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OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION AND HOLLYWOOD MOVIE PROPAGANDA

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Abstract. After America went into World War Two, it established the Office of War (OWI) Information to help with the government propaganda. Hollywood movie, as the pop-culture centerpiece, was the focus of OWI's work. Owing to various reasons, a forced and cooperating relationship between the state and Hollywood formed, which would influence the movies produced during World War Two. This paper focuses on explaining the reasons concerned and indicates that this relationship is also helpful to understand the relationship between government and Hollywood during the early cold war.
Keywords: the state; Hollywood; propaganda; World War Two

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When Nazism grabbed the power, President Roosevelt realized that the United States would sooner or later go into the war. America needed a coordinated propaganda agency to meet the challenges brought about by the coming war. In the fall of 1941, President Roosevelt established the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), with Archibald MacLeish as its director. OFF, established in the Office of Emergency Management, was to "advise with" government departments and agencies concerning the dissemination of war information [1, p. 101].

However, OFF was under severe attacks from the anti-interventionist press at the very beginning and was ridiculed as "The Office of Fuss and Feathers" [2, p. 350]. Two months after the creation of OFF, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and America went into the war. OFF, however, failed to adjust to the new situation quickly. Along with other problems, OFF was on its way to oblivion by the end of the spring of 1942. A new propaganda agency was imperatively necessary to be established.

In June 1942, President FDR issued Executive Order No. 9182 to create the Office of War Information (OWI), with Elmer Davis as the director. It consolidated the functions of OFF, the division of information in the Office for Emergency Management, the Office of Government Reports, and the foreign information service of the Office of Co-Ordinator of Information.

The OWI was charged with forming "intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims" of the U.S. government. The OWI was entitled to monitor and strengthen public opinion with the purpose to persuade the citizens to support the government's war effort. That objective often meant only partial truth or beautified truth. The OWI followed a "strategy of truth" to distinguish itself from the Nazi lying propaganda machine [3, p. 32].

How to develop an informed and intelligent understanding both at home and abroad, President Roosevelt instructed the OWI to use "press, radio and motion picture and other facilities" [4]. Among them, cinema was the ideal instrument. Hollywood, then in its golden age, served as pop culture's centerpiece, and a remarkable 85 million Americans went to theaters each week [5].

Movies were popular and persuasive. Most experts agreed that movies not only entertained and informed but also moved audiences emotionally. Donald Slesinger, the American Film Center's director, upheld cinema as "the most powerful medium of communication" because of its obvious influence over social mores [6].

The best propaganda was the least identifiable one. Movies could make propaganda much easier to get to them. Joseph Barnes, Deputy Director, Atlantic Operations of OWI, characterized the feature film as "the greatest unconscious carrier of propaganda in the world today." OWI director Elmer Davis, like Bernays, regarded film as the "most powerful instrument of propaganda in the world, whether it tries to be or not." He believed "The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized." The OWI demonstrated this view in the Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry, distributed to studios soon after the agency's creation. The manual, which spelled out the official propaganda line and cinema's role in projecting it, declared that Hollywood had "vital war work to do in helping every individual understand the issues for which we are fighting" and "in keeping every participant informed as to the progress of the war" [3, p. 36].

OWI split into domestic and overseas branches. The Bureau of Motion Picture Films (BMP) was part of the domestic operations branch and was given the responsibility of serving "as the central point of contact between the motion pictures, theatrical and nontheatrical, and … will review and approve all proposals for the production and distribution of motion pictures by Federal departments and agencies" [4, p. 35]. Its director was Lowell Mellet. An office, directed by Nelson Poynter, was established in Hollywood to interact with the studios. The overseas operations branch of OWI also had its own motion picture unit, Overseas Bureau (OB), under the guidance of Robert Riskin. OB's job was to approve, but also increasingly to produce, films that would be shown in Europe and other theaters of operation as liberation spread across the world. Eventually the OB had 26 outpost offices across the world [5, p. 51].

BMP's main task was to include the studios in governmental propaganda system. At the beginning, Elmer Davis found Hollywood movie producers, for a variety of reasons, was willing to aid the government's propaganda effort.

In fact, prior to 1939, Hollywood movies were generally apolitical when it came to foreign affairs. Its purpose was to maximize the international profits. Though Hollywood was believed to have a moral responsibility to educate viewers about evils of

Nazism, it arguably remained largely silent as Hitler rose. In 1939, that Hollywood began to politicize silver screen, which could be shown in such anti-Nazi movies starting with Warner Bros.' *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* had several reasons. Germany's invasion of Poland and the outbreak of war in Europe in September 1939 made many filmmakers realize that they could not stand by any longer. The personal politics of those powerful movie moguls also could not be ignored. A list of the most powerful Jews in the film business, concerned with the Nazis' extreme anti-Semitism, were willing to enlist Hollywood to fight against Hitler [3, p. 40].

Meanwhile screen politicization was also related to the change of overseas profits. Beginning in 1933, the Germany restricted to import Hollywood productions on the grounds that American movies were Jewish-made and thus unfit for public consumption. Seven years later, that ban was extended to cover all areas under Berlin's control and was mimicked by Italy. So from Hollywood's perspective, these markets no longer existed. Since British market grew to become the largest one, Hollywood began to create more pro-Allied movies [3].

Hollywood's political conscience was also derived from an improved relationship with the government. A Hollywood-Washington corporatist alliance was formed when a legal matter was solved in the industry's favor. In 1938, the U.S. Department of Justice, responding to complaints from independent producers and theater owners, sued the major studios for violating the Sherman Antitrust Act. Faced with the possibility of losing their theater chains, studio representatives, led by the Warner brothers and Hays, turned to the White House for relief. Harry Warner asked President Roosevelt's closest confidante, Secretary of Commerce Harry Hopkins, to intervene on Hollywood's behalf on the grounds that its products advanced the national interest. Movies fostered patriotism at home and generated goodwill for the United States abroad, the studio head argued. Furthermore, pictures bolstered the nation's economy by hawking American-made goods to foreign consumers. Our films," Warner added, "shriek 'Buy American.'" The commerce secretary evidently accepted this argument. In July 1940, he persuaded federal prosecutors to issue a consent decree allowing the studios to retain their theaters in exchange for discontinuing some unfair distribution practices, such as blind and block booking [3].

Definitely, Hopkins assisted executives in exchange for cinematic support of Roosevelt's defense policies. Lowell Mellett informed Roosevelt in December 1940 that an "effective plan" for collaboration with Hollywood was "being developed." Early in 1941, he once again notified FDR that "the motion picture industry is pretty well living up to its offers of cooperation. Practically everything being shown on the screen, from newsreel to fiction, that touches on our national purpose is of the right sort. And there is a lot of it, perhaps almost as much as the picture patrons can take." Moreover, the grateful Warners also promised the president "to do all in our power . . . to show the American people the worthiness of the cause for which the free peoples of Europe are making such tremendous sacrifices." Roosevelt himself sent a cryptic note read before that year's Academy Awards ceremony thanking the industry for its support. The reason the White House aided filmmakers demonstrated officials' confidence in cinema's ability to spread mass opinion [3, p. 41].

All these went before the establishment of OWI. After the establishment of OWI, the relationship between OWI and the motion picture industry, however, was sometimes rocky. The OWI was an agency without compulsory power, it had difficulty get-

ting government-approved idea to the screen. Nelson Poynter, spent most of 1942 communicating with producers, directors, and writers, to little avail. Few pictures portrayed the war in the prescribed way: as a worldwide struggle for freedom from fascist slavery. Soon thereafter, Poynter's boss, Lowell Mellett, asked studios to submit all screen-plays to the OWI for preapproval.

In December 1942, Mellet wrote a letter to Hollywood asking to see all film scripts before production and all the rough or long version of all films before they were cut down [6, p. 100–110]. So the OWI was able to make suggestions regarding the war content of the films, or recommend deletion of material that might be hurting the United States war efforts [3, p. 434–443]. This angered the industry.

Hollywood's anger could be properly summarized by Walter Wanger, an independent producer and president of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Wanger saw several fallacies in OWI's approach. First he said OWI acted as though anyone could be a writer or a film producer. "An inevitable result is that producers are continually urged, under pressure, to make so-called propaganda pictures that can effect no purpose except to empty theaters." And the movies made in this way could be among the world's dullest ones. The second fallacy was that "the American people are boobs." Wanger believed that the audiences were quick to spot propaganda and were willing to go along with it during the war. What the audiences were not willing to do was put up with amateurish productions and they were "not willing to be bored by clumsy pictures" [6, p. 103–104].

Wagner himself was not against to lend Hollywood's support to government propaganda. What he strongly criticized was the possible censorship. Wanger said "We wish to make an even larger contribution to winning the war and achieving goodwill on earth than motion pictures already have made ⋯ Give the industry the broad lines of policy, and leave the committees within the industry the task of producing the results" [6, p. 110].

Because of the strong opposition from Hollywood, Mellet subsequently sent a second letter to the industry to try and clarify OWI's position. He stated that cooperation between the industry and the government was voluntary. OWI reviewers would read the scripts and offer suggestions, but the producers were free to disregard the suggestions and that OWI never had, or desired to have, the authority to force its views on the producers [3, p. 441].

At the same time, OWI was under other heavy pressures, which restricted its influence on Hollywood.

After OWI was established, it was under severe attacks due to its propaganda policy, some of which praised FDR and his policies. But propaganda as such this disturbed FDR's enemies, those Republicans and conservative Democrats. Meanwhile, Elmer Davis and his staff became targets of accusations of communist influence. Many OWI employees were, in fact, quite liberal. But they are under attack as "fellow travelers", individuals whose ideas and or organizational affiliations were too "sympathetic" toward communism.

Besides, some Hollywood moguls, being afraid of the censorship, also persuade Congress to take actions. Y. Frank Freeman, vice president in charge of production at Paramount Pictures, stood with Wanger in opposition to OWI's wishes. Legend has it that it was Freeman who called on Georgia's US Senators Walter George and Richard

Russell to help him in the eventual budgetary assassination of the OWI's Domestic Branch [7, p. 62].

All the attackers' opportunity came during the appropriations hearings that began in early 1943. In the summer of 1943, the House of Representatives voted to abolish the appropriations for the OWI's domestic branch. After Elmer Davis' strong protest, the Senate Appropriation Committee agreed to give $ 3 million for fiscal year 1944. But it was prohibited from using on films, radios scripts, or publications. The House later cut the amount by removing $250,000. The final budget of BMP was now just a third of what it had been. As a result of the cutbacks, the OWI closed twelve regional branches and its motion picture bureau and gave up publications [1, p. 135].

Beside the pressure from the Congress, OWI was also facing the interference and resentment from the military. During the second World War, the armed forces needed Hollywood to help disseminate their messages, and they insisted on tight control over those messages. The studios also needed the cooperation of the military due to "their increased need to use military facilities, equipment and footage in film production." The result was an exchange in which the military provided equipment, battle footage, and technical advice and the studios presented the branches of the service as they wished to be seen [8, p. 20].

The image of the armed forces was always the priority of the military, for which the military was even ready to ignore OWI's suggestions. In fact, the military quite often approved the movies despite the objections from OWI. For example, the military approved both *Little* Tokyo, U.S.A. (1942) and *Air Force* (1943), though there were disagreements from the Office of War Information about inappropriate racial stereotyping [3, p. 20].

Although the studios generally wanted to support the war effort, they also wanted to make audience-pleasing pictures and thus didn't want to burden films with dull propaganda. Some films that the studios allowed the OWI to greatly influence ended up being aesthetically poor movies and thus poor vehicles for the government's messages. In *I'll Being Seeing You* (1944) two old guys pulled their golf clubs off a bus onto a driving range, exaggeratingly claiming that public transportation truly is as convenient as a private vehicle and, besides, it conserves gasoline. In the same way, *The Human Comedy* (1943) abruptly stopped its storytelling to praise an encampment of United Nations Allies participating in a roadside folk festival. The other examples included *Pittsburgh* (1942) and *An American Romance* (1944). Therefore, one way around the BMP review, as we have seen, was to get the blessing of the army or navy; then the OWI would have to grant approval, even if it was strongly opposed to the film. Usually, films that showed one of the branches of the military in a positive light (and thus increased enlistments) were approved by the War Department. And some bolder studios could simply refuse to cooperate with OWI through this way [3, p. 22].

The amateurship from OWI was also causing great confusion to Hollywood. The frequent problem in government-Hollywood relations was that Washington was not at all sure what it wanted from the industry and when it did know what it wanted it was unable to tell Hollywood how to achieve it. Typical was the presumption and prescriptions of Nelson Poynter. In a speech to the Hollywood Writers Mobilization in 1942, Poynter lectured, "It is easier to glorify the Air Corps than the Infantry. It is easier to portray on screen Great Britain's struggle than that of the Chinese or the Russians, who are on the front line of this war." Referring to the year's most successful home front

melodrama, he admonished the screenwriters to "give us a *Mrs. Miniver* of China or Russia, making clear our common interest with the Russians or Chinese in this struggle." However, a screen treatment detailing how Hollywood might produce a Chinese *Mrs. Miniver* was never forthcoming [5, p. 46].

The intrusive presence of the OWI consumed the patience and tested the tolerance of Hollywood professionals. Martin Quigley, the influential editor of *Motion Picture Herald*, offered a sharp rebuke to OWI bureaucrats "who are even now (1943) not gaining practical experience, and who are constantly torn between a wonderment as to what makes the wheels go around and an urge to apply a monkey wrench as a show of professional capacity." Heartily resented was the Hollywood branch of the BMP and its director Nelson Poynter. Annoying keen on suggesting topics the government felt worthy of feature film treatment, never shy about displaying his lack of motion picture expertise, Poynter addressed producer and screenwriter associations, notified studios of government interest in film treatments, and even sat in on "as many as fifteen story conferences a week." Hollywood had a sardonic for the pushy cues emanating from his office: "poynters" [3].

Apart from the above-mentioned agencies, there are still some other agencies interested in Hollywood, which added more competitions for OWI. Yet the decision of one agency was no guarantee of agreement with the other. The functions from these agencies were duplicated, jurisdictions overlapped, and directives contradicted each other. In 1943, *Cowboy Commandos*, the current issue of Monogram's "Range Busters" serial, got roped into an interagency brushfire. The OWI recommended that the original villains (German-accented Nazi spies) be changed to native-born Americans with Nazi ideology on the grounds that the accented portrayals might offend German-Americans or friendly foreigners of Teutonic origin. Monogram complied, whereupon the Office of Censorship's LA Board of Review rejected the film for export on the grounds that overseas audiences might view the American West as a haven for Axis sympathizers. Only after rereviews by both agencies and postproduction dialogue changes was the film cleared for foreign distribution [5, p. 21].

Different competing interference agencies makes OWI an advisory agency. Although the OWI made suggestions and tried to influence the films that were made, technically, its function was only advisory. As one historian stresses, "The motion picture industry had final responsibility for the films produced during the war" [3, p. 21].

However, this situation witnessed a change favorite to OWI in 1943. When the BMP was defunded by the Congress, Ulric Bell assumed leadership of the Hollywood office. Bell courted the cooperation of Watterson Rothacker, an industry insider who had been vice president of Martin Quigley's *Motion Picture Herald* publishing empire, then heading the Los Angeles Board of Review, the West Coast branch of the federal Office of Censorship. On the firm grounds of national security, this wartime agency was empowered to determine which films could receive an export license for distribution in foreign markets. Bell increasingly allied BMP's Hollywood reviewers with the Office of Censorship and BMP began evaluating films exclusively from the standpoint of their potential impact in overseas distribution. As Koppes and Black explain: "OWI's liaison activities in Hollywood ⸺ were, if anything, strengthened. The reviewing staff simply moved over to the Overseas Branch and continued operations without missing a reel ⸺ The hobbling of the Domestic Branch ⸺ ironically strengthened OWI's

hand in Hollywood. No one in the industry denied the government's interest in policing what films were exported. Freed from Poynter's opposition, Bell strengthened his ties with the censor ‴ As Allied armies liberated potential markets. Hollywood's interest perked up. For the propaganda agency could use something besides patriotic appeals in negotiating with the studios — on the one hand, the club of censorship, on the other, the carrot of reconquered markets" [3, p. 120].

Without licenses, studios could not access the foreign market, a major source of revenue. So the OWI gained considerable leverage by virtue of controlling the issuance of tickets to that market. The maneuver paid immediate dividends, improving publicists' ability to manage cinematic content. Bell reported that executives now took the agency's opinion "a great deal more seriously," and he ascribed the "high efficacy" of the BMP's oversight "to the weight we have been putting upon the overseas angle." An internal OWI study bore out his opinion: the office subsequently eliminated 71 percent of the "negative propaganda values" discovered in the scripts and rough cuts of more than four hundred Hollywood movies [1].

Bell's strategy, though bold, added the OWI to Hollywood's list of federal partners. Propagandists needed a healthy industry, and Bell resorted to export control neither to crush Hollywood's independence nor ruin its commerce. Rather, his strategy established ground rules by which both parties were expected to play: filmmakers produced wholesome, patriotic entertainment, and in exchange, officials opened foreign markets. As the BMP's Robert Riskin, a screenwriter with Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Meet John Doe* (1941) among his credits, wrote, the agency sought to "safeguard" the industry's "economic progress" as long as Hollywood, a potent weapon in the global war of ideas, produced the "right kind" of movies—that is, those reflecting well on the United States [3, p. 42].

From now on, a forced and cooperated partnership between the state and the studios formed, which worked together fairly and smoothly for common ends despite the frequent quarrels and recriminations between two sides. This also left deep mark on the movies produced during World War Two, which is also of great help to understand the movies during early cold war.

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УПРАВЛЕНИЕ ВОЕННОЙ ИНФОРМАЦИИ И ПРОПАГАНДА ГОЛЛИВУДСКИХ ФИЛЬМОВ

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Аннотация. После того как Америка вступила во Вторую мировую войну, она создала Управление военной информации, чтобы помочь с правительственной пропагандой. Голливудские фильмы, являющиеся основным элементом поп-культуры, были в центре внимания Управления военной информации. Между правительством и Голливудом вынужденно сложились отношения сотрудничества, которые повлияли на фильмы, снятые во время Второй мировой войны. В этой статье основное внимание уделяется объяснению причин складывания таких отношений между правительством и Голливудом в начале холодной войны.
Ключевые слова: государство, Голливуд, пропаганда, Вторая мировая война

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