Jill Lepore’s *If Then* is a brilliant, engaging history. It has been widely praised already, so, rather than add to the chorus, I will interpret the book’s importance to the fields of communication, journalism, and media studies. Like Shoshanna Zuboff’s comparable *Surveillance Capitalism*, the book’s publication is a significant event that indirectly brings major public attention to these fields’ research areas.

The book’s subject, American Simulmatics Corporation, is an important example of what we might call “administrative research” and, specifically, the behavioral turn in communication studies (Hardt 1989; Karpf et al., 2015; Pooley and Katz 2008). Though not entirely forgotten, the company has been on the margins of historical research in journalism (Anderson 2018), advertising (McGuigan 2019), urban planning (Light 2005), Cold War social science (Rohde 2013), and political communication (McKelvey 2020). A few excellent papers discuss Simulmatics (Hrach 2011; Rohde 2011) but never in such detail as here.

The Simulmatics Corporation’s links to the field are dense. Harold Lasswell and Paul Lazarsfeld served on its Scientific Advisory board, and it was founded by Ithiel de Sola Pool, who later influenced communication policy and helped popularize content analysis. One could easily spend an entire book recounting the company’s web of academic connections, and, to Lepore’s credit, she discusses wives of the company’s founders and Simulmatics’ Vietnamese survey researchers as much as the so-called thought leaders, giving a much fuller picture of the story.

Over three parts, *If Then* offers an at times tragic, at times comedic account of Simulmatics’ ambitious, crazed, frequently drunken endeavors to apply behavioral research for domestic and foreign population control. Over its short ten-year run, Simulmatics went from poster child of its proposed field of simulation and automation (or SIMUL-MATICS) to bankrupt. Its founders out of work, divorced, and a target of the American antiwar movement. For anyone in doubt of teaching undergraduates the risks of so-called administrative research, here is the cautionary tale, told with flourish and a willingness to make crucial connections to race and gender in American history (Chakravartty et al., 2018).
Simulmatics was one of the first firms to use computers in politics, foreshadowing (as Lepore encourages) comparisons with our post-Cambridge Analytica political landscape. The book’s first part offers the company’s origin story and for aspirations to better control politics through technology. Lepore uncovers the firm’s close connections with Democratic presidential hopeful Adlai Stevenson, probably best known as the loser, by a landslide, to Republican Dwight Eisenhower in 1952. Again in 1956. Ironically or not, Lepore describes Stevenson as a orator who shunned television advertising and appealed to Americans intellectually only to lose to Ike’s slick advertising and simple messaging. Lepore’s retelling of Stevenson’s repeated public thrashings should be required reading in any political communication class, perhaps alongside a discussion of public sphere. Stevenson’s loss is a partial justification for New York businessman Edward Greenfield’s efforts to bring together leaders in the emerging behavioral sciences to help Democrats win elections and civil rights campaigns. The book’s second part explores Simulmatics’ very brief but well-known computer simulations, used to advise the 1960 Kennedy campaign, that it later marketed to advertisers to justify its stock valuations.

How strange it is that white men use computers to understand their fellow humans—that’s the underlying thesis of the book, seen most clearly in the second part. The book’s second part resonates with a key concern in communications studies: how media create the possibility and cultural logic of control at a distance. Computers, field interviews, and surveys are the media that allow the men of the Simulmatics Corporation to retreat to their Madison Avenue offices and beachfront geodesic domes, far away from the riots and bombings, to make objective decisions.1 This remoteness has been a central concern in histories of Cold War social science, and Lepore’s book should bolster contemporary critical scholarship today about a similar remoteness made possible by the concentration and nature of power held by a few large technology giants unwilling or unable to address their participation in deeper structural violence and injustice (e.g. Anderson 2020; Roberts and Hogan 2019).

The book’s third part succeeds in bringing together Simulmatics’ domestic and international efforts to use computers and data to paper over state violence in the name of humane warfare. Here is perhaps the most important consideration for the field, specifically how Lepore juxtaposes Simulmatics’ failed work in Vietnam with its research for the Kerner Commission—one of many go-nowhere reports about racial injustice in America—that makes clear how the behavioral sciences sold their utility to the American government on the basis of managing unruly populations. There is a larger question at work here about the oft unremarked-upon relationship between America’s domestic efforts in computational management and its simultaneous efforts internationally. Key works in the history of political communication, for example, treat the rise of more scientific campaigns as a domestic innovation that was then exported to foreign markets (Johnson 2016). Daniel Immerwahr (2019), in his book How to Hide an Empire, argues that, “if you looked up, at the end of 1945, and you saw a U.S. flag flying overhead it was more likely that you were living in a colony or occupied zone than you were actually living on the U.S. mainland.”2 What would be a history of political communication aware that efforts to better manage political
campaigns shared methods and motivations with America’s other campaigns to pacify its enemies abroad or murder them in their beds domestically? McIlwain (2020) is a good example, telling the efforts of Black activists to build alternative technology and the efforts of the American government to use technology against them.

Lepore’s eulogy for American liberalism makes for a fine conclusion to the book, but for those in the fields above it may be unsatisfying. The final chapters pit Noam Chomsky against Pool and Simulmatics. Lepore describes a loss of objectivity with the New Left’s ascendency. In spite of this criticism, If Then makes a compelling case for the renewed importance of Stuart Hall. Only ten years after the Kerner Commission, Hall et al.’s (1978) Policing the Crisis offered a renewed media analysis, deeply aware of how communication systems perpetuate racism and fears of new immigrants. That New Left critique, not liberal, was able to build a critical scholarship to analyze and advocate for change is important to the field. The book then offers a warning about the promise and failures of administrative research relevant today—a reminder that the field has for generations fostered scholarship committed to critique and the search for alternatives.

Notes
1. Or the basement of the Pentagon, where Robert McNamara’s Hamlet Evaluation Study tried, unsuccessfully, to manage the Vietnam war (Belcher 2019).
2. Taken from an interview with WNYC’s On the Media available at: https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/episodes/on-the-media-empire-state-mind.
3. Prior to Chomsky, Eugene Burdick plays the foil to Simulmatics and Lepore deserves special credit for making the seemingly dull author of The 480 into the book’s most larger than life character—just look at that ad on page 27.

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