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| Media and Power in International Politics:  The Lost Legacy |
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By Dr. Eric M. Fattor

Colorado State University

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***Introduction***

The last quarter century has had more than its share of events of a cataclysmic nature. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the attacks of September 11th, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the uprisings of the “Arab Spring” have challenged the ability of scholars to make sense of a changing world and prevented practitioners of foreign relations from developing any coherent policy. One common element to all these significant events has been the important role media has played in them. The images of the Berlin Wall being torn by Germans from both the east and the west served as a powerful symbol of the demise of the Cold War. The sight of the World Trade Center collapsing into dust gave distant terror groups a sense of power and invincibility that few would have attributed to them prior to that fateful day. Leaked documents from the whistleblower website Wikileaks more deeply problematized the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan and revealed to the world the seedy underbelly of American foreign policy. And in a story now familiar to anyone who followed the news from Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, social media platforms helped topple dictators with decades of tenure and unleashed a wave of instability in the Middle East that persist to the present day.

Despite the epic scale of these events and the central role of media in them, theories of international relations still seem to struggle to properly conceptualize media in global politics. While there is a general consensus that the mass media are an important variable in the complex environment of global politics, there remains much debate as to how impactful the media really are compared with more traditional forms of power wielded by states.[[1]](#footnote-1) Should media be considered a platform of material power that compel, command, coerce, persuade, and propagandize their subjects to act and behave in a particular way through the distribution of information, imagery and symbol? Or is it better to see the power of media as a slower and subtle conditioner of thought and language in which their real power lie in content that induces behavior by shaping consciences, massaging emotions, and instilling hopes, dreams, fantasies and other attractive content laden with values and ideas?

These questions, which seem so pressing amid the turbulent waves of the twenty-first century, were initially explored in the early days of the twentieth-century—an era that also featured events of an epic scale that altered the political, economic, and social landscape of the world. Yet the struggle to make sense of the interplay between media and events in the present day indicates a lack of engagement with the thoughts and ideas of this rich and resonant past. As powerful countries like the United States stumble in their efforts to maintain their reputations for virtue and excellence in the face of revelations from Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, the words of media thinkers and practitioners like George Creel and Edward Bernays provide key insights and sage advice. In academic and policy spaces where problematic terms like “soft power” and “smart power” hold linguistic hegemony, the discussions of scholars like E.H. Carr reveal how conceptually dividing up power between “hard” and “soft” obscures as much as it clarifies. These half-forgotten ideas contained in dust-covered books or stored in the dark corners of the internet constitute a lost legacy of understanding in the relationship between media and power in international politics. The purpose of this paper is to wipe some of the cobwebs off these older ideas and show they still have relevant things to say a century later.

***Power and the Role of Media in International Politics***

The concept of power is one that does not suffer from a lack of analysis and interpretation in global politics. To avoid getting into the tall grass of these debates and their strengths and weaknesses, we can take three representative samples of these studies for further elaboration. The first are the contemporary rationalist debates and discussions centered on the concept of “soft power”—a phrase that denotes “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments and arises from the attractiveness of a country’s culture, political ideals, and policies.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Discussions of soft power take place within a larger “spectrum of power” that ranges from coercion and threats to payments and sanctions to persuasion and co-optation.[[3]](#footnote-3) Rolling all these forms of influence and control together allows a state to engage in a strategy of “smart power” which Joseph Nye defines as “the intelligent integration and networking of diplomacy, defense, development, and other tools of so-called ‘hard and soft’ power.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The second framework for understanding power in international relations theory is the more constructivist account put forth by Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall. While threats and payments and the ability to set agendas in international institutions are an important category of power, what Barnett and Duvall find more intriguing are the examples of productive power—those “sites of social relations…(that) situate ordinary practices of life and define the social fields of action that are imaginable and possible.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Of special importance is the means of producing subjectivities and identities that give individuals and communities their conceptions of themselves, their relationships with others, and nature of those relationships.[[6]](#footnote-6) This last point is particularly relevant in that many of these relationships involve “asymmetries of social capacities” represented in such categories as “ ‘civilized,’ ‘rogue,’ ‘European,’ ‘unstable,’ ‘Western,’ and ‘democratic’ states.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In other words, inequalities of power are not the result of quantifiable differences in power resources between one actor and another, but rather embedded into the intersubjective ideas that give that actor its identity and role in the world.

Finally, there are the critical theories that see power in structural terms as represented by the larger amalgamation of capabilities that powerful states use to exploit weaker ones. Most of these ideas emerge out of a theoretical framework put forth by Antonio Gramsci, who argued that the stability and acceptance of the prevailing political and economic order of the bourgeoisie was brought about by the ability of dominate classes to legitimize their social hegemony through key propagandizing institutions, including the church, schools, and collaborating labor unions.[[8]](#footnote-8) An actor subjected to these influences would be inured with the notion of a “common sense” that legitimized and justified a world that did not work for the actor’s interests but was nevertheless seen by that actor as natural, appropriate and right. Or, in the words of Gramsci, actors “…adopt a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it.”[[9]](#footnote-9) While forms of coercive and institutional power exist, their role is to discipline and punish those who defy the common sense and “rationality of the prevailing socio-economic structure.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The challenge when analyzing the role and impact of media resources is their dogged unwillingness to fit comfortably into any of these conceptions of power in global politics. In the case of the notion of soft power, media are placed alongside other “intangible assets such as an attractive personality, culture, political values and institutions and policies that are seen as legitimate or having moral authority.”[[11]](#footnote-11) In this way, a true understanding of what gives media its power in the global environment is lost as media assets are lumped together with a host of other variables that have little relation with each other than the observation that they are not coercive. And when one adds the concept of smart power—that coy combination of both hard power and soft power together—one is confronted with a situation in which “soft power now seems to mean everything.”[[12]](#footnote-12) In both the cases of Barnett and Duvall’s constructivist framework—where power is broken down in categories of compulsory, structural, institutional and constructive—as well as the understandings of media power in the critical framework, media capabilities seem to fit in multiple categories and roles simultaneously. The ability to use computer networks as offensive information weapons to disrupt internet traffic and take down targeted websites appears to be an example of compulsory power while the content of multiple media platforms such as radio, television, film and personal digital devices contribute to the formation of agent subjectivities and identities.[[13]](#footnote-13) Critical analyses of media power make intriguing insights into the nature of power in the formation of inequalities of economic and social power and speculate on how media can be a tool of resistance, but few of these blueprints for action result in substantive changes in the day to day lives of the most exploited populations of the world.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Much of the imprecision of these shortcomings in the concepts of media can be corrected by re-visiting the writings on mass media when it first emerged onto the scene of politics at the beginning of the 20th century. While print media had obviously been around for centuries prior to 1900 and many of the observations and insights made during this time were apparent before the beginning of the twentieth century, the period between 1900 and 1945 represents a time when media technology made several key advancements. Of principle importance are the following insights: 1) New technologies like film, radio and television made it possible to engage more human senses in deeper and more intense ways; 2) These new technologies also shrunk time and space, making, in some cases, the transmission of information instantaneous from source to consumer regardless of the geographic divide between the two; and 3) the creation of media industries that could maintain a steady stream of production of both the hardware (radios, film projectors, victrolas, and TVs) and the software (programs, screenplays, records and shows) of media power. While numerous thinkers of the era made contributions to the analysis of media power during this period, this paper will confine itself to looking at three of the most important: Geroge Creel, Edward Bernays and E.H. Carr. These three individuals were intimately familiar with the media power of their age and their observations, analyses, commentaries, recommendations, and studies provide a much deeper understanding of the nature of media power both in the time they were active as well as today in the twenty-first century.

***George Creel***

Upon first examination, it is not surprising that George Creel was an important contributor to the merging of media and political power. After spending his childhood in moderate poverty in Missouri, he managed by age twenty to secure a job as a newspaper reporter in Kansas City. From this point onward, Creel was constantly working for or around news media outlets and organizations.[[15]](#footnote-15) Much of Creel’s journalistic career saw him serve as a muckraking journalist. As a reporter for a number of metropolitan newspapers in Western and Midwestern states, Creel was vocal adherent to the principles of Progressivism in the United States that sought to end the corruption of local city government, curb the popular consumption of alcohol, and curtail the availability of prostitution. In the person of Woodrow Wilson and his rhetoric about the virtues of democracy, Creel found a kindred spirit who represented a substantive change to the decadence of national politics. When Wilson’s re-election campaign ran into trouble in the run-up to the 1916 vote, Creel was hired to pen a flattering hagiography of the President that would sell, among other controversial policies, Wilson’s position of neutrality toward the war in Europe. Creel wasted no time invoking the imagery and language common among idealist politicians of the era, including civilization and democracy: “In the outset of every great government, every wonderful idea, is a *dream*, and democracy was evolved to make these dreams come true.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Creel never lost this commitment to idealism, political reform and the promise of democracy to create a better world. However, when the United States entered World War I and Woodrow Wilson needed to convince the American people to support his decision to enter this conflict, Creel the idealist unwittingly made one of the most powerful arguments for understanding media power in pragmatic and materialist terms. This dramatic transformation took place when Wilson asked Creel to direct the Committee on Public Information (CPI)—a new wartime state agency that would direct the nation’s effort at consolidating and coordinating news and information in April of 1917. Empowered by his appointment and the full confidence of the president, Creel went about creating the very first state propaganda agency in the history of the United States—an agency that was taking the bold step of persuading the world that the cause of the war was just and that the United States was the friend of all decent freedom-loving people around the world. Yet this state-run propaganda office was going to unlike any other kind of similar endeavor. It would refrain from censorship and formal government control and accomplish its mission solely through the output of a massive bombardment of words, numbers, images and other bits of data that would cut through the noise of all other sources of information.[[17]](#footnote-17)

To get a sense of the larger role Creel and his subordinates had for the CPI one can review the comments made by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker after the war had ended:

We shall be telling them all the rest of our lives, and I say we because we share with the

soldiers who went to France the dignity and the glory of having fought as they fought, along a

somewhat different front and with not quite the same peril; but we fought with the same spirit,

we fought for the same cause, we fought with them, and when the night was dark in France,

when the stars were not visible over the trenches and the noise of hostile artillery was

menacing and fearful, when in was lonesome for the sentinel, the thing that sustained him

there, the thing that made it possible for him to stay, was the unseen but almost palpable hand

of his country resting on his shoulder.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In saying this, Baker was placing the activities of the CPI alongside that of any of the other military support operations in the war. The management of information and media capabilities was as essential to victory for the United States as the training of soldiers, management of logistics, provision of medical care, or any of the other countless supplemental functions of war-fighting. When one talk of “military capability” being the central means by which state power is measured, all of the support operations beyond the actual utilization of weapons are understood to be part of this capability. World War I represented for the first time the central role of media operations in an overall war effort and the need to account for this component of military capability when measuring a state’s power in the future.

For Creel, however, information and media capability did not occupy a support role in the war effort—it represented a critical front of the war itself. Writing after the war ended, Creel declared that “…the Great War differed most essentially from all previous conflicts. The trial of strength was not only between massed bodies of armed men, but between opposed ideals, and moral verdicts took in all the value of military decisions.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Rather than struggling for territory, the battle for public opinion was a “fight for the minds of men, for the ‘conquest of their convictions,’ and the battle-lines ran through every home in every country.”[[20]](#footnote-20) And like a traditional battlefield, the arena of struggle featured an assortment of “weapons” that each belligerent would deploy in their efforts to control the cognitive battlespace:

There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that

we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the telegraph, the

cable, the wireless, the poster, the sign-board—all these were used in our campaign to make

our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take

up arms.[[21]](#footnote-21)

And if, once again, the temptation emerges to completely write off such language as hyperbole, Creel continues a few pages later with literal examples of information being used as ordnance in military weaponry: “Mortar-guns, loaded with ‘paper bullets,’ and airplanes, carrying pamphlet matter, bombarded the German front, and at the time of the armistice balloons with a cruising radius of five hundred miles were ready to launch far into the Central Powers with America’s message.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

In using the language of war and conjuring up the images of information as literal bullets in a gun, Creel was showing how the battle for hearts and minds was but one theater of conflict in a multi-front war. Just as the empires and great powers of the past learned to project power first on land, than at sea, and as witnessed in the most recent conflict, in the air, the battle to win the imaginations of populations was yet another space for states to struggle for power. In no way was the new battlefield seen to be somehow less important or “softer” than the frontlines in France and Belgium in the same way that the struggle to control the Atlantic sea lanes or the campaign to dominate Arabia was somehow less important to the overall war aim of defeating the Triple Alliance. And if the United States failed to properly arm itself for battle in the struggle for the minds of the imaginations of populations both at home and abroad, the defeat it would suffer in this crucial front would result in defeat on other fronts.

Yet in other places Creel also utilized a conception of media influence that fit more snugly in the constructivist or critical accounts of power. If the procurement, deployment, and operations of the infrastructure of media resources could be understood in a similar manner as that of the resources of violence and war, the effects of these “paper bullets” of information was very different. Recall again that within a very short period of time Creel was tasked with producing content like *Wilson and the Issues* that was supposed to legitimize Wilson’s policy of staying out of the war only to turnaround a few months later and use this same rhetoric to bring about the exact opposite goal—the drumming up of support for the United States to enter the Great War. To accomplish this was to go beyond simply flooding American society with a cascade of information on the hope that the sheer volumes of material would be sufficient to be persuasive. Instead, the success of Creel stemmed from his implicit understanding of media power as the ability, as scholars like Clarissa Rile Heyward have argued, to generate subjectivity.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Creel almost never uses this kind of dense philosophical language when describing his work or that of the CPI, preferring instead a more populist tone that is a better fit with his advocacy for democracy and the importance of the United States as its protector. On occasion, however, he does provide insight on what he believes the true power of media is and how best it can be tapped. In the early pages of his account of his work at the CPI, Creel writes

What we had to have was no mere surface unity, but a passionate belief in the justice of

America’s cause that should weld the people of the United States into one white-hot mass

instinct with fraternity, devotion, courage, and deathless determination. The *war-will*, the

will-to-win, of a democracy depends upon the degree to which each one of all the people of

that democracy can concentrate and consecrate body and soul and spirit in the supreme effort

of service and sacrifice.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Just a few months before, Creel argued that the fight to maintain American neutrality and support the re-election of Woodrow Wilson was a campaign with “more tremendous meaning than any other in the history of America.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Now, the American mind was being transformed to accept a “new normal” and to reimagine what was natural and possible.[[26]](#footnote-26)

For the CPI, however, the objective was not merely the American mind. As also detailed by Creel, the formation of an American information capability also required the erection of several structural components that gave its fledgling media power a dimension in tune with some of the critical conceptions of power in global politics. Indeed, the great irony of this portion of the CPI’s story is its need to confront a pre-existing assemblage of media power and to outflank it using new technologies. As Creel discusses when he recounts the CPI’s effort at creating a world news service: “When we first set about the creation of a news machinery to carry American facts to the world a natural reliance was placed upon cables, the one established medium for international communication. The cables, however, were virtually all foreign owned, the rates were prohibitive, and, what was even more conclusive, all were so overburdened as to endanger vital war business by their delays.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Because the structure of global communications was largely controlled by European belligerents, the means of the CPI to communicate its message to the minds of the world free of foreign interference were hopelessly compromised. The solution for Creel was to exploit the still developing technology of wireless and, by extension, create an alternative communications structure in which the United States would exercise hegemonic control.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Dubbed “Compub,” by the CPI, this news service would send pre-written stories to stations all around the world via military wireless stations. The territorial parameters of Compub were ambitious. Beginning with a single station in Lyons, France, the service expanded to stations in all corners of the world from Vladivostok, Russia to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Once channels of communication were set up, non-state outlets of transcription and distribution were established in part to lend credence to the notion that the information was objective fact and not a product an a particular state’s propaganda agency. In places like England and Ireland, the “Y.M.C.A. gave a daily bulletin circulation among the rest houses, camps, and clubs.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Compub was supplemented by a Foreign Mail Service that provided, among other things, “short descriptives” of American economic development, the American educational system, and the status of American workers and families.[[30]](#footnote-30) Also created was a film production and foreign distribution service that sought input from all elements of the dominant institutions of American society, including the Ford Motor Company, “United States Steel Corporation, the International Harvester Company, Waterman’s Pen, the Corn Products Company,” and dozens more.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Put together, these agencies of the CPI and their counterparts in government and in the private sector created an organizational structure through which the United States took on the established informational hegemonies of the leading belligerents (on both sides) of World War I and supplant them with a combination of new technologies, new organizational structures, and new strategies for disseminating information to the masses. In constructing this global media apparatus, Creel sought nothing less than total global coverage, discussing at length the various means by which the CPI attempted to insert its informational products in every region of the world.[[32]](#footnote-32) At one point, in discussing the challenges of transporting and screening CPI films to audiences in South America, Creel describes how in Peru, “Railroads reached some of the more important mining and agricultural sections, but a vast amount of this territory was accessible only by burro.”[[33]](#footnote-33) In other words, the CPI was actively trying to spread its media output to the most remote corners of the globe—including in countries that were not actively fighting in the war in Europe nor where most of those people were even aware that a conflict was taking place thousands of miles and an ocean away from their place of inhabitance. In this respect, the CPI was less about legitimizing American participation in the war, and more about spreading American ideals and values through a newly constructed global media structure.

Remarkably enough, this structure of media power was more or less disassembled overnight once the war ended. Frightened by the enormous growth and power the CPI seemed to wield, prominent members of Congress (many of whom were never very fond of Creel or supportive of the CPI) removed the funding for the organization once the Treaty of Versailles was signed.[[34]](#footnote-34) Nevertheless, the CPI had revealed an almost “dark magic” kind of power that when conjured up and cast throughout the world, would have enormous impacts on the nature of global politics. The most obvious example of this was the rise of the Nazi propaganda machine, which, according to scholars like James R. Mock and Cedric Larson, took direct inspiration from the experience of the CPI.[[35]](#footnote-35) One need not, however, look to the rise of Nazi Germany to see how the birth of media power was changing the nature of world politics. New innovations were already underway in the immediate aftermath of the war back in the United States.

***Edward Bernays***

Creel was not the only one at the CPI who understood the true nature of the work being carried out. On page 266 of *How We Advertised* America, Creel mentions very briefly the name of Edward Bernays followed by a description of his work as the head of the Export Service of the CPI—an office responsible for making “brief inserts telling of war aims and activities to be inclosed (sic) with business catalogues and also to be sent in tens of thousands of letters mailed weekly from the United States.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This passing mention of Bernays by Creel in his book disguises a closer and more quarrelsome relationship between the two men. In 1918, when Bernays was about to be drafted into the military as a clerk, Creel personally intervened in order to keep Bernays at his post with the CPI.[[37]](#footnote-37) When the time came to drum up support for the unfolding Paris Peace Conference and sell the American public on its outcome, Bernays was part of the sixteen person team that traveled with President Wilson to the conference. By the end of the conference, however, a rift had developed between the two men when Bernays had spoken out of turn about the true reason for the CPI’s presence in Paris. Though Creel insisted the government’s press organ was only interested in collecting and distributing the facts of the conference, Bernays was quoted in the *New York World* saying the real purpose for the presence of the CPI was to keep up a “worldwide propaganda to disseminate American accomplishments and ideals”[[38]](#footnote-38)

In the end, both men blamed each other for improperly promoting the agreed upon terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and thus implying that the subsequent failure of the United States to join the League of Nations lay at the other man’s feet.[[39]](#footnote-39) Despite this clash, however, both men recognized that shaping public opinion—both at home and abroad—was a form of power in its own right and that shrewd management of media platforms was the key to unlocking this type of power. If Creel’s contribution had been to formulate and create, for the first time, a state run organization to properly administer media power, Bernays’ contribution was to develop specific techniques and practices that could be utilized by any organization beyond the state—private businesses, professional groups, non-profit entities, and individual celebrities whose prominence requires them to manage their public image. In this way, Bernays became “the young Machiavelli of our time” who, like the great Renaissance thinker, wrote short and concise pamphlets that offered advice (as well as being solicitations for employment) to elites on the proper ways of acquiring and maintaining power in a challenging historical period.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Being a “young Machiavelli” began with seeing the world through a pragmatic and materialist lens. Many of Bernays’ writings bear a similar militarized language found in Creel that captures the empirical nature and effects of media power. In *Propaganda,* Bernays argues that flows of information be “universal and continuous; and in its sum total it is regimenting the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments the bodies of its soldiers.”[[41]](#footnote-41) When talking of media strategy in business, Bernays quips “Instead of assaulting sales resistance by direct attack, he (the propagandist) is interested in removing sales resistance. He creates circumstances which will swing emotional currents so as to make for purchaser demand.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Indeed, early in his career, Bernays observed, in reference to one of his former bosses, “Possibly business was always conducted like a war. (George Washington) Hill acted like a general, intent on confounding the enemy.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

This tough-minded realism was often contradicted by a “softer” and more liberal side. Though never waxing quite as poetic as Creel on the virtues of democracy, Bernays often demonstrated a more nuanced and historically-oriented understanding of how a society governed by ostensible democratic principles differed from previous assemblages of government. In one of his most widely read pamphlets, Bernays writes:

The steam engine, the multiple press, and the public school, that trio of the industrial

revolution, have taken the power away from kings and given it to the people. The people

actually gained power which the king lost. For economic power tends to draw after it political

power; and the history of the industrial revolution shows how that power passed from the king

and aristocracy to the bourgeoisie. Universal suffrage and universal schooling reinforced this

tendency, and at last even the bourgeoisie stood in fear of the common people. For the masses

promised to become king.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In this statement, Bernays is arguing that the very nature of power has shifted and become more diffuse as the innovations of a more advanced civilization have progressed. The authoritarian power associated with the king has been eclipsed by the commercial and economic power of the bourgeoisie, and now, Bernays argues, this power is being gathered by the masses and will transform again into expressions yet to be fully understood.

Yet just a few pages later, Bernays suggests that the authoritarian power of the king is not necessarily lost to the modern day leader. If one understands the nature of public opinion and manages information properly, the will of the masses need not be an obstacle to the effective use of power. Whereas the rulers of the past governed “by the simple process of doing what they wanted,” today, “the successors of the rulers, those whose position or ability gives them power, can no longer do what they wanted without the approval of the masses, they find in propaganda a tool which is increasingly powerful in gaining that approval.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

Mastering this power would be important not only for the soap or bacon manufacturer trying to sell more of their product, but also for states, international institutions and transnational corporations trying to realize their interests at the level of global politics. One of Bernays’ first employers after World War I was Lithuanian National Council, which hired Bernays as part of a public relations drive in the United States to get the Senate to recognize Lithuanian independence. Bernays was hired for this task in 1918 and Lithuanian sovereignty was given by the United States in 1922.[[46]](#footnote-46) After Bernays had established his own firm in New York, India came calling as a client in 1950, though the results of this venture were far more inauspicious than with Lithuania.[[47]](#footnote-47) Bernays also worked off and on with the state of Israel after its independence with Bernays claiming in his biography that he often had the ear of Prime Minister Golda Meir.[[48]](#footnote-48)

However, Bernays most notorious role in international affairs was his work with the United Fruit Company in the overthrow of the Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán regime in Guatemala. Coming to power in March of 1951, Arbenz had been elected on a platform of progressive political reforms that included, among other things, redistribution of uncultivated land to the nation’s poor peasants. This policy, if adopted, would be a serious blow to United Fruit Company, the Boston based exporter which was responsible for a large percentage of the banana trade between Guatemala and the United States.[[49]](#footnote-49) United Fruit had already been a client of Bernays prior to the election of Arbenz, but after the spring of 1951 Bernays took a particular interest in the fate of his powerful client in Guatemala in a way that would shape the history of the Western Hemisphere. Between 1951 and 1954, Bernays ramped up, in his words, “psychological activities aimed at developing a better climate of public relations.”[[50]](#footnote-50) At the heart of this effort was stoking the fears of communism expansion in Latin America among the American people. These included commissioning studies from elite universities showing “the parallelism in the thinking of Guatemalan Communist leaders and the thinking of Marxist of Soviet leaders,” collaborating with reporters in major newspapers in writing stories that cast the Arbenz regime in a bad light, and portraying his client United Fruit Company as the victim of communist aggression.[[51]](#footnote-51) These efforts came to a head on June 18th, 1954 when the Eisenhower Administration authorized the CIA to launch a coup d’etat against the Arbenz government with a small ragtag army it had trained supported by airstrikes from American aircraft. Even in this operation, Bernays appears to have played central role, with the first news reports coming out of Guatemala originating from contacts controlled or handled by Bernays.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The episode in Guatemala is a further demonstration of how media power can exercise a similar effect on political events as traditional coercive power. Indeed, Larry Tye, in a manner similar to what was seen with George Creel in World War I, uses the language of war to describe the role of Bernays in the conflict in Guatemala: “It was a war in which few shots would be fired but upon which the very safety of the free world was said to hang. It was a war where words and symbols were the primary weapons, and Eddie Bernays was the principal source of ammunition. And in 1954 Bernays’ arsenal was as well stocked as it would ever be.[[53]](#footnote-53) However, the episode in Guatemala is also important for the way it represented the central role of media power in a larger hegemonic and imperial structure. For several years before the coup, Bernays was at the center of a nexus of power that includes media outlets, major international corporations, universities and research firms, and the government of the United States. Coordinating the actions of these institutions through media, Bernays managed to contribute to the overall mindset of communist paranoia during the early 1950s, a time when the McCarthy hearings were shaping and shifting the daily experience of American society.

***E.H. Carr***

Both Creel and Bernays are well known inside the world of media historians but remain obscure figures beyond. The British scholar and government technocrat E.H. Carr, on the other hand, is reasonably well known as a key writer and thinker in the disciplines of international politics and history.[[54]](#footnote-54) This relative notoriety, however, obscures some of Carr’s contributions to the understanding of power in international relations. Scholars who invoke Carr’s name point to his frank and straightforward realist worldview and laud him for his pragmatism in a time when many statesmen were still beholden to idealist principles that prevented honest assessments of German remilitarization and the rise of fascism in Europe after World War I.[[55]](#footnote-55) Yet Carr was also remarkable for his time in his sophisticated and complex understandings of the notions of power among states. Of particular interest here are his discussions of the power over public opinion and propaganda. It is these ideas that will be highlighted here.[[56]](#footnote-56)

That Carr would be interested in the power of media should not come as a surprise. Much of Carr’s professional life was spent in moving into and out of various elite media institutions in Great Britain before and during World War II. Carr’s career began as a foreign diplomat with the British Foreign Office which included a stint at the embassy in Riga, Latvia. As the political situation deteriorated in Europe in the 1930s, Carr sought a more independent space to “take part in the quickening national debate in foreign policy.”[[57]](#footnote-57) He found this space first as a professor at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, then as a writer with the BBC and the newspaper *The Times*.[[58]](#footnote-58) At the start of World War II, Carr went back to the government at the Ministry of Information in the hopes of crafting a clear set of war aims the British government could present to the world in the hopes of winning allies and persuading neutrals to isolate Hitler and Germany. This position was short-lived as Carr clashed with his bosses and he sought professional and patriotic fulfillment with an expanded role at *The Times*, a position he kept through the war writing editorials and leaders.[[59]](#footnote-59) Given this professional life, it is not hard to see how Carr’s experience with media institutions or state agencies responsible for overseeing media institutions impacted his writings about power in global politics.

As with both Creel and Bernays, Carr understands media capability as a form of power that can be thought of in the same materialist terms as military or economic power. In *The Thirty Years’ Crisis*, the place where he writes the bulk of this thoughts on power in international politics, he says “man-power is not reckoned with the counting of heads,” and then observes the “…view which regards propaganda as a distinctively modern weapon is…substantially correct.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Carr was particularly drawn to the arguments of Harold Laswell who identified “psychological war” as one element of an much larger military strategy that included elements of military power and economic power.[[61]](#footnote-61) As discussed by Creel, the munitions that were used to deliver explosive shells could also deliver leaflets, flyers and other forms of print propaganda, and the unconventional nature of these “weapons” was of sufficient capability that during World War I, many officials on both sides insisted the use of such tactics violated international law.[[62]](#footnote-62) Yet while the mobilization of military and economic resources for war ended once hostilities ceased, the psychological component of war continues even when states are technically at peace. In the aftermath of the World War I, Carr observes that “within twenty years of the armistice, in what was still formally a time of peace, many governments were conducting propaganda with an intensity unsurpassed in the war period; and new official and semi-official agencies for influencing public opinion at home and abroad were springing up in every country.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Stated another way, media power allowed states to engage in a kind of permanent warfare.

Carr also interprets media capabilities in the productive and structural frameworks of power. Like Gramsci and other critical thinkers, Carr observed a common “good which consists in loyalty and self-sacrifice for an end higher than self-interest.”[[64]](#footnote-64) The cognitive and value-laden elements of this common good are propagated first by programs of universal popular education which instill the principles of democracy and laissez-faire capitalism in the liberal west and the “strength and discipline of totalitarianism” in the authoritarian east.[[65]](#footnote-65) Yet with advancing technologies and more empowered masses, the focus of media power shifts to the “radio, the film, and the press” to “share to the fullest extent the characteristic attribute of modern industry, i.e. that mass-production, quasi-monopoly and standardisation are a condition of economical and efficient working.”[[66]](#footnote-66)

Carr was quite clear about the dependency of media power on other forms of capability. Indeed, propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion alone cannot sustain the viability of a state in a world of intense international competition. The pre-1789 French liberals, the pre-1917 Marxists, and the pre-1948 Zionists all suffered from weakness until their ideologies were fused with the military force of Napoleon, the Bolsheviks and the state of Israel.[[67]](#footnote-67) In citing these examples, Carr emphasized that power in international politics is, on the one hand, multi-dimensional, and on the other hand, transformational. While the power to disseminate ideas can be useful in maintaining the status quo and preserving a notion of “common sense,” media power is also a means of introducing new and critical ideas into the global battleground of ideas. Or, as stated by Carr, “it is a basic fact about human nature that human beings do in the long run reject the doctrine that might makes right.”[[68]](#footnote-68)

***Concluding Remarks***

In saying this, Carr shows that military power alone cannot persist without power over opinion—material power is as dependent on opinion power as the other way around. This sophistication in Carr’s understanding of power in international politics echoes what has already been observed in the comments of George Creel and Edward Bernays. Given this fact, the last step in this inquiry is to bring these insights back into the dominant perspectives of the present day, especially as they relate to the discourses of “soft power.” These accounts have little to say about inequalities in the amounts of soft power particular states enjoy and their capacities to exploit it. And when one makes the suggestion that these inequalities, especially when they concern the gargantuan disparities that exist between the United States and most of the rest of the world, constitute something like an empire, thinkers like Nye get downright testy. As Nye scolds at the end of one of his books:

Though unequal relationships certainly exist between the United States and weaker powers,

and can be conducive to exploitation, absent formal political control, the term “imperial” can

be misleading. Its acceptance would be a disastrous guide for American foreign policy

because it fails to take into account how the world has changed.[[69]](#footnote-69)

It is perhaps understandable for an individual who counsels elite decision-makers in Washington DC on the importance of soft power to deny the existence of American Empire, for few things ould undermine this soft power more than to acknowledge the existence of an imperial structure where the circuitry of command and control largely emanates from the United States. But in his excoriations about properly accounting for how the world has changed, what if Nye is the one being misled about the nature of these changes?

The space to ask a question like this opens up once our understandings of non-coercive capability become more nuanced beyond the categories of “soft” and “smart” power. The thoughts and analysis of thinkers and practitioners of media and propaganda like George Creel, Edward Bernays, and E.H, Carr provide a conceptual foundation to engage in these more sophisticated enquiries. By showing a more intertwined nature of media capabilities with military capabilities, these individuals breach the conceptual wall that figures like Nye have built up between the notion of “hard” and “soft” power. By touching on the power of media and communications to shape and shift ideas and values, they foresaw later studies on the role of discourse and cognitive production in the creation of an intersubjective universe of identities and roles in global politics. And by their discussions of assemblages of influence beyond the state, they confirm understandings of power that account for change, transformation, and rise and fall of competing structures of rule at the global level—including the concept of American Empire that Nye finds so repugnant. Further research and study of this lost legacy of media power from the early twentieth century will no doubt continue to yield impactful insights on power and politics at the global level and produce useful concepts for a world that continues to change at a rapid pace.

1. These debates were first tracked in the realm of international relations theory by Majid Tehranian in “Global Communication and International Relations: Changing Paradigms and Policies,” *International Journal of Peace Studies* (1997) vol. 2, no. 1. Available at <http://www.gmu.edu/programs/icar/ijps/vol2_1/Techrenian.htm> (accessed 9 February, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), x. Nye first used the term “soft power” in *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 20-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 209. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on the idea of hegemony, see See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds. and trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1999), 258–276; and Robert Cox, “Gramsci, hegemony, and international relations: an essay in method,” in Stephen Gill, ed., *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 137–139. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, *Power in Global Governance*, 18-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Nye, *Soft Power,* 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Leslie Gelb, *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Barnett and Duvall, 13-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For more on critical perspectives on the media in the age of neo-liberalism, see Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Creel’s full life story can be found in his autobiography *Rebel at Large: Reflections of Fifty Crowded Years* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1947). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. George Creel, *Wilson and the Issues* (New York: Century Company, 1916), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Interestingly enough, Creel only agreed to accept Wilson’s appointment when he learned that the president was considering proposing a censorship law after war was declared. Creel believed a state office that put out its own information and had a rock-solid reputation for fairness and accuracy was a more effective way of controlling information than censorship. See Alan Axelrod, *Selling the Great War: The Making of American Propaganda* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 55-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Newton D. Baker, Forward to *How We Advertised America* by George Creel (London: Forgotten Books, 2012), XVII. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Clarissa Rile Heyward, *De-facing Power* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Creel, *How We Advertised America, 5.* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Creel, *Wilson and the Issues*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Barnett and Duvall, 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Creel, *How We Advertised America, 250.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For more on the creation of international telegraph monopolies, see Simon J. Potter, “Empire and the English Press, 1857-1914” in Simon J. Potter, ed. *Newspapers and Empire in Ireland and Britain: Reporting the British Empire, 1857-1921* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 290-398. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 280. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. For the full story of the end of the CPI, see Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 401-434. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See James R. Mock and Cedric Larson *Words That Won the War; The Story of the Committee on Public Information 1917-1919* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 337-347 and Axelrod, *The Selling of the Great War*, 218-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Creel, *How We Advertised America*, 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays and the Birth of Public Relations* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Memo from Edward Bernays to George W. Hill, May 29, 1929 quoted in Tye, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Tye, 19-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In the case of Bernays, his advice was actively sought by the elites of his era. Machiavelli did not enjoy such popularity in his own time. See Tye, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Bernays, *Propaganda*, (Brooklyn, New York: Ig Publishing, 2005), 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1965), 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., *Propaganda,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., *Biography of an Idea*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. India at the time was seeking $1 billion in aid from the United States and Bernays’ task was to facilitate the appropriation of this aid. The media campaign, which Bernays heralded as successful in improving the public perception of India, nevertheless failed to win the Congressional aid grant and also resulted in harsh and unpleasant exchanges of words between Bernays and many of the Indian diplomats working with him. See Ibid., 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid.,702-704. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Much scholarship has been published surrounding the American intervention in Guatemala in the 1950s. The most authoritative account can be found in Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit:* *The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala, Revised and Expanded* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Bernays quoted in Tye, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Tye, 172-176. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Tye, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Tye, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Carr’s key works are *The Twenty Years’ Crisis: 1919-1939* (New York: Perennial, 2001) which is seen as an important early work of international relations theory and *What is History* (London: Penguin, 1990), a work derived from a series of keynote lectures Carr gave at Cambridge in 1961. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. For a discussion of Carr’s legacy see William T.R. Fox, “E.H. Carr and Political Realism: Vision and Revision,” *Review of International Studies*, 11: 1, January 1985, 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Most of Carr’s writings on this topic appear in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, 132-145. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Charles Jones, *E.H. Carr and International Relations: A Duty to Lie* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. For a full accounting of Carr’s early career, see Jones, 22-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Jones, 66-77. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See Harold D. Laswell, Introduction to George G. Bruntz, *Allied Propaganda and the Collapse of the German Empire* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1936), 3-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Bruntz, 142-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid., 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Nye, *Soft Power*, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)