

Beyond the Code: Hollywood's Trade Association and Wartime Public Relations

Paul Monticone

ROWAN UNIVERSITY

monticone[AT]rowan.edu¹

Abstract

In 1942, after the United States' entry in World War II (WWII), Hollywood studios initiated a reorganization of the public relations strategies of their trade association, commonly known as the Hays Office. Strategies targeting moral reformers and sympathetic cultural elites had succeeded in the 1930s but were deemed inadequate in the wartime era. Trade association staffers and studio publicists endeavored to adopt cutting-edge public relations strategies taking hold throughout the US business community, including institutional advertising campaigns and public opinions polling. Through a detailed study of the internal documents of the industry's various trade groups, this article explores the extent to which such innovations in corporate public relations were adopted by Hollywood's collective organization and examines why this media industry's corporate public relations diverged from those of the broader US business community.

Keywords: trade associations, public relations, MPPDA, WWII, Hollywood studio system.

The leading industry organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Inc, was the natural source of manpower and plan-power for the wide activities undertaken by the screen to translate to the people the mighty efforts of our own nation . . .²

In the summer of 1942, *Film Daily's* "Industry at War" special section credited the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) as the coordinator of Hollywood's wide-ranging contributions to the nation's World War II (WWII) mobilization. Such flattering press coverage was not uncommon over the organization's first two decades of existence. Known more commonly as the Hays Office, after its well-connected and powerful president Will H. Hays, the MPPDA had often been lauded as an effective and modern trade association. But in the early years of World War II, such positive publicity was in stark

contrast to the darkening views of producers, lawyers, and publicists who composed the Hollywood majors. It was not clear that the Hays Office was, as *Film Daily* claimed, still the “natural source” of “plan-power”—certainly not in the eyes of those whose dues sustained the MPPDA. The studio executives’ increasing conviction that the MPPDA was no longer at the cutting edge of business representation led them to initiate a reorganization of the Hays Office’s industry public relations program.³ In the early war years, the film industry’s trade association developed a public relations program that selectively drew on and adapted public relations practices that were becoming commonplace throughout US corporate culture.

The MPPDA’s public relations are not unknown to media historians, but these studies have not consistently situated Hollywood in relation to the broader field of corporate public relations. This becomes notable in the case of the wartime era, during which period corporate America adopted PR innovations to secure a privileged position in the postwar economy. An extensive body of scholarship focuses on the first dozen years after the association’s founding in 1922, which began with a series of star scandals and culminated in the Production Code Administration (PCA), Hollywood’s machinery for content self-regulation.⁴ As Richard Maltby has shown, mollifying and converting reformers not only fulfilled a defensive function but also disrupted the “alliance of convenience” between moral reform groups and independent exhibitors by displacing “disputes over the industry’s distribution of profits onto another arena quite literally—from economic base to the ideological superstructure of movie content.”⁵ By the end of the 1930s, however, moral panics were at a low ebb, and the oligopoly’s economic base was laid bare before an activist antitrust department in the Roosevelt administration. As it did for other sectors of US business targeted by the Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression, WWII presented an opportunity to garner goodwill by putting the film industry at the service of the national war effort, an effort that led to Hollywood’s own “alphabet soup” of war committees and inaugurated its “finest hour as a social institution and cultural force.”⁶ To convert this ephemeral status into a durable value for the industry, Hollywood, like other business institutions, would need to leverage its wartime service to win important friends and convert, subdue, or isolate enemies—in short, to engage in public relations.

The Hays Office felt pressure to do this from within its own membership. While the trades lauded its “natural” position of leadership, Hays’s staff spoke privately of an attack from its members: “organized forces of opposition to the Association . . . are openly competing with us. Their plan of action would be to preserve the [PCA] and usurp all other activities.”⁷ Chief among these internal adversaries were west-coast studio publicists who entreated studio executives to strip the Hays Office of several of its functions, charging that the Hays Office has not “in any way shown itself to be rightfully considered the office that is qualified to protect the good name of this industry.”⁸ Responding to this threatened erosion of its status within the industry, the Hays Office would, over the war years, modernize its public relations by pivoting from the moral reformers and cultural elites who had been the association’s core audience in the 1920s and 1930s to a larger and more dispersed public. In so doing, Hollywood’s trade association would attempt to incorporate innovations that were increasingly common in big business in the 1940s. This article sheds light on a significant but overlooked period in the development of Hollywood’s corporate public relations by

assessing the extent to which the MPPDA adopted strategies taking hold in the US business community.

Much of the process by which this program was developed, debated, and came to fruition occurred at an organizational level below that of Hays and the studio moguls, the president and directors of the association. It was instead carried out by mid-level executives of the association and studio publicity directors who staffed its standing committees, thus my research draws on not only Hays's oft-used personal papers but also the internal reports, proposals, and interoffice memoranda from the archival collections of the MPPDA and its West Coast affiliate, the Association of Motion Picture Producers (predecessor of today's Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers). The latter of these includes the papers of the studio publicists who lobbied for and drove the PR reorganization. The archival record of this reorganization of the MPPDA's operations reminds us that, far from being a simple institutional expression of the Hollywood oligopoly's economic interests, its trade association was as much a site of conflict, compromise, and contradiction as of collusion and coordination. Analyzing the operations of such media industry institutions, uncovering the cracks and fissures in these seeming monoliths, can inform the work of activist scholars who hope to intervene in media policy. More modestly, cases such as that examined here allow industry scholars to specify how media and culture industries—with their unique mix of executives, managers, and intermediaries—operate both like and unlike other capitalist enterprises. The reorganization of the MPPDA's public relations program reveals how the fragile alliance between Hollywood and the US state came apart so swiftly after WWII, changing rapidly, as Thomas Schatz has put it, from “boom” to “bust.”⁹

The received history of the US film industry tells us that Hollywood performed a crucial role in the US war effort, and this view is echoed in self-congratulatory tomes like Will Hays's memoirs, the authorized history of the Hays Office produced by Raymond Moley, and of the Motion Picture Industry (WAC's) *Movies at War* annuals. The oligopoly's public relations efforts succeeded more in influencing popular memory than the beliefs of the audiences it originally sought to target. The fragility of Hollywood's wartime status is evident from how quickly it collapsed after the war. The archival record of the film industry's efforts to mobilize and exploit its wartime service allows us to see why this was the case, and considering its public relations program alongside that of the broader US business community shows us what a more effective corporate public relations program would have looked like. Hollywood's failure here helped create the conditions for the dismantling of the studio system in the years after WWII.

I begin by establishing the origins of the MPPDA's public relations reorganization by outlining the Hays Office's prewar program and tracing its breakdown as the world war affected Hollywood's markets and place in the US political economy. I then survey the wartime innovations in the broader field of public relations that the MPPDA's member firms sought to bring into the film industry. Many of these innovations occurred through private industry's wartime service committees, but while the Hollywood oligopoly was early to form such an organization, it lagged behind those of other industries in promoting corporate interests. That task fell to the MPPDA, and in this article's final section, I show that the program the film industry ultimately adopted involved little of the opinion-survey research or institutional advertising

that were becoming commonplace elsewhere in corporate culture, but they did draw on other trends, such as employee goodwill ambassadors, to refashion elements of their prewar system. I argue that the selective uptake of innovations in corporate public relations can tell us how this big business, a media industry, was both like and unlike others in US corporate culture.

The MPPDA's "Central Switchboard"

Although the coming of WWII would precipitate intense criticisms of the Hays Office, the public relations work of the MPPDA had long been a point of pride within the association, and it had garnered rave reviews from the broader business community. In *Fortune*, the MPPDA's work was favorably compared to the utility industry's information campaign of the 1920s, recalled for the "crudity with which [it] had attempted to influence public opinion," whereas the MPPDA, representing a much smaller industry, offered "the great example" of effective public relations.¹⁰ *Fortune* later expanded on this assessment in a feature on public relations, singling out the MPPDA as "easily the most successful of the long-established group efforts at public relations" and drawing particular attention to its success in converting "public spirited groups that were harrying the industry" into not merely "allies" but a "vast army of voluntary workers to fight its battles for it."¹¹ When criticisms from Hollywood-based publicity executives began to mount, Hays's staff authored a report for studio executives that highlighted its coordination of this network of influence. This report imagines the trade association as the "central switchboard of a great telephone system . . . [with] outgoing trunk lines which successively separate into a nation-wide and world-wide array of individual receivers."¹² The rest of the twenty-page document enumerates the various lines—two dozen in all—through which the association conveyed an image of the industry to the public. These can usefully be divided into activities for which the association maintained standing committees or departments—that is, had a continuing program that was institutionally integrated into the association—and those activities that were handled in a more informal manner by top executives.

Two key departments were responsible for the association's formalized interactions with the public. Since the film industry is first known through its products, the report trumpets the association's regulation of content through the PCA as the centerpiece of the industry's management of public opinion. The Code ensured films adhered to the broad standards of inoffensive entertainment, performing a generally defensive function, but the association also sought to create constructive relationships with interested groups. The second key department, the Community Service Department (CSD), functioned primarily to promote the industry to educators, librarians, and community groups. This work involved the preparation and circulation of newsletters and bulletins, as well as scripts for members of local film councils or library and museum displays to tout particular films identified as potentially beneficial to the industry's prestige. Through such endeavors, the CSD sought to "widen and deepen love of pictures on the part of the best public in this country . . . that leads in standards, in thinking, in measuring."¹³ The CSD operated through collaborations with reform organizations and public interest groups, those that Hays had organized under a Committee

on Public Relations in 1922, in part to reach the “best public” and out of a conviction that “a prestige-building program . . . is most effective in proportion as it is implemented and carried on by disinterested cultural and educational opinion-forming leaders.”¹⁴ Because the association found that interfirm jealousy was inflamed when it chose to promote one studio’s film over another’s, the CSD’s work was dispersed among many partner organizations outside the industry.¹⁵

Despite the image of a comprehensive and successful program painted in the association’s report, the MPPDA’s existing departments were beginning to break down. As historians of the Code have noted, the PCA’s industry policy of apolitical, inoffensive entertainment was revised as moral guardians were superseded by outside observers who wondered why the nation’s dominant cultural form had so little to say about Axis belligerence.¹⁶ As the war approached, the CSD was increasingly under the strain of declining resources and the shifting priorities of the groups with which it worked. This existing structure, designed to coordinate with local film councils, was beginning to exhaust its usefulness—not in the eyes of the association but the film councils themselves. The MPPDA’s long-serving vice-president Carl E. Milliken, the former Maine governor who oversaw this department, recalled: “We began, even before the war broke out, to get clippings from newspapers where the local film council had gone out of business, feeling that progress had been made.”¹⁷ The volunteers who had been active in these councils shifted their attention to other social issues, primarily those relating to the impending war. On the supply side of the CSD, the outbreak of war in Europe led to a loss of revenue for the studios, which in turn “instituted very drastic economies” on the association’s work: “the roof fell in on our . . . ‘community service.’”¹⁸ As a result, the cultural elites and community leaders toward whom the MPPDA directed one of its most significant public relations programs became less easily reached and less valuable to Hollywood. The Hays Office’s more informal efforts were likewise proving less effective.

Beyond their standing departments, MPPDA executives provided counseling services to avert “damaging situations.” Through these informal, and largely unpublicized, means, the association defused situations that might lead to public controversy and government intervention. To take an example cited by the MPPDA staff, when *Liberty* magazine ran Congressman Martin Dies’s exposé of Hollywood Communism in its February 1940 issue, the association decided not to dignify the articles with a formal answer, but Hays and association staffers held several conferences with the publisher. The MPPDA declined an invitation to publish a rebuttal authored by Hays but instead ensured Dies’s article carried a disclaimer and demonstrated that the industry was deserving of compensating positive coverage. Hays’s staff recounted these efforts in a report to the board occasioned by mounting criticism from Hollywood publicity executives. This report dismissed its publicist critics’ view of public relations: The Hays Office avoided

sensational press releases, which tend to “fan the flames” rather than to limit and speedily subdue, the conflagration—sometimes to the chagrin of excellent directors of publicity who measure results by the size of headlines or the volume of newspaper space.¹⁹

That the MPPDA preferred to handle such matters quietly is no surprise; the majority of its high-level personnel were former political operatives (in the case of Hays and Milliken) and

accustomed to addressing various interest groups in addition to the press that the publicists took as the sum total of public relations.

By the end of 1941, a Congressional investigation of Hollywood's alleged propaganda exposed the inadequacy of the MPPDA's public relations. During the fall of that year, isolationists in the Senate targeted Hollywood, charging that a handful of anti-Nazi films and newsreels supporting the passage of the Lend-Lease Bill to arm Britain made the industry a propaganda arm of the Roosevelt Administration. Hays had been aware of the looming crisis for nearly a year, but his typical method of operation—private correspondence and conferences—failed to avert the Senate inquiry. Once an investigatory subcommittee was formed, the studio heads appointed a committee of studio lawyers to strategize the industry's response.²⁰ Hays was sidelined as the industry turned to former presidential candidate Wendell Willkie, who mounted an aggressive and widely lauded defense of Hollywood's interventionist advocacy.²¹ The hearings were a disaster for the isolationists and triumph for the organized industry—except, that is, for its trade association. The episode had shown that the MPPDA's program—its switchboard to the cultural elite and “unostentatious” influencing of publishers and politicians—no longer functioned to vouchsafe Hollywood's interests. After the embarrassment of the hearings, and with urgent new public relations demands and opportunities on the horizon, the committee of studio lawyers undertook an audit of the Hays Office and directed its staff to work with their critics, the studio publicity directors, to modernize the association's public relations strategies.

Corporate Public Relations and WWII

In reorganizing its public relations programs, the MPPDA would look to strategies that were increasingly common in the broader US business community. Historians of corporate public relations identify the United States' entry into WWII as a watershed event. Given the administration's reformist and antitrust policies, the American business community was initially reluctant to partner with the government, but, as Roosevelt adopted increasingly business-friendly policies, corporate executives and managers began filling the staffs of war agencies such as the Office of Production Management and the War Production Board. This service was neither purely altruistic nor sentimentally patriotic. It provided an opportunity for American business leaders to recover the cultural authority that was thought lost during the Depression and to safeguard their interests for the postwar future. To convert their service into public opinion that private enterprise ought to operate free of government constraint, American businesses devoted considerable resources to a variety of public relations initiatives.

The War Advertising Council was a key institution in this regard. Founded in November 1941 by two major advertising trade associations and chaired by Young & Rubicam's Chester J. LaRoche, the Advertising Council was conceived as a defensive measure against the possibility of tax rulings and defense contracts excluding advertising as a business expense. In addition, advertising executives, worried that the conversion to war production would leave their clients with nothing to sell and thus nothing to advertise, used the council

to encourage advertising agencies find ways to “sell America to Americans.”²² When war broke out, the council was rechristened the War Advertising Council and absorbed within the Office of War Information (OWI). As a division of a wartime agency, it coordinated the (tax deductible) donation of newspaper and magazine space and broadcast airtime to sell war bonds, recruit manpower, and promote the government’s message of war-time sacrifice.²³ Although enlisted in a national project and part of a government office, the council never lost sight of its organizing mission. Through the council advertisers developed forms of address that sold ideas rather than products, and clients proved willing to fund such advertising after a May 1942 ruling from the Treasury Department that made corporate advertising a deductible expense.²⁴ As a result, spending on such advertising rose from \$1 million in 1939 to \$17 million in 1943.²⁵ During the war years, advertisers had “a state of the art laboratory where business could experiment with the tools of ideological command.”²⁶

Promoting the contributions of a company’s or industry’s own products to the war effort was one obvious form of nonconsumer advertising that would burnish its self-image, and to this end, companies compiled detailed lists of their war-related activities and commissioned handsomely illustrated, self-congratulatory war histories for distribution to employees. But such themes, when presented more broadly, could oversell an industry’s or company’s contributions and offend the public with, as one surveyed soldier put it, “sloppy, second-rate sentimentalizing.”²⁷ Campaigns were thus increasingly preceded by public opinion surveys to determine what messages corporations ought to sponsor. Discovering the limited utility of advertising to narrowly enhance their own images, large corporations sought broader themes and thus contributed to the American industry’s long search for a “new vocabulary” to promote the so-called fifth freedom—“free enterprise.”²⁸ Institutional advertising campaigns represented the corporation through such scaled-down figures as the G.I. Joe. In such ads, the “heroic but homesick” enlisted man was mobilized to articulate a vision of what America was fighting for that tolerated bureaucratic expansion as a wartime necessity to be rolled back once the peace was secured. Held up as ideals were small-town, local businesses—for example, a local repair shop that flourished without any “bureaucrat” telling the owner what to do, in a Republic Steel ad.²⁹

Institutional advertisements celebrating “the American way of life” activated the imagery of the idyllic small town. Decades earlier, AT&T, under vice-president of public relations Arthur W. Page, had innovated this formula of linking big business to such images of Americana to assuage public fears over the influence of large, distantly headquartered commercial enterprises. During WWII, many more industries flattered the small town for more diffuse purposes, to build a “sympathetic political constituency for the future.”³⁰ Reflecting the content of War Advertising Council messages disseminated for the OWI, many companies promoted the sales of war bonds (offering payroll deductions to facilitate their purchase), encouraged Victory Gardens, and coordinated care packages for servicemen overseas, among other forms of philanthropy. Through such means, Marchand notes, companies revived the welfare capitalism of the previous decades and “meld[ed] loyalty to the corporation with war patriotism.”³¹ This turn toward employees, and interest in joining their wartime volunteerism with the corporation, aimed to convert workers into “ambassadors of good will” for the industry in the local community.³²

Hollywood's own industry wartime organization originated much earlier than that of advertisers, with the Motion Picture Coordinating Committee for the Nation Defense (MPCCND) in June 1940. It was announced by Hays and formed by the five vertically integrated majors to produce and distribute films to train troops, an initiative to which Congress had recently appropriated a half-billion dollars. Like the Advertising Council, the MPCCND sought to find new uses and functions for an industry's products as the nation readied for war, but Hollywood's early participation was driven by another factor—the *United States v. Paramount* antitrust suit that had just gone to trial. Just as the MPCCND launched, the Department of Justice abruptly reversed course and entered into a consent decree, temporarily pausing the antitrust suit. Noting the timing of these two events, Mary Samuelson has characterized the MPCCND as initiating a period of “collective collaboration” between the film industry and government: Hollywood's oligopoly would be tolerated to support the administration's foreign policy. Days after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the MPCCND became the War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry. This change reflected geopolitical developments, but it was also accompanied by an administrative expansion of the group's work. New divisions formed, including those devoted to theaters, distribution, and Hollywood.³³

Much of the work carried out by the WAC involved utilizing the movie industry's resources to bring the government's wartime messages—whether concerning recruitment, fundraising, or rationing—to the moviegoing public. Typified by star-studded bond rallies and propaganda shorts, wartime Hollywood, as Sue Collins has argued, worked with government agencies to mobilize the cultural authority of stars as “a crucial personification of state discourse in wartime” that functioned as an “ancillary of liberal governance to serve war mobilization, military financing, and soldier relief.”³⁴ In coordinating and financing these efforts, the WAC functioned as a public relations agency, but one that Hollywood publicity executives worried served national interests more effectively than those of the film industry itself. Given the nature of the industry's product, its service-rallies and broadcasts featuring star appearances—would garner positive publicity, and, like General Motors, the WAC created attractive annuals that summarized the industry's work. But the organized industry, as well as individual companies, also sought to shape public discourse about the industry itself, drawing attention to particular facets of its wartime contributions and controlling the ways in which they were understood.³⁵ In order to accomplish this, the MPPDA sought a public relations program for the industry that would make use of the new tools outlined above—institutional advertising, opinion and industry research, and the organization of employees' wartime philanthropic service to advance corporate public relations goals. Not all these ideas would find purchase in the film industry's revived public relations program, and those that did were most easily adapted to the structure built in the MPPDA's first decades.

The MPPDA's New Program

To develop plans for the modernization of the Hays Office's public relations, studio publicity and advertising executives on both coasts, along with MPPDA staffers, formed branches of a Public Relations Committee (PRC) in the spring of 1942. Through its efforts, the PRC sought to bring intra-industry public relations into line with trends taking hold throughout the US

business community. Three hallmarks of WWII corporate public relations—the centralized collection of industry data, survey research into public attitudes, and institutional advertising campaigns crafted to address these attitudes—ultimately failed to be implemented. But the MPPDA did launch a national organization to unite the majors’ distribution and exhibition workers through an industry newsletter and speakers bureau; by turning local employees into local goodwill ambassadors, this organization would create a network of advocates for Hollywood outside the industry’s bicoastal centers.

Through the MPPDA, the film industry had twice before sought to promote moviegoing through industry-wide advertising campaigns—first, with the Greater Movie Season of 1925–1926 and then the 1938 Motion Pictures Are Your Best Entertainment (MPAYBE) campaign.³⁶ The PRC hoped to expand on these with a \$3-million multimedia campaign to promote the value of not only moviegoing but also the industry itself. In so doing, Hollywood’s publicists sought to compel “industry leaders to recognize and study other industries and their efforts along similar public relations lines.”³⁷ Their proposals included several research reports as exhibits, indicating the extent to which the studios’ publicity staff were devoting resources to bolster the industry’s public relations operations. These included studies of advertising expenditures in magazines and analyses of possibilities for institutional radio advertising. The most important of these—advocated in the trade press by members of the PRC—was the report on opinion research prepared by MGM’s Howard Dietz, who MPPDA executives recognized as “the dean of the publicity fraternity.”³⁸ The research report Dietz authored distinguishes itself from the other exhibits in not presenting data supporting the PRC’s initiatives so much as mounting an argument in their favor: “It is becoming increasingly evident that all industries are on trial in time of national crisis. Each industry endeavors . . . to insure its destiny in a post-war period.”³⁹ In this important respect, the film industry was lagging behind other major industries, and Dietz interviewed several research firms such as the Audience Research Institute to obtain quotes for assessing the public’s misconceptions about and concern over “salaries . . . public responsibility, labor relations, political affiliations, domestic lives, economic waste, moral behavior, etc.”⁴⁰ Such opinion research, combined with a research bureau to compile accurate industry data, would be instrumental in marshaling support for the institutional advertising expenditure from the studio executives who sat on the MPPDA’s board of directors. These campaigns, Dietz recalled, were often regarded a good idea “in a vague sort of way” but, with the two exceptions noted above, were always rejected because of their expense: “Perhaps if we knew definitely what we wanted to say, meaning what we wanted to accomplish, meaning what we knew about the public, the expense would-not loom large.”⁴¹ The resources the PRC had hoped to marshal in coordinating this ambitious program were not forthcoming.

When presented with the plan for institutional advertising, opinion surveys, and research, the MPPDA’s board of directors balked.⁴² Proposals to establish a research bureau of “authentic industry statistics” ran aground, for not the first time, on the studios’ mutual fear of a rival gaining an advantage. As the MPPDA’s Arthur DeBra observed several years later, this had long been an ambition of the trade association, but each member was loathe to “allow data derived from its own business operation to become property of other companies.”⁴³ Dietz’s proposed survey of attitudes toward the industry was deferred owing to its cost, as was the institutional advertising campaign, even with a budget trimmed and made to coincide with

the WAC's Third War Loan Drive.⁴⁴ Although denying funding, the board of directors offered a general statement of support for a "carefully planned long-range campaign of institutional advertising," but they were nonetheless unwilling to invest in such planning. Such contradictory stances had long hampered the MPPDA's efforts. As Milliken observed to Hays during the MPAYBE campaign,

the constant dilemma preventing a consistent, expanding public relations program is that in times of prosperity the leaders of the industry regard such a program as surplusage and in times of adversity they feel that they can not [sic] afford to spend the money.⁴⁵

With the domestic box-office boom not yet making up for lost overseas markets, intra-industry research and advertising seemed extravagances; the exogenous pressures of Congressional investigation had passed. Once again, the changing economic fortunes of the studios militated against an ambitious program.

When the trade press reported that a new, broadened public relations program had been adopted by the MPPDA, articles omitted the program that was rejected and highlighted what the board had approved: the publication of a new weekly bulletin to keep the industry's employees throughout the country informed of the film industry's war contributions and "organization on a national basis" coordinating "prominent men in the field" such as circuit executives and branch personnel of distribution exchanges.⁴⁶ This idea had originated with the PRC, which envisioned publicists of each town's largest chain acting as "liaisons between that community and Hollywood" by inviting prominent citizens, local industry employees, and presidents of fan clubs to a meeting addressed by a speaker from Hollywood.⁴⁷ This representative would acknowledge "certain weaknesses in the industry's contact with the public because it is such a vast business" and ask their cooperation in "bind[ing] together the real friends of the business to protest against unfair and unfounded criticism and humiliation of the industry."⁴⁸ These groups would then, "if Hollywood were unjustly attacked in a story or in legislation," offer a protest that would carry weight locally.⁴⁹ This provided the framework of the public relations program that was finally implemented.

MPPDA staffers, most notably the association's newly installed vice president Charles Francis Coe, took the lead in reworking the PRC's plan, both expanding and redirecting it. The New York office would not only prepare the industry newsletter but also maintain "a graphic file which will carry the names of a thousand persons . . . broken down into various classifications," representing key contacts in at least five cities, in each state.⁵⁰ Economies that would appeal to the board of directors were made possible by the growth of the WAC. Exchange publicists were now the "Light Brigade" or "noble 600" touted in the WAC's annual review, *Movies at War*, and they provided a "network of skilled and enthusiastic campaigners, promoters and exploiters" in every community of over 25,000.⁵¹ Instead of just supporting the sale of war bonds, the local publicists would be enlisted to promote the industry broadly.

In terms of refocusing the initial plan, the publicists and the MPPDA differed with respect to whom these efforts should be directed and what attitudes needed to be improved. The studio publicists understood this as a Hollywood-centered problem—"unfortunate misunderstandings" about aspirants coming to Hollywood and fans expecting their letters receive

the personal attention of stars. As the plan developed, making use of a national organization to smooth relations between exhibitors and producer-distributors, to facilitate their “present[ing] a unified industry front to the public,” became a central goal. Through their collaboration on War Loan drives, a “structure of confidence” was being built between the majors’ exchange workers and independent exhibitors.⁵² By shifting the focus of the campaign from misconceptions about Hollywood to the role of the movie theater as a civic institution—a key component of the WAC’s stateside program—the public relations plan would flatter local exhibitors, perhaps even improve their business, without having to address what the press called “inter-industry problems such as clearance, percentages, playdates, etc.”⁵³ The theater would be an avenue through which the industry’s far-flung critics could be won over. Cultivating local theater owners would improve relations with local newspaper editors, the benefit of which would be in reaching “the rural communities where, after all, the vast majority of our legislators . . . reside.”⁵⁴ This national organization plan would thus allow the association to shift its public relations emphasis from moral critics, whose concerns about Hollywood’s products and its denizens’ lifestyles had previously threatened boycotts and government intervention, to the comparatively ignored independent exhibitors, small-town newspapers, and rural legislators who would have significant influence on the course of antitrust actions against the industry once the war crisis passed.

After successfully launching the program at the Advertising Club of Boston before a crowd of 1,000—equally mixing local business and community leaders and film industry workers—the MPPDA scheduled tours up the Pacific Coast, through the Midwest, and down into the South. Regional advance men preceded MPPDA staffers, coordinating local publicists who brought together notable citizens and industry workers in each exchange zone. Over the next 2 years, Coe and other MPPDA staffers would travel to twenty-two exchange cities, gathering a contact file of 15,000 community leaders not heretofore reached by the Better Films Councils. A popular author and orator before obtaining a law degree and starting a business career, Coe delivered rousing speeches extolling the industry’s war contributions, the advantages of entertainment over propaganda, and the educational potential of films in the postwar era. These events won favorable reviews in both the trade and local press, and in interviews discussing the program, Coe confidently predicted it would provide a basis on which to build a postwar “Peace Activities Association” that would bring “all elements of the industry together” to work “harmoniously for a common cause.”⁵⁵

But Coe may have been a more effective publicist for the MPPDA’s new public relations plan than he was for the Hollywood oligopoly. Exalting the community theater seemed little more than cheap flattery to exhibitors who wanted trade practices addressed. When discussion forums turned toward such matters, Coe tried to stress that the purpose of his presence was “advancing the good name of the motion picture industry.”⁵⁶ In San Francisco, when an independent exhibitor interrupted his speech wanting to “know what was being done to help prevent the small exhib from being squeezed out of business,” Coe replied that “this was not his province and also he was not prepared for discussion on the subject”—“and so began the free-for-all.”⁵⁷ The efforts of an MPPDA employee to conjure a united industry front were often unsuccessful. The exhibitor trade press was skeptical of Coe’s call for a continuation of the WAC as a peacetime “solid-front industry organization” that could combine all branches

and skirt the economic relationships that set these factions against each other. Publisher Jay Emanuel editorialized:

As A MATTER OF FACT, at the same time as the WAC has been proceeding successfully, the same elements which make it up have been battling in other fields on trade problems . . . THE PICTURE Coe draws is a pretty one, but it is not likely to get support from those factions which believe that the exhibitor's salvation rests with Government action.⁵⁸

Coe's heckler in San Francisco, Rotus Harvey of the Pacific Coast Conference of Independent Theater Owners, traveled to Washington the month after Coe's visit to lobby the Department of Justice to pursue divorcement.⁵⁹ Within the MPPDA, the studio publicists grew increasingly concerned that too many resources were devoted to Coe's tour. They still preferred that the resources of the association be devoted to advertisements and published articles than "this new policy of barnstorming": "One issue of THE [READERS] DIGEST reaches more people than Mr. Coe and his entourage of press-agents will encounter in a dozen years."⁶⁰

In the end, the reorganization of the MPPDA's public relations program was an internal institutional success but broader failure, one that was both characteristic of the trade association's ability to coordinate its members and consequential for the resolution of the pending antitrust suit. The MPPDA averted the "stripping of functions" feared by its personnel in the wake of the propaganda hearings and redirected its public relations toward publics targeted by corporate public relations more broadly. But institutional advertising campaigns like those developed by members of the Advertising Council could not be mounted in the face of perennial MPPDA obstacles—the studios' short-term thinking about investments and mistrust of each other. As a result, the MPPDA could not reach a mass public with a message that wedded the wartime service of cinema to the continuation of the vertically integrated majors and Hollywood oligopoly. The national organization and speaking tour both built on the existing MPPDA experience and structure of the CSD and expanded the wartime service of distribution employees into work on behalf of the studios in their communities, but in so doing it brought the competing sectors of the film industry into more direct contact and thus conflict. Winning over educators and moral reform groups through the CSD and Hays Code could deprive independent exhibitors of crucial allies, but touting wartime service directly to those exhibitors seems only to have provoked them. Thus, while the MPPDA's status as the central public relations agency within the industry was preserved, its partial adoption of corporate public relations innovations failed to protect the interests of the majors from the forces that threatened the continuation of the studio system and which "would return with a vengeance immediately after the war."⁶¹ Historical studies of media industry institutions can show us that the commercial media industries' concentrated economic power is not without its internal weaknesses and may not be as imperishable as it may sometimes seem.

¹ Paul Monticone is an Assistant Professor of Radio, Television, and Film at Rowan University, where he teaches courses in film history and the media industries. His research lies at the intersection of these fields.

² "The MPPDA and the War," *Film Daily* (hereafter FD), 28 Aug. 1942, 'Industry at War' Special Section, 11.

- ³ These efforts to reform the trade association would eventually culminate, in 1945, with Hays being replaced by Eric Johnston and the MPPDA being reorganized as the Motion Picture Association of America. For an account of Johnston's ascension to the leadership of Hollywood's trade association, see Jon Lewis, "'We Do Not Ask You to Condone This': How the Blacklist Saved Hollywood," *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (2000): 3–30.
- ⁴ See, for example, Ruth Vasey, *The World according to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942* (University of California Press, 1997).
- ⁵ Richard Maltby, "The Production Code and the Mythologies of 'Pre-Code' Hollywood" in *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, edited by Steve Neale (Routledge, 2012), 239. On the divergent interests of those in this alliance, see Catherine Jurca, "The Congressional Battle over Motion Picture Distribution, 1936–40" in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, edited by Philip Davies and Iwan W. Morgan (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 86–102.
- ⁶ Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Scribner's, 1997), 1.
- ⁷ Charles Coe to Carl Milliken and George Borthwick, Interoffice memo, 6 July 1942, box 155, folder 5, Will Hays Papers, Indiana State Library, Indianapolis (hereafter WHP).
- ⁸ WHP.
- ⁹ Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 1.
- ¹⁰ "The Trade Association Emerges," *Fortune*, August 1933, 40.
- ¹¹ "The Public Is Not Damned," *Fortune*, March 1939, 112.
- ¹² Memorandum Outlining the Public Relations of the Motion Picture Industry, September 1940, 3, Motion Picture Association of America general correspondence files, reel 6, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter MPAA).
- ¹³ Alice Winter to Hays, 17 Jan. 1940, MPAA-NYC, reel 6.
- ¹⁴ Milliken to Hays, Confidential Memorandum, 3 Oct. 1938, WHP, box 137, folder 1. On the formation of the Committee on Public Relations, see Kia Afra, *The Hollywood Trust: Trade Associations and the Rise of the Studio System* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 167–79.
- ¹⁵ On such initiatives, see Lea Jacobs, "Reformers and Spectators: The Film Education Movement in the Thirties," *Camera Obscura* 22 (1990): 28–49; Craig Kridel, "Educational Film Projects of the 1930s: Secrets of Success and the Human Relations Series" in *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, ed. Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible (Oxford University Press, 2012), 215–29; Charles R. Acland, "Hollywood's Educators: Mark May and Teaching Film Custodians." In *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 59–80.
- ¹⁶ Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," 68–70.
- ¹⁷ "The Reminiscences of Carl Elias Milliken, 1950," oral history interview conducted by Allan Nevins and Dean Albertson, *Columbia Center for Oral History*, Transcript, 118.
- ¹⁸ "The Reminiscences of Carl Elias Milliken, 1950."

- ¹⁹ Memorandum Outlining the Public Relations of the Motion Picture Industry, 8.
- ²⁰ Industry Gathers Forces for Answer to Senator's Blasts," *Hollywood Reporter*, 5 August 1941, 1.
- ²¹ On the hearings, see Steven Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); David Welky, *The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and, most recently, Chris Yogerst, *Hollywood Hates Hitler!: Jew-Baiting, Anti-Nazism, and the Senate Investigation into Warmongering in Motion Pictures* (University Press of Mississippi, 2021).
- ²² Roy F. Irvin, "An Open Letter to the Advertising Agencies of America," *Printer's Ink*, 12 September 1941, 24.
- ²³ Robert Griffith, "The Selling of America: The Advertising Council and American Politics, 1942–1960," *The Business History Review* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 389–91. On the development of the Advertising Council, see Inger Stole's institutional history of the organization, *Advertising at War: Business, Consumers, and Government in the 1940s* (University of Illinois Press, 2012).
- ²⁴ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (University of California Press, 1998), 320.
- ²⁵ Richard Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900–1950* (JAI Press, 1979), 139.
- ²⁶ Stuart Ewen, *PR!: A Social History of Spin* (Basic Books, 1996), 341.
- ²⁷ Young & Rubicam's survey of responses to war advertising is quoted in Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 330.
- ²⁸ Ewan, *PR!*, 345. The "fifth freedom" follows the four freedoms comprising President Roosevelt's war aims, as outlined in early 1941. For an intellectual and cultural history of the concept, see Lawrence R. Glickman, *Free Enterprise: An American History* (Yale University Press, 2019).
- ²⁹ Republic Steel advertisement reproduced in Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 325.
- ³⁰ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 327.
- ³¹ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*, 317.
- ³² Speaker at the American Petroleum Institute quoted in Tedlow, *Keeping the Corporate Image*, 135.
- ³³ On the formation of the WAC, see Mary Samuelson, "The Patriotic Play: Roosevelt, Antitrust, and the War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry," Ph.D. Diss., UCLA, 2014; Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. Film and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 57–61.
- ³⁴ Sue Collins, "Star Testimonies: World War and the Cultural Politics of Authority," in *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex*, ed. Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson (University of California Press, 2018), 281.
- ³⁵ On the shaping of Hollywood's films by bureaucrats from the OWI and Bureau of Motion Pictures, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (University of California Press, 1990).

- ³⁶ Catherine Jurca, *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures Greatest Year* (University of California Press, 2012), 60–69.
- ³⁷ Public Relation Committee–West Coast, “Report of the Publicity Directors Committee,” 30 Apr. 1942, MPAA-NYC, reel 8.
- ³⁸ MGM’s long-serving director of advertising, publicity, and exploitation was widely respected among industry executives and had served as something of an ambassador for his profession, testifying before the Senate subcommittee on propaganda and authoring articles on the field. See *Propaganda Hearings*, 292–322; and Howard Dietz, “Public Relations,” in *Behind the Screen: How Films Are Made*, ed. Stephen Watts (A. Barker, Ltd, 1938).
- ³⁹ Howard Dietz, Exhibit B: Report on Research to the Public Relations Committee, 18 June 1942, AMPTP, file 440.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. On the film industry’s incorporation of survey research techniques, see Susan Ohmer, *George Gallup in Hollywood* (Columbia University Press, 2013).
- ⁴¹ Dietz, Exhibit B. See also “Publicity Heads Weigh Plan for Audience Poll,” *Motion Picture Herald*, 9 May 1942, 49; and “Eastern Public Relations Comm. Still Compiling Exploratory Data with an Eye to Market Film Analysis,” *Variety*, 27 May 1942; 14.
- ⁴² Hays to Coe, Confidential in re: appropriation for advertising campaign, 9 September 1942, WHP, box 156, folder 1.
- ⁴³ Arthur DeBra to Arch Reeve, 28 September 1944, Association of Motion Picture and Television Producers records, folder 159, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (hereafter AMPTP).
- ⁴⁴ On the September 1942 bond drive, see Oscar A. Doob “Thirty Dizzy Days!!!” *Film Daily Yearbook of Motion Pictures* (1942), 156–58. The \$250,000 spent by the WAC covered not only advertising but also the expenses of traveling stars.
- ⁴⁵ Milliken to Hays, Confidential Memorandum, 3 Oct. 1938, WHP, box 137, folder 1.
- ⁴⁶ “MPPDA to Broaden Public Relations.” *Motion Picture Herald* (hereafter MPH), 20 June 1942, 26.
- ⁴⁷ John Joseph, Planning Committee Report Outlining National Organization for Dissemination of Constructive Publicity, 2 October 1941, AMPTP, file 440.
- ⁴⁸ Joseph, Planning Committee Report Outlining National Organization for Dissemination of Constructive Publicity.
- ⁴⁹ Joseph, Planning Committee Report Outlining National Organization for Dissemination of Constructive Publicity.
- ⁵⁰ Joseph, Planning Committee Report Outlining National Organization for Dissemination of Constructive Publicity.
- ⁵¹ War Activities Committee of the Motion Pictures Industry, *Movies at War 1943*, vol. 2 (1943), 50.
- ⁵² Coe, Prospectus for National Operations of Public Relations Committee, 19 Sept. 1942, WHP, box 156, folder 2.
- ⁵³ “Coe Details Functions of Pix Biz’s New Public Relations in the Field,” *Variety*, 3 Feb. 1943, 16.
- ⁵⁴ Coe, Prospectus.
- ⁵⁵ “Keep WAC, Urges Coe,” *Motion Picture Daily* (hereafter MPD), 13 September 1944, 14.

⁵⁶ “Public Aware of Industry War Aid, Says Coe,” MPH, 24 July 1943, 46.

⁵⁷ *Showman's Trade Review*, 24 July 1943. The MPPDA's David Palfreyman reported to Hays that the discussion with exhibitors “got a little rough.” Palfreyman to Hays, 7 July 1943, WHP, box 158, folder 7.

⁵⁸ “No Encouragement for Coe,” *The Exhibitor*, 27 September 1943, 3.

⁵⁹ “PCC Reaffirms Stand on Abolishing Consent Decree,” FD, 23 August 1943, 1, 4; “Clark Talks Decree with Lukan, Harvey,” MPD, 10 November 1943, 1, 6.

⁶⁰ Walter Brooks to Hays, 30 June 1943, WHP, box 158, folder 6.

⁶¹ Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 2.

Bibliography

Acland, Charles R. “Hollywood’s Educators: Mark May and Teaching Film Custodians.” In *Useful Cinema*, edited by Charles R Acland and Haidee Wasson, 59–80. Duke University Press, 2011.

Carr, Steven Allen. *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Collins, Sue. “Star Testimonies: World War and the Cultural Politics of Authority.” In *Cinema’s Military Industrial Complex*, edited by Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, PP. University of California Press, 2018.

Doherty, Thomas. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. Columbia University Press, 1993.

Ewen, Stuart. *PR!: A Social History of Spin*. Basic Books, 1996.

Griffith, Robert. “The Selling of America: The Advertising Council and American Politics, 1942–1960.” *The Business History Review* 57, no. 3 (Autumn 1983): 388–412.

Jacobs, Lea. *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928–1942*. University of California Press, 1997.

Jacobs, Lea. “Reformers and Spectators: The Film Education Movement in the Thirties.” *Camera Obscura* 22 (1990): 28–49.

Jurca, Catherine. *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures Greatest Year*. University of California Press, 2012.

Jurca, Catherine. “The Congressional Battle over Motion Picture Distribution, 1936–40.” In *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, edited by Philip Davies and Iwan W. Morgan, 86–102. Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Hays, Will H. *Memoirs*. Doubleday, 1955.

Horne, Gerald. *Class Struggle in Hollywood, 1930–1950: Moguls, Mobsters, Stars, Reds, and Trade Unionists*. University of Texas Press, 2001.

Koppes, Clayton R. and Gregory D. Black. *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies*. University of California Press, 1990.

- Kridel, Craig. "Educational Film Projects of the 1930s: Secrets of Success and the Human Relations Series." In *Learning with the Lights Off: Educational Film in the United States*, edited by Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, 215–29. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Lewis, Jon. "'We Do Not Ask You to Condone This': How the Blacklist Saved Hollywood." *Cinema Journal* 39, no. 2 (Winter 2000): 3–30.
- Maltby, Richard. "The Production Code and the Hays Office." In *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, by Tino Balio, 37–72. History of the American Cinema. University of California Press, 1993.
- Maltby, Richard. "The Production Code and the Mythologies of 'Pre-Code' Hollywood." In *The Classical Hollywood Reader*, edited by Steve Neale, 237–48. Routledge, 2012.
- Moley, Raymond. *The Hays Office*. Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1945.
- Marchand, Roland. *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business*. University of California Press, 1998.
- Ohmer, Susan. *George Gallup in Hollywood*. Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Samuelson, Mary. "The Patriotic Play: Roosevelt, Antitrust, and the War Activities Committee of the Motion Picture Industry," Ph.D. Diss., UCLA, 2014.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s*. Vol. 6. History of the American Cinema. University of California Press, 1997.
- Stole, Inger. *Advertising at War: Business, Consumers, and Government in the 1940s*. University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Tedlow, Richard. *Keeping the Corporate Image: Public Relations and Business, 1900–1950*. JAI Press, 1979.
- Vasey, Ruth. *The World according to Hollywood, 1918–1939*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Welky, David. *The Moguls and the Dictators: Hollywood and the Coming of World War II*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008.
- Yogerst, Chris. *Hollywood Hates Hitler!: Jew-Baiting, Anti-Nazism, and the Senate Investigation into Warmongering in Motion Pictures*. University Press of Mississippi, 2021.

