most of BASR's reports remain unpublished in Columbia University Archival Collections. This article focuses on Mr. Biggott, a character full of prejudice created by Carl Rose to test the effects of an intentionally racist and antisemitic comic strip. We analysed the content of the three reports developed by BASR on the reception of three comic strips: the first one examined 160 focused interviews; the second one focused on a survey with 692 respondents; and the last sought to combine the results obtained through these two techniques together. We argue that they represent a pioneering approach in Social Sciences, both methodologically (random samples, focused interviews, triangulation) and theoretically (limited effects, boomerang interpretation).

Introduction

Audience analysis is almost as old as the field of media studies itself. In the case of a medium such as comics, moreover, this analysis began under special circumstances for two reasons. Firstly, the comic book industry as we know it today emerged during the 1930s in the United States of America with the publication, among others, of *The Funnies* in 1931, but especially *Superman* in 1938. Secondly, because this circumstance coincided with the growing interest of American empirical sociology in the media, particularly cinema, radio, and the written press. The concern of academia in comic research appeared almost at the same time the comic book industry was emerging. According to Tilley (2017), the first evidence of research on comics was dated in 1941,[1] when George Hill and Estelle Trent published the results of a survey on comics interest directed to 256 children from a suburb in Philadelphia. The fieldwork for that seminal paper was completed in the spring of 1938 (Hill & Trent 1940). Many other studies will appear in the following years focusing on comic reading, its effects on literacy or its influence on criminal behaviour, both from quantitative and qualitative perspectives (Giner-Monfort 2021).

It was in this context that the Bureau of Applied Social Research (hereafter BASR) appeared. It was created as the Office of Radio Research at Princeton in 1937 and subsequently established at Columbia in 1940, always under the command of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, who intended to continue his research on audiences that began in Vienna during the 1930s (Glock & Sills 1958; Jeřábek 2017). The Princeton radio project was originally a three-year research project to study the impact of radio on American society, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. However, the Bureau survived until 1977, in part thanks to the sponsorship received by foundations, private companies and the US administration itself. This would explain some of the empirical research carried out from 1940 onwards, focusing on issues such as radio and newspaper audiences, which was Lazarsfeld's first publication as director of the BASR (Lazarsfeld 1940). Paul F. Lazarsfeld would later be joined, among others, by Robert K. Merton, Bernard Berelson, Patricia Kendall, Marjorie Fiske and Charles Wright Mills (Simonson 2006; Hristova 2022).

During the first decade of its existence, the Bureau developed a vast range of studies: from radio persuasion strategies, such as Merton's study on successful mechanisms implemented to convince the population to buy war bonds during World War II (Merton 1946) to voting research, professional socialisation or even singing and dancing (Barton 1979). But there were also studies focusing on comics as learning tools in schools (Wolf & Fiske 1949) or on the mechanisms of message interpretation in the media (Kendall & Wolf 1949). These latter examples are part of a broader line of research developed by BASR on

[1] Recent studies situated the first research where comics and funnies were cited back in 1927 (Giner-Monfort & Mengual-Morata 2023).

comic strips and cartoons between 1945 and 1946, one of which is discussed below. It must be said that BASR's comic studies have been largely ignored by the academic community for different reasons: firstly, because of the minority character of comics compared to other hegemonic media such as radio, press or television, with larger audiences and acceptance, on the one hand, and less criticism from society, as was the case during the comic persecution that began in the 1950s (Hajdu 2009). Secondly, because most of this research remains unpublished in the BASR archive at Columbia. And finally, because although this research was developed in a pioneering centre such as BASR, the scientists in charge (mainly Patricia Kendall and Marjorie Fiske, with the occasional collaboration of Katherine Wolf and Marion Strauss among others) have not had the same recognition of their male colleagues like Lazarsfeld, Merton or Berelson (Hristova 2022).

This article aims to explore in more detail one of BASR's investigations (Mr Biggott's) into how the messages of an openly intolerant comic strip were interpreted by its readers. To do so, we will pay attention to the process of creating the strips, to the messages they used and, above all, to the methodologies implemented by the BASR to try to understand how different groups interpreted the manifest and latent discourses. Behind this desire to understand the interpretation of written messages, there was an explicit need to introduce cultural mechanisms for social change at a historical moment marked, among other things, by antisemitism and racism (and the latent threat of communism).

Mr Biggott in the context of propaganda measures against antisemitism

Mr Biggott's research was one of the four projects focusing on comics conducted by BASR between September 1945 and March 1946. All of them were political and social studies aimed at examining the effects of printed material in comic strip format on American society. The objective was to use these materials to promote tolerance, be it racial, religious, class or even to improve the relationship between the American population and trade unions. To this end, the BASR received funding from different organisations. In the case of the research on *Mr Biggott*, the funding was provided by the American Jewish Committee (hereafter AJC) at a time, during the 1930s and 1940s, when antisemitism and racism, in general, were highly prevalent in North American society (see, for example, Ziege 2012). The AJC had sponsored a scientific meeting in May 1944, held on the initiative of Joshua Liebman, which brought together 25 scholars from diverse fields, from which emerged the need for a scientific department for the study of antisemitism and the use of propaganda techniques for its control (Schachner 1948). Max Horkheimer, who was involved at that time in the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in exile was proposed to head this department. He had already planned a series of investigations aimed at mapping antisemitism in the United States, which led to the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*. Moreover, he intended to detect

antisemitism through the use of films (Horkheimer 1941:142), but, eventually, he had to shelve that film project due to economic and methodological issues (Fleck 2011:246). As it will be shown below the film project became a comic-centered research instead.

Probably because of the economic costs, the AJC, then under the leadership of Samuel H. Flowerman and with Horkheimer as chief consultant, focused on a more controllable medium such as prints for which it commissioned a series of nine comic strips from cartoonist Carl Rose (pseudonym of Earl Cros). Rose was a well-known cartoonist for *The New Yorker*, who received the order to create *Mr Biggott*, a character embodying all sorts of racial and religious prejudices. The strips were distributed to more than 80 US newspapers in 1945 and to various US Army journals (AJC 1945). The reaction to these cartoons was the subject of an initial analysis by the AJC and further study by the Bureau. Although the AJC's Scientific Research Department had already produced an initial study on *Mr Biggott* (AJC 1946), its proximity to the Bureau (in fact, Paul F. Lazarsfeld was a member of the advisory board of the AJC's scientific department) and its tradition on media research were fundamental to understand why the BASR took a more in-depth approach to this character. With this aim, the Bureau chose one of the products that AJC had developed, *Mr Biggott*, which was part of a broader communicative strategy against racial prejudice and antisemitism that included comics, radio, television, and printed media messages[2] (Hristova 2013).

Mr Biggott, the character created by Carl Rose, represented an elderly, old-fashioned-looking white man, whose character was depicted by placing a spider's web on his head as an allegory of his old age and retrograde way of thinking. In the few comic strips that were produced, he openly and unabashedly expressed his racial and religious prejudices. These racist and antisemitic comments took place in contexts related especially to World War II so most of the targets of *Mr Biggott*'s rage were depicted as fellow citizens fighting or willing to fight with the Allied forces. It was hoped that the readers would rapidly and effectively detect the inappropriateness of such stances and comments at a time when the whole American society was united against the enemy represented by fascism. However, the preliminary research by the AJC itself found that there were some problems with the interpretation of the propagandistic message that these strips were intended to spread (AJC, 1946). In the report entitled *Biggott and the Minister*, the AJC itself tested in 26 focused interviews one of the cartoons they were preparing to evaluate, which featured *Mr Biggott* and a Protestant chaplain in a comic situation in which the prejudice focused on the Jewishness of Jesus Christ **(Figure 1)**. This first research stated the need to establish the correct target audience for the cartoon. For example, the authors of the study recommended its dissemination in Protestant

[2] Comics included *Joe Worker* and *Joe Worker and the Story of Labor* (on trade unions) and *Ghosts Go West* and *They Got the Blame* (on fascism). Radio messages include a series of scripts for the *Superman* radio serial, the originals of which are available in the AJC archives.

churches, but not among the working class because of the difficulty of understanding the message and the inappropriateness of a discussion between a devotee and a priest, something that might come as a surprise to the working class, which was largely Catholic at the time (AJC 1946:2).

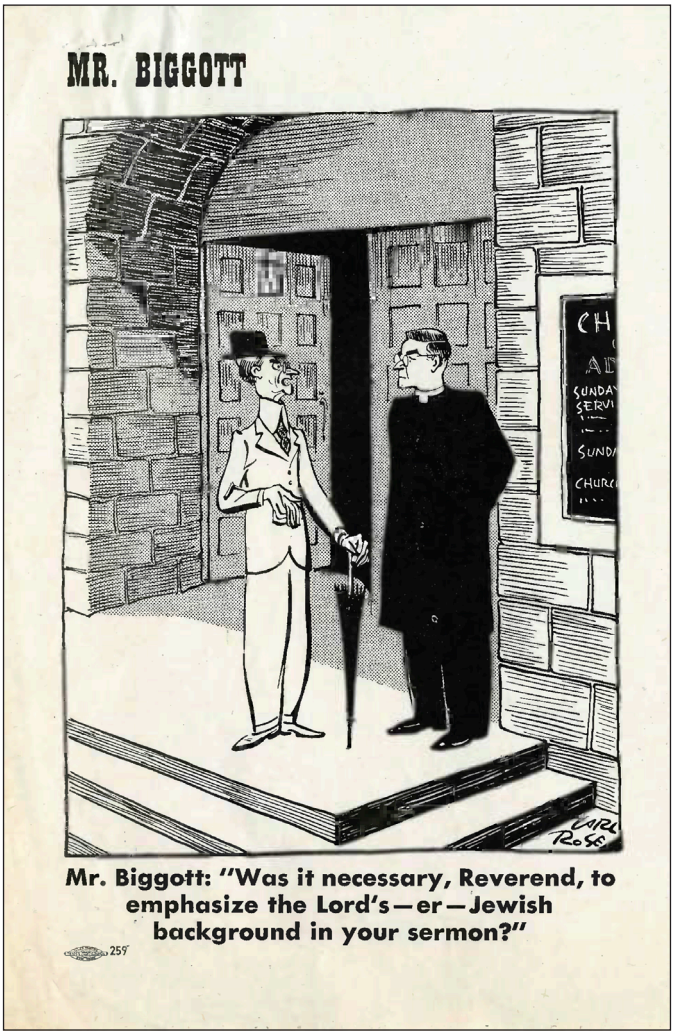

Figure 1: Earl Cros (Carl Rose). Biggott and the Minister. © 1946 American Jewish Committee.

On the other hand, Cooper and Jahoda,[3] both of them working for the AJC (1947), reported in an article in which they compiled some of the results of the AJC and BASR

[3] Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld's first wife, had been living in Germany for two years at the time of publishing that paper. Jahoda arrived after fleeing from Austria, where she had been imprisoned, and having lived for several years in exile in the UK. She will not be the only Lazarsfeld's couple linked to prejudice studies and/or *Mr. Biggott*. In fact, Patricia Kendall, Lazarsfeld's third and last partner, was also a sociologist connected to the BASR. In addition, and more importantly, she was also one of the researchers more committed to the figure of *Mr. Biggott*. This also reflects the reality of the research group around Lazarsfeld during his American exile (Fleck, 2021).

research, that not all people interpreted the cartoons presented to them during the focused interviews in the same way. This entered in contradiction with the theory of the hypodermic needle or word bullets, which was hegemonic up to that time. This theory stated that the message was inoculated and interpreted in the same way by the whole audience (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott 2005). Cooper and Jahoda named the effect they observed as propaganda evasion, that is, the ability of a prejudiced individual to avoid humorously interpreting a clearly prejudiced message, but rather interpret it according to their own discriminatory views. Thus, the message goes through a circuit of understanding, identification of the prejudice, disidentification of the prejudiced elements and, finally, loss of the initial interpretation of the message. With these preliminary results, the BASR was ready to try to evaluate the interpretation of this campaign against discrimination and hatred within North American society.

Research on *Mr Biggott's* interpretation

The AJC's Department of Scientific Research, under the guidance of Max Horkheimer, began a collaboration with Lazarsfeld's BASR to design an ambitious research plan to be carried out in 1945. This plan included 160 focused interviews with non-Jewish white working-class men in New York and a questionnaire with 692 women in the city of Decatur (Illinois). It is noteworthy to recall that at that time there was no theoretical or methodological development of focused interviews. The first article on this subject appeared in 1946. It should be said that the very concept of focused interviewing was at that time in full methodological development and practically coincides in time with the first publication on this technique in which Patricia Kendall, Mr Biggott's lead researcher, also participated (Merton & Kendall, 1946) and which preceded the well-known manual with Marjorie Fiske, another Mr Biggott research staff (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956). Fiske also took part in another research on comics while she worked at the Bureau, on the reading habits of school-age children (Wolf & Fiske, 1949).

Focused interviews with men in New York

Following the report, the 160 focused interviews lasted from one to three hours, concentrating on the interpretation of the comic strips designed by Carl Rose, but also on the process of interpretation itself, which could vary throughout the interview. Finally, it included an estimation of who could be a likely real-life characterisation of *Mr Biggott* (which political party he would have voted for, what his tastes would have been, etc.) (Kendall & Wolf 1946).

The selection of the sample, non-Jewish white men of working class, seems to have been made at the request of the AJC in order to detect prejudices, especially antisemitism. It included people between 17 and 75 years old; only 53 per cent had completed school and 20 per cent had no schooling at all; 55 per cent were Catholic and 31 per cent Protestant; 75 per cent were born in the USA while 22 per cent had a migratory background, mostly from European countries; and finally, a large proportion were affiliated to trade unions (Kendall & Wolf 1946: 5).

For the development of the focused interviews, three of the nine comic strips were selected, those in which prejudice was more evident: *Honor Roll*, *Transfusion* and *Indian*, the last of which can be seen in **Figure 2**. In addition to his racial and religious prejudices, Kendall and Wolf stated in their research that *Mr Biggott* could be identified as a member of a certain social class, marked by his elegant way of dressing (with suit, shirt, gloves and cane), so it could be affirmed that he is a cosmopolitan person of moderate income. That factor could be interfering with some of the interviewees' interpretations of *Mr Biggott's* message.

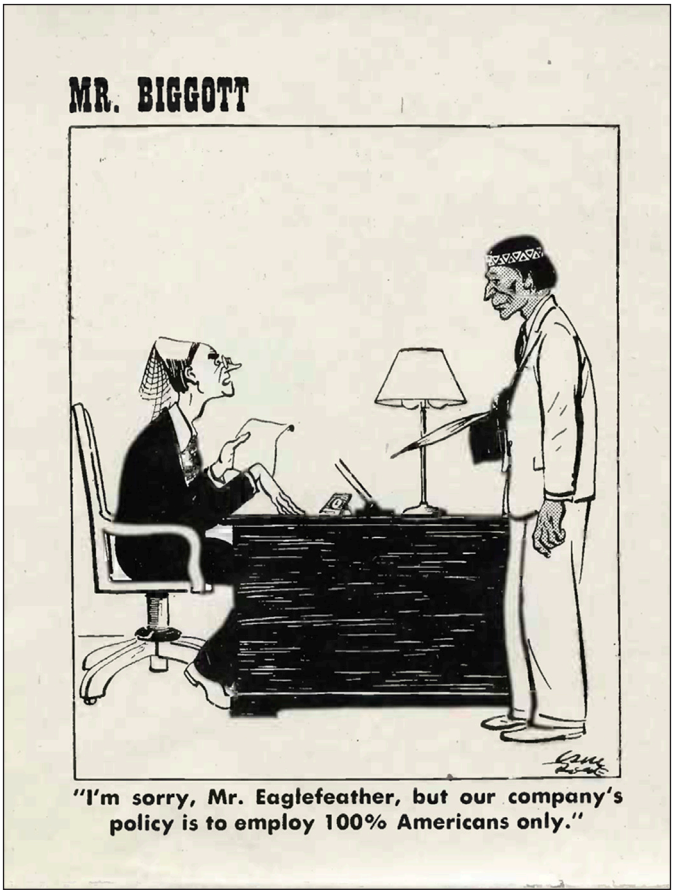

Figure 2: Earl Cros (Carl Rose). Biggott and Eaglefeather. © 1946 American Jewish Committee.

After analysing the 160 interviews, it became clear that at least two-thirds of the interviewees had misinterpreted the message: 31 per cent misinterpreted the message completely, while 33 per cent performed what they called a boomerang interpretation, that is, a twisted interpretation where *Mr Biggott* is identified as part of a strategy aimed at creating racial unrest and an increase in racial prejudice (Kendall & Wolf 1946:15; Jenemann 2007:125). In fact, 40 per cent of the sample admitted, before being asked about the central questions, that they had prejudices, while 27 per cent showed latent prejudices according to previous measurements by the research team. They even detected a group of people who misinterpreted the final objective of the strips and thought that they served to create even more prejudice among the audience. In short, it is obvious from the analysis of the interviews that there was a mechanism of dissociation from the original message that worked especially for prejudiced readers.

Therefore, the BASR suggested a triple recommendation to the AJC in the findings report. First, in order to avoid misunderstandings, the character of *Mr Biggott* should be a clear example of stereotyping. Second, the satire must be clearly identifiable. Finally, a third figure should be introduced to represent those positive aspects of non-discriminatory behaviour that the comic strips were intended to reinforce. Kendall and Wolf believed that one of the reasons for the boomerang effect laid precisely in the existence of misunderstood satire. Furthermore, the authors of the research report suggested the AJC that the comic strips should be implemented in another format, allowing for more elaboration, as the concentration of the message in a single image made it easier for the audience to fall into misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Kendall & Wolf 1946:101). The following research on propaganda material commissioned by the AJC for the BASR was based on serialised cartoons, what is commonly known as comics (that was the case of *Joe Worker*, *Joe Worker and the Story of Labor*, *Ghosts Go West* and *They Got the Blame*). Only a part of the analysis related to the deviant cases was published in *Communication Research*, a volume edited by Paul F. Lazarsfeld. The deviant cases were those who did not observe racism in *Mr Biggott*; who identified his antisemitic discourse while distancing themselves from it; or who associated it with an ideological position of an elderly person (Kendall & Wolf 1949).

Decatur women's survey

For the second approach to the effects of comic strips on their readers, 692 women were selected for a random survey in Decatur[4] to collect their opinions about *Mr Biggott*. In addition to information about their age, educational and economic status, media

[4] This city had previously been characterised as the closest to the average of the average of midestern cities between fifty and eighty thousand inhabitants and was also the place where the BASR applied different questionnaires such as the one Lazarsfeld used to formulate his Two Step Flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1945; Simonson, 2005; Summers, 2006).

exposure and general opinion on Jews, the questionnaire sought to probe *Mr Biggott*'s political position and their perception of what might be the ultimate intention of the artist who had created the strips, as this was the main focus of the research. For the last two questions, a spontaneous response was collected, followed by another query with a list of categories predefined by the research team. These categories were used to assess the correct interpretation of the three comic strips analysed in the survey (*Honor Roll*, *Transfusion* and *Indian*), the same as in the previous study (BASR[5] 1946).

Generally speaking, *Mr Biggott*'s ratings were negative. Even spontaneously, he was often defined with adjectives such as cruel, narrow-minded or greedy. In the assisted response on predefined categories, he was mostly described as a snob, a crackpot or a stupid. In fact, in a subsequent question asking whether *Mr Biggott*'s views were similar to those of certain selected public figures, 61.6 per cent of the women equated his speech with that of Hitler, although this comparison did not extend to other well-known contemporary North American fascists such as Charles E. Coughlin or Robert R. McCormick, also included as predefined categories in the questionnaire. On the contrary, 26 per cent of the respondents said that *Mr Biggott*'s views had nothing to do with Hitler's (BASR 1946:4). Similarly, there is no agreement among respondents as to whether the strips were in favour or against something. More people identified in the comic strips issues against (foreigners, people of colour, children) than issues in favour (the rich, the black market or the Ku Klux Klan). There was also no general agreement on who or what the target of the cartoon was. Responses were identified both as criticising the Nazis and also supporting the Nazi message.

The authors developed different indices of understanding, stereotyping and recognising prejudices, from which a composite index was developed, based on the answers to the central four subjects of the questionnaire (what kind of man *Mr Biggott* was; how similar his opinions were to contemporary public figures; recognition of prejudices; and what was the artist trying to do). This index unveiled a typology of five levels of intelligibility, from understanding nothing to interpreting correctly the four questions. The results showed that only 5 per cent of the women who participated in the survey had correctly understood the ultimate intention of the strips, while 32 per cent had understood nothing at all (BASR 1946:15). The main factors influencing the correct interpretation of the message were having a high education level and also previous feelings against antisemitism. Other factors like age, religion, political party affiliation, economic level or listening/reading the news had no relation with the level of understanding. Therefore, the authors considered the AJC's task of trying to influence the prejudices of the American population to be very challenging, as these

[5] Although the report has no authorship indicated, everything points to Patricia Kendall. She is also the leading author of the other two reports related to the analysis of *Mr. Biggott*'s comic strips (Kendall and Wolf, 1946; Kendall and Strauss, 1946).

predispositions were closely related to external factors and, thus, difficult to modify in the short term (BASR 1946: 22).

Triangulation report

Finally, Patricia Kendall and Marion Strauss led a last report dedicated to the joint analysis of the two investigations (Kendall and Strauss 1946). In this report, Kendall and Strauss highlighted the exceptional opportunity to conduct such a methodological comparison: "We are rarely in a position to do more than speculate about the values and deficiencies of our techniques. The result is that the development of suitable techniques depends more often on intuitive feeling than on objective evaluation" (Kendall and Strauss 1946:2). In fact, that triangulation exercise arrived nine years before the seminal text on triangulation by Vidich and Shapiro (1955) and much earlier than the later contributions by Campbell and Fiske in the 1960s or Denzin in the 1970s. The comparative study between both investigations provided interesting data on how the qualitative interviews were used in the fieldwork, and the way that interaction between interviewer and interviewee facilitated a learning process during the dialogue. The unprovoked training achieved through the interaction could be behind a clearer interpretation of the message in the focused interviews than in the survey. On the contrary, the survey analysis showed more interpretation problems, so the difference between men and women, between New York and Decatur, could be attributed, in the first term, to methodological issues.

The comparative analysis also yielded some data to consider for a better comparison, such as the difference in Catholics in the two samples (53 per cent in New York, 12 per cent in Decatur). Likewise, some of the predefined categories in the survey, which were intended to interpret the adequacy of understanding, required prior information from the interviewees (for example, about certain American fascist leaders). Not everyone in the sample was able to reach that level of knowledge on politics and current affairs. This could be specifically disadvantaging less educated people, women, and other groups with less information or less interest in political issues. Kendall and Strauss pointed to the cultural ignorance imposed on the Decatur women as a factor to be considered to understand the correct interpretation of their answers. The same applies to the New York men, whose greater interest in the aspects evaluated -and lack of imposition on cultural ignorance- facilitated their correct interpretation of the messages (Kendall & Strauss 1946:9).

Conclusions

The BASR studies of *Mr Biggott*'s cartoons represent one of the most important examples of empirical research based on the language of comics in the 1940s and, possibly, of

the twentieth century. Although they are not the only empirical studies focusing on the language or industry of comics in the North American panorama, nor are they an exception in the research tradition within the BASR, these studies are among the most important from the point of view of sample size, both quantitative and qualitative (160 focused interviews and a survey with 692 responses), and depth of analysis, with three different reports of results. It is important to highlight the importance of the third report, the one focusing on comparative analysis, for what it means in methodological and epistemological terms, and also for the fact that it appeared as early as 1946, years before the appearance of triangulation concept.

From today's perspective, it can be said that the results of this research were important for the development of sociology in general. Firstly, it used focused interviews, which coincided in time with Merton and Kendall's seminal publication on focused interviews (1946). So, it is arguably one of the first projects in which this technique was put into practice, together with the fieldwork that had been carried out a few years earlier and which led to one of the first monographs by Robert K. Merton (1946). On the other hand, the results of this research were important for the sociology of communication, in the sense that it reinforced the theory of the limited effects of the media and the active role of audiences. It was found that, even in environments where the message is intentionally biased, it is possible to find that the audience interpretation can be different from the one initially expected by the research team (boomerang effect and propaganda evasion). Those findings made it possible to apply their results to contexts of political propaganda as well as marketing, market research, and persuasion in general. The very different interpretation of the same cartoon observed during the fieldwork surely gave Paul F. Lazarsfeld arguments to consolidate his proposal of limited effects and to put forward his theory of two-step flow, just a few years later. It has been shown that the research on *Mr Biggott* shared with Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence*, at least, the same territory over which the random sample was selected: Decatur, Illinois. The influence of such studies could be even more significant since some scholars pointed out that the Bureau, as other research institutions, were in fact government agencies designing effective propaganda campaigns (Pooley 2008).

Nevertheless, most of the material from this and other BASR research on comics remains unpublished, except for two articles (Wolf & Fiske 1949; Kendall & Wolf 1949) and a few papers on their researchers (Hristova 2022; Hristova 2023). Finally, it is worth noting the presence of women in the articles and research reports, which was quite common in the BASR background, although this was not the case with the rest of the reports on comics produced by the Bureau.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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