

# Solving Social Media's Propaganda Problem | Medium

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As alarm at the influence of social media over [political polarization, hate speech, misinformation, and the rising tide of nativist xenophobia](#) has grown over the past year, I've found myself thinking over and over about an article published seventy years ago, a warhorse of the communications literature I taught to distracted first-year undergraduates almost a decade ago as a teaching assistant. That article is Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton's 1948 classic "[Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action](#)." I guess neither my students nor I were paying enough attention at the time, because Lazarsfeld and Merton describe with uncanny prescience the conditions under which mediated propaganda would succeed in the United States—conditions Facebook, Twitter, Google and other platforms have created in our contemporary social media age.

[...]

What can these insights from a different era tell us about today's social media mess, and how to potentially fix it? First, they're a testament to the relevance, and importance, of [communications and media studies, and their history](#), to contemporary debates about social media regulation, and on the broader question of digital technologies' social impact. Second, it's that Lazarsfeld and Merton's conditions for propagandizing towards social change potentially work as well for progressives as they do for conservatives. Merton and Lazarsfeld argued that media monopolies could be neutralized by an equal amount of counter-messaging, an insight that would seem to argue for more social media activity by progressive causes, not less. Small-group organizing online and off, and making the connection between deep-seated values and progressive causes, are meanwhile staples of the Black Lives Matters movement, the anti-Trump Resistance, and the nascent groundswell for gun control.

Source: [Solving Social Media's Propaganda Problem | Berkman Klein Center Collection | Medium](#)