What do international organizations (IOs) want from us, the public? In this volume, the outcome of a 2016 conference, historians impressively come together to combine their research on IOs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into an investigation of international public diplomacy. Examining interactions of IOs with the media as a “formative component” of such institutions, the volume bridges two separate historiographies: the history of international organizations and history of communications.

The acknowledgement that public relations has long been at the center of IO agency is not new; indeed, the authors cite Susan Pedersen’s argument that the interwar intergovernmental experiment of the League of Nations “fed off and promoted public mobilization.” Some examples of recent research on the efforts of various international institutions to manage the media do exist, including the earlier work of editor Heidi Tworek who has laid out the involvement of the League in setting up international conferences to discuss the use of false news in propaganda. But nothing has been done in terms of contextualizing the longer, variegated history of interactions between IOs and the media and employing the findings into some general observations. This is where this book paves the way forward.

The editors question “some of the basic assumptions about how [IOs] could use media to promote or enable international governance” (6). They entertain few illusions about the elusive concept of public opinion, which has been emphasized by international institutions since, at least, the League onwards, calling into question why IO-bureaucrats have seemingly continued to believe in its great power despite a consistent absence of clearly defined aims and targets. “Audiences and aims,” the authors say, must overlap (8) – publicity efforts have little effect if the audiences targeted were not positioned to enact the aims of the IO. Most chapters resonate with this assertion and serve, with nuances, to demonstrate this problem and its consequences, showing how several IOs struggled with how to efficiently influence and mobilize the public through the media – but for different reasons.

“Exorbitant expectations” about the value of communications is an “overarching theme” of the volume and at the same time also the third of its three

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arguments. While this double role serves to underscore its primacy, it also confuses because the two other arguments do not fit seamlessly into this theme. Roughly put, the authors argue first, that IO communication with the media was elite-oriented before 1945 and was then gradually broadened. Second, that before 1945 such communication was geographically focused on the West and Japan, and was then gradually expanded, and third that IOs have generally, since their inception, held exorbitant expectations as to the value of publicity, propaganda and public mobilization. Tomoko Akami and David Allen’s research on the League, contrasted with that of Glenda Sluga and Monika Baár, shows the development from elite and technocracy-oriented communication to the involvement of Hollywood and other popular means of mass communication and the rise of the importance of culture in the UN through UNESCO. Arthur Asseraf and Jonas Brendebach show the flip from “a total absence of communication” to the inclusion of the non-European populations in UN communications. The shift from a Western focus to a global one is convincing if not very surprising, somewhat paralleling, of course, the processes of decolonization. The argument about a shift from elite-to mass-focus, however, invites further discussion of why the story begins in 1815. True, there is general agreement that IOs originate at the Congress of Vienna, and Robert Spaulding and Richard John argue convincingly that the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine and the Universal Postal Union were engaged in promotion. But this promotion, we see, was not aimed at a modern kind of public, rather their efforts resembled lobbying towards select groups and institutions. They do not fit neatly into the story of rising mass-reading publics and resulting debates about the power of public opinion seen in the interwar period. Even if, for example, the efforts of the League of Nations were mostly aimed at elites, it did employ ambitious press facilities and the public was invited to visit its New York Pavilion, and so on.

Returning to the volume’s main argument, the ideal conditions for successful communication, the authors claim, occurred when the aims and audience of IO communications were clearly defined. “Broader aims, like awareness-raising” still mattered, but it remained “unclear how they achieved policy goals” (9). True, if we accept unconditionally the premise that the achievement of concrete policy goals was always the aim, but the IOs discussed differ substantially in whether their goals could be reduced to a set of specific policies. The League and the UN depended on public opinion as a symbol. The observation that despite growing intellectual skepticism about public opinion (the so-called Almond-Lippmann-consensus) international bureaucrats continued to believe public opinion would solve all their problems misses the fact that one does not need to “believe” in the full potential of such an appeal to use what
Stephen Wertheim has recently called “the illocutionary power of public opinion talk.” Wertheim argues that while liberal internationalism did partly open the door towards the public in diplomacy, the original purpose of the concept in the pre-polling age was in pointing to the capacity of statesmen to synthesize the will of the people – not actually reflecting it through an aggregate of opinions. In line with this thinking one might object that appeals to a mobilized public were sometimes acts of “constitutive rhetoric,” which in turn legitimized the organization in relation to its member governments and national bureaucracies themselves. In conclusion, and only more so because of these tensions, this is a welcome and highly illuminating book presenting an under-researched angle of IO-history. The book’s target group – “specialists, teachers, undergraduate students” – is probably fitting and, by the way, was often the stated target group of League of Nations public information-pamphlets.

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