

In the beginning (roughly the 1930s through the 1950s), we find the “magic bullet theory” or alternatively the “hypodermic effects theory.” According to this simplistic paradigm, like a bullet or a needle, if the message reached its target its “effects,” typically persuasive effects, would be immediate and evident. The notion was frequently attributed to Harold Lasswell, whose work on propaganda and psychopathology posited an all-powerful government propagandist manipulating passive and atomized audience members who lacked independent sources of information (Lasswell, 1930, 1935). The theory is also associated with a notion of a mechanical transmission model of direct effects linked to early theorists of information engineering, such as Claude Shannon (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). With the growth of the industrialized mass media, especially radio and later television, and the apparent success of European totalitarian propaganda, such a view was culturally and historically resonant; or,

as Katz puts it, “in the air” (Katz, 1960). Subsequent scholarship traced the origins of the bullet and needle concepts and revealed that they were not used by those to whom they were attributed and do not accurately characterize the theorizing about media effects of the early researchers, which was actually much more sophisticated and nuanced (Bineham, 1988; Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1982; Lubken, 2008; Power et al., 2002; Sproule, 1989). The narrative is still in use, however, because it relates a memorable storyline and allows the storyteller to introduce the second stage of research in the 1950s and 1960s: the “minimal-effects school.”

Paul Lazarsfeld and his associates at Columbia University “opened a new era of thinking” by rejecting “the old hypothesis that the media have great power” (De Fleur & Dennis, 1981, pp. 294–297). The minimal-effects terminology comes from the seminal review and summarization of research to date: *The Effects of Mass Communication*, published in 1960 by Lazarsfeld’s student, Joseph Klapper. Key findings that only a tiny fraction of voters actually changed their vote intentions during an election campaign, that audience motivations and prior beliefs influenced the interpretation of persuasive messages, and that messages were often discussed among opinion leaders and friends, leading to a mediation via two-step flow, as the narrative is told, reinforced this minimal-effects conclusion. The fact that Klapper was employed by the CBS television network and that part of his job was to testify in Washington to fend off possible regulation resulting from the potential effects of television in the domains of smoking, sexuality, and violence added to the dramaturgy of the story and the vilification of Klapper.