

## Legislative Investigations into Propaganda Activities (1919–1941): The Tacit Collusion Between U.S. Politicians and the Press<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The present work analyzes the complex relationship that was established during the interwar period between the American press and the legislative committees which investigated the propaganda activities of subversive movements and large private corporations during those years. The investigation is the result of the examination of journalistic sources and documentary evidence recently collected from various US federal and state archives. The main hypothesis is that the struggle against propaganda by both the press and the legislative committees became a new form of manipulation of public opinion, enabling politicians and reporters to exploit people's aversion to the new persuasion techniques in order to satisfy their own personal interests and ideological purposes.

**Keywords:** Journalism; American Press; Legislative Investigations; Propaganda; United States.

### [es] Investigaciones legislativas sobre propaganda (1919–1941): la colusión tácita entre los políticos estadounidenses y la prensa

**Resumen.** El presente trabajo analiza la compleja relación que se estableció durante el periodo de entreguerras entre la prensa estadounidense y los comités legislativos que estaban investigando las actividades de propaganda. La investigación es el resultado del examen de fuentes periodísticas y evidencias documentales que han sido recientemente recopiladas en varios archivos federales y estatales de los Estados Unidos. La hipótesis principal es que la lucha contra la propaganda por parte de la prensa y de los comités legislativos se convirtió en una nueva forma de manipulación de la opinión pública, permitiendo a políticos y periodistas de explotar la aversión popular hacia las nuevas técnicas de persuasión con el fin de satisfacer sus intereses personales e ideológicos.

**Palabras claves:** Periodismo; Prensa estadounidense; Investigaciones legislativas; Propaganda; Estados Unidos.

**Sumario:** introduction. 1. Concern about propaganda and the press. 2. Scrupulous coverage of the investigation activities. 3. The newspaper as a tool in the service of propaganda. 4. The committees' investigators and their relationship with the press. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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## Introduction

In the interwar period, fears of indiscriminate use of propaganda techniques by different actors in the political, economic, and cultural worlds began to spread in the United States of America. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information, the first propaganda agency in American history, which gave rise to a wave of patriotism among the population, but also to distrust relating to the blatant manipulation of public opinion carried out by federal authorities. Led by journalist George Creel, the Committee operated from April 1917 to August 1919 (Mock and Larson, 1939).

The awareness of the enormous power that persuasion strategies could hold over the masses gradually gave rise to deep concern about propaganda activities that could be exerted by foreign nations in US territory (Migliucci, 2018A and 2019). In particular, several people started to wonder if Communist and Fascist

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dictatorships were able to contaminate the minds of ordinary Americans through the spread of totalitarian doctrines, by means of infiltrated agents, immigrants who were loyal to their countries of origin, or even US citizens who were politically committed to radical ideologies.

In the same way, some strategies used by certain sectors of the business world—for example, the deliberate enticement of journalists to back corporate interests in the press—began to be regarded with some suspicion. In a period considered to be the golden age of advertising and which spawned the rise of public relations, it seemed inevitable that speculators and unscrupulous businessmen would throw themselves into the creation of fraudulent persuasion campaigns.

In those years, propaganda was considered to be one of the main threats to liberal democracy. After the Great War, this power was certainly magnified. It was said that propaganda caused several setbacks suffered by the allies of the United States during the conflict. In the same way, a direct link was established between radical movements' ideological crusades and the ferocious insurgencies that were destroying social peace in countries such as Russia, Finland, Hungary, Italy, or Germany. Subversive propaganda was also blamed for the strikes, disorder, and violence that were then developing in the United States.

The response of the intellectual world to these challenges was the creation of an erudite debate in which the dangers of mass manipulation were carefully analyzed (Brett, 1999; Sproule, 1997: 23-29; and Migliucci, 2016A, 2016B and 2018B). In the academic world, for example, the influence of the press in election processes began to be studied (Lundberg, 1926: 709-715). Faced with a situation which was perceived as serious and urgent, some of the nation's brightest minds advanced different potential solutions. The philosopher John Dewey, for example, was one of the main defenders of education as a means to counteract the adverse effects of propaganda, while the publicist Walter Lippmann longed for a world in which the formation of the opinions of citizens would be entrusted to a class of highly specialized experts (Dewey, 1927; and Lippmann, 1922). Beginning in the 1930s and coinciding with the rise to power of the Nazis in Germany, several intellectuals proposed the implementation by federal authorities of effective counter-propaganda campaigns aimed at neutralizing the ideological campaigns of totalitarianism (Migliucci, 2016A).

The political world, in the meantime, established numerous legislative committees with the purpose of investigating propaganda. Some of these operated at the federal level and were based in Washington D.C.; others were organized at state assembly level, such as the one in Albany (New York State). They were responsible for the development of inquiries into Communist and Fascist proselytism, on the one hand, and into the advertising strategies of private companies, on the other.

The Overman, Lusk, and Moses Committees investigated Bolshevik propaganda during the Red Scare years (1917–1920); the Fish Committee investigated communist campaigns in 1930; and the McCormack-Dickstein and Dies Committees investigated so-called Un-American propaganda—Fascist, Nazi and Soviet—starting from 1933. All of these investigations were instituted in the Senate or the House of Representatives (Washington D.C.), except for the Lusk Committee, which was established by the legislative authorities of the State of New York. As for private corporations, throughout the interwar period, various legislative investigations were established to explore advertising techniques employed by companies in charge of the supply of electricity and gas, the producers of weapons and munitions, and those responsible for broadcasting and entertainment systems. All these investigations were carried out by congressman, except for the inquiry into utility corporations, which was carried out on behalf of the federal Senate by the Federal Trade Commission.

The aims, work, and results of some of these legislative committees has been widely studied in the last few decades by various generations of researchers (Gruening, 1931; Coulter, 1947; O'Reilly, 2014: 237–261; and Goodall, 2014: 71–105). Through the analysis of documentary evidence recently collected from US archives, the present investigation will focus on the silent complicity that was established among the press and politicians who headed the propaganda committees. This study consults materials these committees produced and managed during their investigation activities which are stored in the National Archives and Records Administration of Washington D.C. and College Park (Maryland), as well as in the New York State Archives of Albany (New York). Full access to historical newspaper articles from the Library of Congress was made possible, thanks to digital platforms such as ProQuest Congressional.

Firstly, the role played by the press in creating a climate of suspicion around propaganda activities will be analyzed, especially with regard to the way in which periodicals encouraged judicial and legislative inquiries into mass manipulation. Secondly, the present investigation will examine the way in which the press covered the work of committees, constantly informing their readers about the progress of these investigations. Thirdly, the way in which different newspapers of the time ended up in the spotlight of the investigators—for spreading radical ideology or supporting the interests of business organizations—will be studied. Finally, our attention will focus on the special relationship between the chairmen of the committees and workers in the world of mass communication, and we will try to reconstruct the peculiar complicity that marked the legislative inquiries of that period.

The main hypothesis is that while, in the beginning, the objectives of journalists and investigators were divergent, their interests finally ended up coinciding with remarkable regularity, which caused the creation of a subtle collusion between reporters and politicians. Thanks to the active participation of different magazines and

newspapers, the political struggle against subversive propaganda and private corporations' illicit campaigns became, over time, a new way of manipulating the attitudes of citizens for the personal benefit of the leaders of committees and political and commercial targets pursued by the press.

## 1. Concern about propaganda and the press

After the end of the Great War, the American press participated, along with important sectors of the political and cultural worlds, in the creation of a climate of strong hostility toward mass persuasion. During the first months of peace, newspapers frequently raised the alarm about manipulation activities carried out by American institutions. Overall, it was considered that, because of the spread of propaganda by the Central Powers during the war, the Committee on Public Information's unethical behavior was, in hindsight, a necessary evil. However, as hostilities ended, it was widely believed that a rapid return to normality was crucial. A *Boston Daily Globe* leading article, entitled "Demobilize the press agents", claimed that governments could no longer afford to keep experts in persuasion techniques on the payroll.<sup>3</sup> The federal authorities were constantly accused of spreading propaganda campaigns, for example, in favor of the implementation of the League of Nations or against trade unions, denouncing in the press that the formidable advertising structures of the belligerent period had not been completely dismantled after the end of the conflict.

The press also censured proliferation throughout the national territory of propaganda campaigns aimed at supporting the policies of nations that had shown an incessant hostility toward the United States. The newspapers denounced the presence in the country of propagandists from Germany and Bolshevik Russia, the latter being perceived as the new great threat for the capitalist system and liberal democracy. Many journalists requested the monitoring of school environments, so that young people did not come into contact with doctrines originating in Moscow or Berlin.

It was found that our national system of education was permeated by an alien and a hostile propaganda. Text books contained and teachers taught deliberate and intentional untruths, some intended to influence us in favor of some foreign nation and some to prejudice us unjustly against some other nation.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this period characterized by social demands, extremist group violence, and harsh judicial repression, the publication in newspapers of chronicles about the spread of radical propaganda became a recurrent theme (Murray, 1955; and Jaffe, 1972). According to prestigious newspapers such as *The New York Times*, the industrial cities of the United States were infested with communist propagandists, who were blamed for the frequent disturbances –strikes, demonstrations, riots, and even terrorist attacks– that marked those convulsive first years of peace and whose ultimate goal, it was claimed, was the destruction of American democracy and its replacement with a Soviet-type republic.

There is public disquietude already, and even alarm, at the large latitude and freedom allowed to Bolshevik and I.W.W. agitators and their aiders and abettors. They have been allowed to preach their doctrines openly. In various parts of the country they have instigated strikes and labor disorders.<sup>5</sup>

Several media also began to report the propaganda of private corporations. The focus was not on advertisement campaigns –a practice that was considered legitimate by most– but rather on subtle information campaigns that tried to make readers' opinions coincide with the economic interests of companies. For example, the morality and legality of the numerous press articles that extolled the private management of public services in those years was criticized, because the reader was not aware that their publication was often promoted and financed by precisely the same companies that managed these services. Frank Cobb was one of the many journalists who, in those years, denounced the manipulations of large corporations.

[Private propaganda] established itself long before the war and was a development of the press agent, who from being merely a theatrical attachment, had extended himself to Wall Street, to big business and to most of the institutions that have to deal with public opinion [...] Their function is not to proclaim the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, but to present the particular state of facts that will be of the greatest benefit to their clients in short, to manipulate the news.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Boston Daily Globe*, 03-03-1919.

<sup>4</sup> *North American Review*, 08-1919.

<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, 06-04-1919.

<sup>6</sup> Frank Cobb, address delivered before the *Women's City Club of New York*, 12-11-1919.

The press enthusiastically supported the establishment by federal or state authorities of legislative committees that investigated the problem of propaganda. *The Jewish Advocate* expressed deep gratitude to chairman Samuel Dickstein for the establishment of his inquiries into Nazi propaganda.<sup>7</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor* conveyed great satisfaction at the establishment of the Nye Committee which investigated the arms industries' activities.<sup>8</sup>

This attitude is not surprising. In effect, the constant denunciations of the newspapers played a central role in promoting the establishment of different committees. Congressmen used to acknowledge –implicitly or explicitly– that the press was one of the main driving forces behind the investigations, a reality that was reflected in the resolutions these committees finally instituted. The federal Senate established the Overman inquiry because associations of American brewers had been “publicly and repeatedly” blamed for the dissemination of propaganda.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Lusk committee was instituted because the dissemination of radical propaganda in New York had become “a matter of public knowledge” (Lusk Committee, 1920: 1). Even more blatant was the resolution in which the Senate gave the green light to the foundation of the Moses Committee, claiming that the inquiry into Russian propaganda had been inspired by “newspaper reports” concerning the activities of Ludwig C.A.K. Martens, alleged Soviet ambassador to the United States.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Scrupulous coverage of the investigation activities

In general, the American press followed with scrupulous attention the work of the various committees. It was not infrequent for journalists to contact the committee's leaders in order to obtain information, or even images, for their periodicals. In a letter to Otis B. Johnson –secretary of the Federal Trade Commission committee's investigating Utility propaganda– Paul Wootan (McGraw-Hill Publishing Company) asked to be allowed to take pictures during the hearings.

I am planning to write a rather long story reviewing what has been done. I would like to use a couple of photographs with the story. I am wondering if there would be any objection were I to have a photographer there some morning when the hearing is about to start so as to get a photograph of the room showing the setting of the hearings.<sup>11</sup>

The permission was obviously granted by commissioner McCulloch, who promised to suspend the hearings for that purpose.<sup>12</sup> Journalists poured rivers of ink over the threat of propaganda and many of the articles had a distinctly sensationalist tone. *The New York Times* coverage of the Lusk Committee activities was exemplary of this trend. The famous newspaper informed its readers about each step taken by the investigation, turning all the suspicion of the congressmen into incontrovertible proof that the American democratic system was in a state of siege. The journalists followed the public hearings during which witnesses were interrogated, informed their readers about the raids organized by the committee in collaboration with judicial and police authorities, and published summaries of press conferences, press releases, and official reports.

In light of the committee's revelations, the newspaper warned about the presence of radical groups in the trade unions, asserting that the increase in strikes and demonstrations was a consequence of subversive propaganda.<sup>13</sup> The articles gave the impression that there were agitators everywhere. On one day, the alarm was raised about the arrival at Ellis Island –in those years the main gateway for immigrants who arrived in the United States– of radical activists; on another, the presence of “Reds” in the northern cities of the State or among citizens of Finnish origin was denounced.<sup>14</sup> Many conspiracy theories were spread. It was reported that agents of Vladimir Lenin sowed discord in the factories, organizing Soviet riots in the urban areas.<sup>15</sup> Several articles were dedicated to the committees' counter-offensives, beginning with police raids against so-called sedition centers.<sup>16</sup> Finally, magazine and periodicals publicized the many proposed methods the investigators planned to use to quash the implied dangers. Among others, these measures included counter-propaganda activities, control of educational centers, or Americanization programs in the industrial plants.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *The Jewish Advocate*, 04-13-1934.

<sup>8</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12-05-1934.

<sup>9</sup> Senate Resolution 307, Sixty-Fifth Congress, 1918.

<sup>10</sup> Senate Resolution 263, Sixty-Sixth Congress, 1920.

<sup>11</sup> National Archives at College Park, RG122, Records of the Federal Trade Commission, Economic Investigations File 1915-1938, Power & Gas, Box 3726, COR McG7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *The New York Times*, 07-16-1919; *The New York Times*, 07-18-1919; and *The New York Times*, 01-02-1920.

<sup>14</sup> *The New York Times*, 12-27-1919; *The New York Times*, 28-12-1919; and *The New York Times*, 01-04-1920.

<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times*, 07-26-1919; and *The New York Times*, 12-10-1919.

<sup>16</sup> *The New York Times*, 11-09-1919; and *The New York Times*, 06-28-1919.

<sup>17</sup> *The New York Times*, 12-20-1919; and *The New York Times*, 03-18-1920.

The American democratic system, however, was characterized by mass media pluralism, which is why there was no lack of periodicals harshly criticizing the work of the committee. *The Nation* was one of the most severe magazines in this sense, denouncing the “illimitable ignorance and impenetrable stupidity” of the “quixotic crusade” carried out by the New York State investigators.<sup>18</sup> The progressive magazine pointed out that the campaigns against the left movements were producing the effect of multiplying antidemocratic movements’ supporters. It was suggested that “brute force” would not put an end to seditious activities, just as the persecutions of the Romans had not put an end to Christian proselytism.<sup>19</sup>

If Bolshevism comes to the United States –and I don’t believe it will– it will not be through the I.W.W. or any other organizations of that class, but because of the repressions of the reactionaries.<sup>20</sup>

Even the *New York Times* –whose sympathies toward the Lusk Committee were more than evident– gave visibility to prominent critics of the legislative investigation, such as academic Zechariah A. Chafee or publicist Walter Lippmann, who denounced the creation of a climate of “hysteria” with respect to radicals’ activities.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, although journalists benefited from the broad freedom that the US Constitution granted to the press, criticism toward the committees entailed some risk –specifically, the risk of nosy reporters becoming a potential target of the investigators. In a letter written by Congressman Joe Starnes (Dies Committee member) to Robert E. Stripling (Committee secretary) it is possible to find an express request for the investigation of annoying journalists.

I am enclosing article ‘This Evening’ by our critic, Charles N. Fiedelson, in which attacks the chairman of the Committee. This is the same writer who made a vicious attack on me lately [...] Please check our files carefully and see if we have any record of this man’s connection with any subversive groups.<sup>22</sup>

For the committees, however, the presence of detractors did not necessarily pose a problem. The political polarization of their activities allowed them to enjoy the attention of the public. The real danger seemed to be the indifference of the media; the truth is that the committees which aroused little interest among the press had an extremely short life. The Moses and Fish Committees are clear examples of this. They barely caught the attention of the press, which inevitably accelerated the suspension of their activities by Congress. As Alex Goodall suggested, the Fish team experienced a double fiasco. On the one hand, Fish failed to create legislation to fight communist propaganda and, on the other, he was incapable of having impact on the public debate (Goodall, 2014: 72). The devastating sarcasm of various periodicals was also significant. In *The Nation*, journalist Paul Wallace Hanna wrote that the investigators themselves could not understand the revelations of the Moses Committee.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in *The New Republic*, William Hard claimed that the allegations around Bolshevik conspiracies seemed to have been written in order to make people aware of their absolute inconsistency.

Senator Moses, presiding, does not seem to be afraid of these Bolsheviks. In fact, he is so bold about their plots against the existence of the American Republic that he seems to be actually willing to let them prove themselves innocent if they can. They ought to be able to prove with some skill. They are undoubtedly today the world’s leading experts in being investigated, examined, revealed, uncovered, exposed, unearthed, probed, brought to light and laid bare. And at the end of it all, instead of being in jail, they are still sitting on the steps of the State Department with their calling cards in their hands from the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic.<sup>24</sup>

The enormous power and massive influence of the press was openly acknowledged by some of the main protagonists of those legislative inquiries. For example, Martin Dies, who was the Chairman of the Committee on Un-American Activities from 1938, assured that the Fish Committee (investigating communist propaganda in 1930) had been defeated by its enemies thanks to the complicity of the press. He claimed that the revolutionary forces organized a media trap aimed at damaging Fish’s credibility before both public opinion and Congress.

Representative Fish, as Chairman of that Committee [on communist propaganda], was the victim of a clever counter move. He was informed that he would find in criminating evidence in a Maryland barn, but his raid

<sup>18</sup> *The Nation*, 06-28-1919.

<sup>19</sup> *The Nation*, 08-02-1919.

<sup>20</sup> *The Nation*, 07-26-1919.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*, 02-29-1920.

<sup>22</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG233, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, Member and Staff Correspondence, 1938-1944, 9E3/1/13/2, Box 1.

<sup>23</sup> *The Nation*, 03-27-1920.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Republic*, 02-18-1920.

yielded only what one news story described as cases of ‘some moldy pink cabbages’. That was the end of the Fish Committee (Dies, 1963: 57-58).

### 3. The newspaper as a tool in the service of propaganda

The role played by the press as a vehicle transmitting propaganda was a very important question in those years. If many newspapers devoted substantial space to the work of the legislative committees on propaganda, it is also true that many of these committees ended up investigating the persuasion activities of different media.

The Overman Committee, for example, accused the Hearst newspapers of having maintained a pro-German attitude during the Great War. The communications group’s lawyers had to send archival material to the committee—lead articles and cartoons published during the period—attesting to their irreproachable patriotic posture.<sup>25</sup> The attitude maintained by the press during the first world conflict continued to be investigated throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Among the documentation of the Nye Committee is a memorandum—*The War Cry: A study of Newspapers of the Middle West and South and When They Began Advocating War with Germany* (1936?)—analyzing the reasons why the American press (a total of sixty-nine newspapers) began to ask for military intervention in Europe.<sup>26</sup>

In the same way, from the very moment it was launched, the Lusk Committee studied the way in which several newspapers had extolled antidemocratic or anti-capitalist doctrines.<sup>27</sup> In the New York State investigators’ final report, almost three hundred pages are dedicated to the study of what is called revolutionary journalistic material (Lusk Committee, 1920: 1145-1431).

A similar concern characterized the investigation that the Federal Trade Commission conducted, on behalf of the federal Senate, into the manipulation activities of private companies that in those years managed public services such as gas and electricity. In the committee’s report, dozens of pages are dedicated to the examination of the relations between these companies and the journalists.

The Press ranks first as the opinion-forming factor for current adult opinion. To have the great body of the press give voice only to matter in harmony with the program of the private utility industry or at least not give publicity to hostile opinion and matter, it was necessary first to secure proper approach to the newspaper fraternity of both editorial and news divisions (Federal Trade Commission Committee, 1934: 61).

Numerous newspaper’s directors were finally called to testify before the committee and interrogated about their relationships with large corporations.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the interwar period, private corporations’ persuasive campaigns remained at the center of the work of the different committees. The Nye Committee, for example, investigated the propaganda activities carried out before the first world conflict by the arms industries, focusing on the cooperation between these companies and the press. In its final report, there are several references to the weapons and ammunition manufacturers’ press campaigns (Nye Committee, 1936: 10, 163 and 276).

An additional problem was the fact that during this period most of the newspapers used to publish, upon payment, appeals that were intended to influence public opinion or congressmen to support (or oppose) the enactment of certain laws. The Overman Committee, for example, asked several newspapers to explain the reasons why in 1915 they had published the text “An appeal to the American people”, whose purpose was to end the sale of American arms to the enemies of Germany. Suspecting that this text had been inspired by German agents, the committee requested information on the people who had financed its publication.<sup>29</sup>

The truth is that many people began wondering who was behind certain advertising initiatives and questioning the origin of funds used to pay for campaigns that had clear political or commercial purposes. In 1920, Congressman Tom D. McKeown proposed that all money collection initiatives aimed at the organization of campaigns to “influence, through propaganda, national legislation or public opinion” should be required to register with the Department of Commerce.<sup>30</sup> However, despite all attempts at regulation, campaigns of this type continued to be published in the press with little transparency throughout the interwar period, arousing on more than one occasion the distrust of some congressmen. In 1929, for example, Republican John L. Cable called for the opening of an investigation aimed at determining those responsible for newspaper propaganda

<sup>25</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG46, Records of the United States Senate, Sixty-Sixth Congress, Committee Papers including Hearings, Committee on the Judiciary, SEN 66A-F12, Box 71.

<sup>26</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG46, Special Committee Investigating the Munitions Industry, Executive File, N-P, Sen 74A-F27, Box 158.

<sup>27</sup> *The New York Times*, 09-21-1919; and *The New York Times*, 10-20-1919.

<sup>28</sup> *The New York Times*, 05-15-1929.

<sup>29</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG46, Records of the United States Senate, Sixty-Sixth Congress, Committee Papers including Hearings, Committee on the Judiciary, SEN 66A-F12, Box 72.

<sup>30</sup> H.R. 12378, Sixty-Sixth Congress, 02-06-1920.

against the restrictive laws on border control mechanisms, such as the *Immigration Act of 1924*, which was enacted during that time.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, great concern arose due to the increasing number of periodicals published in foreign languages, targeting the immigrant population or American citizens of foreign origin. Those publications designed to reach people who came from places such as Russia, Italy, or Germany appeared to be extremely suspicious, because these countries' regimes were considered to be a threat to the United States. Though some academic studies at the time pointed out that the immigrant press often became an instrument of assimilation, many of these newspapers showed clear subordination to the totalitarian regimes that had risen to power in their lands of origin (Park, 1922; and Luconi, 1999: 1031-1061).

The resolution which established the Overman Committee in 1918 assumed that the German-born brewing industry had used the foreign language press to control the outcome of several elections.<sup>32</sup> In 1930, the Fish Committee claimed that out of a total of twelve communist newspapers that then existed in the United States, only one –the *Daily Worker*– was published in English; the rest were written in “Hebrew, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Slovak, Russian, Ukrainian, Finnish and Yugoslav [sic.]”. (Fish Committee, 1930: 20). In 1934, the McCormack-Dickstein Committee updated the list to include the names of more than fifty foreign language publications published or circulating in the United States (McCormack-Dickstein Committee, 1935: 233).

#### 4. The committees' investigators and their relationship with the press

Newspaper reporters and directors, however, were not generally treated with hostility by the investigators. On the contrary, legislators considered the periodicals as the vehicle through which to communicate their revelations to citizens. The committees' chairmen frequently granted interviews to the newspapers, as well as assiduously pronouncing speeches before the microphones of different radio stations.

In the archives of certain committees, it is possible to find hundreds of press releases which were delivered regularly to journalists. Among the archival documentation, there are also thousands of newspaper clippings, some on the subject of the investigation they were carrying out and others extolling or denigrating the members of the committee.

The investigators were fully aware of the importance of getting along with the media. Senator Lusk, for example, maintained cordial correspondences even with liberal journalists such as Bruce Bliven, who was then one of the editorial writers at *The New York Globe*.<sup>33</sup> Many periodicals offered to collaborate with the legislators, even sending them old journalistic investigations on the topics that the committees were dealing with. In September 27, 1918, Bliven, for example, made available to Senator Overman an old investigation previously carried out by one of the newspapers for which he worked.

I have noted with interest the investigation which a committee under your chairmanship is about to make, of German propaganda in this country. It occurs to me that you may be interested in a record of some of the notorious methods which German propagandists have used in all parts of the world, and which have not come to the attention of the general public as a whole.<sup>34</sup>

The inquiry chaired by Martin Dies was probably the most prolific in terms of issuing press releases.<sup>35</sup> Besides, many of the individuals connected with the un-American activities investigation had a very special relationship with the media. Journalist Walter S. Steele was one of its most controversial witnesses, denouncing –as he had done previously before the Fish Committee– the existence of hundreds of communist organizations in the country (Sproule, 1997: 126). In a letter addressed to the secretary of the Dies committee, Robert E. Stripling, in June 16, 1939, Steele bragged about the amazing media results he had achieved, including an advertising campaign about the danger of anti-American activities which Steele seemed to link to the one carried out by the investigators.

I spoke in Atlanta on Flag Day at a banquet which was given in my honor. My address was broadcast over the radio. This concluded a series of 77 consecutive broadcasts of my testimony before the Dies Committee. Congressman Dies is to speak in Atlanta next week, and great publicity is being given to the affair. The people

<sup>31</sup> H.R. 33, Seventy-First Congress, 04-29-1929.

<sup>32</sup> S. Res. 307, Sixty-Fifth Congress, September 19, 1918.

<sup>33</sup> New York State Archives, Box LOO40-78, 2 of 2, Persons Supporting.

<sup>34</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG46, Records of the United States Senate, Sixty-Sixth Congress, Committee Papers including Hearings, Committee on the Judiciary, SEN 66A-F12, Box 71.

<sup>35</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG233, Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, Press Releases, 1938-1945, 9E3/1/13, Boxes 1 and 2.

appear to be pretty well educated in Georgia with regard to subversive forces and activities, and they will, of course, give Congressman Dies a rousing reception.<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, the documentation kept in the committees' archives seems to show that it was the McCormack-Dickstein team that was the most concerned about the information they transmitted to citizens through the media. The correspondence that Congressman Dickstein maintained with the press and radio stations shows that he was extremely active in public relations. In a letter to Mr. Berkley, of the National Broadcasting Company (October 31, 1933), Dickstein ask to be allowed to speak once again to the radio audience

I want to convey to you, and to the officers and directors of the National Broadcasting Company my sincerest thanks and appreciation for your courtesy in extending to me the privilege of talking over your station in New York, as well as in Washington a week ago (...) I do not wish to be hoggish, but I would appreciate it very much if your company could spare some additional time the first part of the month. I am sure it will be of great interest to the American People.<sup>37</sup>

In September 28, 1934, Franklin O. Poole, librarian of the *Association of the Bar of the City of New York*, one of the most prestigious lawyers' organizations in the American metropolis, wrote to Dickstein to confirm that he could count on the use of the meeting hall of the association to hold the committee's public hearings. The letter conveys that the main thrust of Dickstein's concerns was the presence of the media. Poole, in effect, guaranteed him that it was possible to install microphones for the National Broadcasting Company and the Columbia Broadcasting Company in the meeting hall.<sup>38</sup>

A Letter from Dickstein to Frank P. Randolph, secretary of the committee (October 5, 1934), allow us to understand that the leaders of the Nazi propaganda investigation even considered the possibility of changing the date of a public hearing session because it coincided with the hearing of a trial against an alleged kidnapper and murderer of the son of famous American aviator Charles Lindbergh. The case had captivated public opinion, and both McCormack and Dickstein feared that, due to the simultaneity of the two events, no one would heed the findings of the committee.

I received a letter from Mr. McCormack in which he propounds the following inquiry to me: In view of the fact that on October 11th the Lindbergh kidnaping case will be heard in New York, it might take some publicity away from our public hearings, and he asked my judgment in the matter [...] I think that if we will not get the proper amount of publicity in view of the Lindbergh trial that we ought to arrange another date.<sup>39</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

Any analysis of the relations established throughout the interwar period between the American press and the numerous legislative committees investigating the problem of mass manipulation is extremely complex.

Newspapers were undoubtedly one of the main factors responsible for the opening of the investigations. Reporters alerted the public to threats of propaganda activities and, once the legislative committees were established, the readers were informed by them about the development and results of the committees' work.

As for politicians, they constantly sought the publicity that the media could grant them, which was the main reason for their friendly relationships with journalists and radio operators. However, they also scrutinized the press, accusing hundreds of newspapers and magazines of carrying out illicit campaigns of manipulation. While powerful periodicals such as *The New York Times* stood as champions of the struggle against mass manipulation, a very different sector of the journalist world –small minority newspapers, trade union magazines, etc.– had to defend themselves before the legislative committees against the charge of having weakened American democracy. Other newspapers were accused of having betrayed the sacred duty of transparently informing citizens and serving the interests of large companies.

Formally, journalists and investigators pursued very different objectives. On the one hand, the periodicals had to inform their readers in the most impartial and truthful way about different national and international events. On the other, the ultimate goal of the committees was to persuade the legislative branch to enact laws which would eradicate the threats they investigated. However, the results of these efforts were generally very poor, because the approval of restrictive legislation could call into question the freedom of expression of American citizens. Among the few laws that were approved as a result (or with the contribution) of federal

<sup>36</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., Special Committee on Un-American Activities, Member and Staff Correspondence, 1938-1944, 9E3/1/13/2, Box 1.

<sup>37</sup> National Archives at Washington D.C., RG233, U.S. House of Representatives, Special Committee on Un-American Activities on Nazi Propaganda, Entry I- Administrative Records, HR73A-F30.I, Box 358.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

investigations into propaganda activities, it is worth recalling the *Foreign Agents Registration Act* and the *Alien Registration Act*.<sup>40</sup> The first one required the registration of the agents representing the interests of foreign nations; the second one required the registration of all foreign citizens and punished propaganda that advocated the overthrow of the government. In the State of New York, following the Lusk Committee, repressive legislation (Lusk laws) were enacted, which included one that required an oath of allegiance for state teachers. These were definitively repealed by Governor Alfred Emanuel Smith in 1923. Thus, the committees had to settle for public denunciations of propaganda campaigns, claiming that they endangered the political and economic structure of the United States. These denunciations constituted the very essence of the congressional inquiries, which led the investigators to establish an ever-closer relationship with the press.

In the end, the aims of politicians and reporters coincided, moving far away from their official purposes. From the beginning, investigators were aware that only with a good press campaign would it be possible for them to maintain a high level of citizen interest in their crusade. Appearing in the press became indispensable. Without the support of the public, the more likely prospective was that Congress would prematurely close the investigation. The committee's chairmen thus established a complicit linkage with the media, which transmitted all kinds of information about their discoveries and suspicions.

As for the periodicals, they wanted to increase their readership and, therefore, their incomes. The material they received from the legislative committee allowed them to spread a huge number of sensationalist articles about the problem of propaganda, an issue that –after the mass manipulation experience of the Great War– produced enormous concern among the population.

It is worth asking whether the work of denouncing propaganda practices, carried out by an accredited sector of the press in collaboration with the legislative committees, could not in turn be construed as an evident manipulation of the population's perceptions.

The question at hand is not whether the threats were real. Undoubtedly, the battle against private companies' fraudulent campaigns was based on tangible facts, and the Communist and Fascist movements' challenges and conspiracies against democratic institutions were extremely serious. Nevertheless, the issue is a much more complicated one.

The analysis carried out in this article allows us to become aware of the evident affinity existing between the ideological stances of the different newspapers and the purposes of the committees which they decided to publicize. Conservative newspapers supported the investigations about un-American propaganda, while the most progressive magazines became the natural sponsors of committees inquiring into the informative campaigns of large corporations.

As for the investigators, they were individuals defending very radical ideological views, which inevitably led to a strong politicization of the committees. Some experts have pointed out that Martin Dies did not hesitate to use the un-American propaganda investigation as a tool for attacking the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration (Manning and Romerstein, 2004: 286). Others have indicated that politicians such as Samuel Dickstein sought self-promotion by presiding over a legislative inquiry (Goodall, 2009: 61). For the legislators, in effect, the investigations became a great opportunity to progress in their political careers. Huge visibility in the press was granted, something essential in a system based on the participation, through elections, of public opinion in the political system. Prominence in the mass media gave a certain guarantee of perpetuating oneself in office and even of ascending the hierarchical steps of their political party.

Obviously, ideological impetuses and personal aspirations of both investigators and journalists were carefully hidden behind the necessity of instructing citizens about the impending dangers caused by propaganda activities. The Lusk Committee report, for example, devoted several pages to a detailed description of socialist organizations, something that was considered to be an investigators' educational task in service of the American people.

The most important questions of the day are Socialism and Labor. The men who are leading in both these fields of thought and action are quite aware of their international character. The American public is not. It must be educated to see that every big movement on the other side [Europa] has its parallel in the United States (Lusk Committee, 1920: 39).

Furthermore, the educational role of the investigators was presented as being extremely successfully. In the report of the Nye investigation, it was proudly claimed that the recent public demand for a new neutrality policy was a consequence of the hearings of the committee (Nye Committee, 1936: 2).

The press, of course, endorsed this version, revindicating an old school of thought –still widespread in those years– that asserted that the democratic system is based on decisions taken by informed public opinion, which the newspapers deemed to be the most appropriate means for the propagation of the committees' revelations. In

<sup>40</sup> Public Law 75-583, Seventy-Fifth Congress, September 6, 1938; and Public Law 76-670, Seventy-Sixth Congress, June 28, 1940.

1941, while attributing to the Dies committee a “vital importance”, *The New York Times* emphasized the need for subversive activities to be “exposed to the glare of publicity”.<sup>41</sup>

Manifestly, a true symbiosis was established between the editorial line of the New York newspaper and the position of the un-American propaganda committee. It seems entirely legitimate to ask whether this symbiosis became an obstacle for readers to receive impartial and truthful information; information on the delicate topic of mass manipulation of the masses that was not, in turn, a distortion of reality at the service of personal or political interests.

In the early twenties, Walter Lippmann recalled that news reached citizens through a network of press agents who were at the service of private corporations, banking institutions, and political and social organizations (Lippmann, 1922: 135). Several decades later, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky warned about “mutual interests and relationships between the media and those who make the news and have the power to define it and explain what it means” (Herman and Chomsky, 1988: XI).

Through the analysis and contextualization of substantial archival evidence, the present work demonstrates that a close relationship existed, during the interwar period, between the media and the legislative investigators that dealt with the subject of propaganda. It was a relationship of interdependence, in which both of the two parties needed and, at the same time, feared (the attentions or the indifference of) the other. Their interests –at first absolutely unrelated– finally came to converge. Reporters and investigators supported each other in order to achieve the realization of their personal ambitions, and their ideological and commercial objectives. The struggle against propaganda became itself a new sort of propaganda.

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<sup>41</sup> *The New York Times*, 02-13-1941.

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