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**LOUELLA PARSONS AND HEDDA HOPPER'S HOLLYWOOD:  
THE RISE OF THE CELEBRITY GOSSIP INDUSTRY IN  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA, 1910–1950**

by

**KATHLEEN A. FEELEY**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The  
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## Abstract

LOUELLA PARSONS AND HEDDA HOPPER'S HOLLYWOOD:  
THE RISE OF THE CELEBRITY GOSSIP INDUSTRY  
IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA, 1910–1950

by

Kathleen A. Feeley

Adviser: Professor David Nasaw

The social and cultural functions of gossip have a history as long as that of humankind. What was new in the twentieth century was the unprecedented scale upon which gossip could be transmitted to a national audience using both the new forms of mass communication—film, radio, and then television—as well as the previously existing print media. And in the early twentieth century, the celebrity gossip columnist emerged as a powerful new figure in American culture: among the most influential were Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper. This dissertation will explore the rise to power of these two celebrity journalists from 1910 to 1950 and the evolution of the celebrity gossip industry. The process by which these gossip columnists moved from the relatively benign world of promotional gossip and the fantasy of celebrity identification in the 1910s to acting as informants for the federal government and wielding the power to destroy careers and lives by the late 1940s and early 1950s is at the heart of this narrative. Dispensing a potent blend of advertising, myth, politics, and innuendo, Parsons and Hopper helped alter the parameters of the public disclosure of private lives—a process with profound

political and cultural consequences, particularly in the wake of the House on UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) investigation of the film industry, begun in 1947, that led to the establishment of the blacklist in Hollywood and beyond.

This dissertation will begin a scholarly discussion of Parsons and Hopper, two of the most powerful, if woefully understudied, women in the mid-twentieth-century Hollywood film industry, but it is also part of a much larger narrative: the construction of and overt politicization of celebrity culture and celebrity journalism, which transformed the landscape of public life in the twentieth-century United States. This dissertation will provide new insight into the construction of a truly national popular culture and examine a critical intersection of popular and political culture that remains a vibrant part of U.S. culture and society today.

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And, finally, Larry. With his patience, kindness, decency, and most of all with his fearless love, he created a harbor in the tempest and inspired me to bring this long journey to an end. For all this and more, I thank you.

For my mother Elizabeth Feeley and in memory of my father Donald Feeley  
and my grandmother Dorothy Feeley

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Manuscript collections and newspapers frequently cited have been identified by the following abbreviations:

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| CRH          | <i>Chicago Record-Herald</i>  |
| HH bio files | Hedda Hopper biographical files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California         |
| HHc          | Hedda Hopper collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California                 |
| HWPCc        | Hollywood Women's Press Club collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California |
| LAE          | <i>Los Angeles Examiner</i>   |
| LAT          | <i>Los Angeles Times</i>  |
| LP bio files | Louella Parsons biographical files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California      |
| LPc          | Louella Parsons collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California              |
| MT           | <i>The Morning Telegraph</i>  |
| NYA          | <i>New York American</i>  |
| NYJA         | <i>New York Journal-American</i>  |

## Introduction

In July 1947, *Time* magazine devoted a cover story to entertainment reporters Louella O. Parsons and Hedda Hopper: “Miss Hopper and . . . Miss Parsons are two of the mightiest publicity powers on earth, and even their whispers can reduce the \$250,000-a-year padishahs of pictures to masses of quivering jelly. . . . Gossip, as practiced by Hedda and Louella, is big business.” Indeed, celebrity gossip had become big business. The purveyors of this gossip emerged as powerful new figures in mid-twentieth-century American culture and industry. Among the most famous (and infamous) of this new breed of entertainment journalist were Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper.<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation will examine Parsons and Hopper’s rise to power as leaders of the Hollywood press corps. In doing so, it will explore their impact on the practice of United States journalism, the construction and overt politicization of celebrity culture, and the changing landscape of life as a public figure in the United States. As Charles Ponce de Leon has argued in his study of celebrity journalism, “[C]ritics must accept that celebrity is intimately related to modernity—that this unique way of thinking about public figures, which differs so dramatically from the hagiographic discourse of fame, is a direct outgrowth of developments that most of us regard as progressive: the spread of a market economy and the rise of democratic, individualistic values.” Indeed, Parsons and Hopper’s success was not an aberration, but a product of the triumph of corporate capitalism and the considerable advertising and marketing industries that developed to sell mass consumer goods in the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century culture of abundance. Parsons and Hopper were in the business of promoting the consumption of

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<sup>1</sup>“The Gossipist,” *Time*, July 28, 1947, p. 60.

mass entertainment—luxury items for which demand had to be, in part, constructed. While the focus will be upon Parsons and Hopper—as two of the most successful and high profile celebrity journalists in mid-twentieth-century America—the crowded field of their competitors will be examined as will the media, advertising, and entertainment worlds in which they operated. Parsons and Hopper were not simply media reporters, but marketers, performers, and sometimes critics.<sup>2</sup>

Stringing together disparate dispatches about members of the fast-growing entertainment industries, Parsons and Hopper crafted an imagined community of celebrity that grew to include other social, economic, and political elites—some individuals entered this promotional universe willingly eager for the publicity, while others were included as a result of Parsons and Hopper’s ambitions and agendas. A tension always existed between the stories they told in their columns and the real lives of the celebrities they reported upon. They uncovered information nobody wanted published or broadcast and used the threat of exposure both to titillate their audiences and to negotiate for information they could publish. This was the real source of their power. The process by which the gossip columnists moved from the relatively benign world of promotional gossip and the fantasy of celebrity identification in the 1910s to acting as

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<sup>2</sup>Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 4. The scholarly literature on the economic and cultural transformations in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States is vast. On twentieth-century consumer culture, see, for example, William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993); and Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears, eds., *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880–1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983). On the culture of celebrity and personality, see, for example, Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1985); and Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984). On the development of the advertising and public relations industries, see, for example, Stuart Ewen, *PR: A Social History of Spin* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

informants for the federal government and wielding the power to destroy careers and lives by the late 1940s and early 1950s is at the heart of this narrative. Dispensing a potent blend of advertising, myth, politics, and innuendo, Parsons and Hopper helped alter the parameters of the public disclosure of private lives—a process with profound political and cultural consequences, particularly in the wake of the House on UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) investigation of the film industry begun in 1947 that led to the establishment of the blacklist in Hollywood and beyond.

The development of the celebrity gossip industry was fueled by the rise of the mass media in the twentieth-century United States. The social function and role of gossip has a history as long as that of humankind. What was new in the twentieth century was the unprecedented scale on which gossip could be transmitted to a national audience using the new forms of mass communication—film, radio, and then television—as well as the previously existing print media.<sup>3</sup> The mass media not only provided lucrative new forums for the distribution of this gossip, it also offered up its celebrities—actors, singers, dancers—as the subjects of gossip. For the motion picture industry, in particular, celebrity gossip emerged in the 1910s as a critical promotional tool to encourage the

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars have examined the rise of the mass media both collectively and by medium. The texts listed below are just a sampling of the voluminous scholarship on the media. On the rise of the mass media in its totality, see Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1982); and Michael Gurevitch, ed., *Culture, Society and the Media* (New York: Methuen, 1982). On film, see Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Steven Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975). On radio, see Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (New York, Times Books, 1999), and *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899–1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); and Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994). On television, see Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). On the interplay amongst these forms of mass communication, see James L. Baughman, *The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America since 1941* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Michelle Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990).

consumption of this mass entertainment.<sup>4</sup> The film gossip column, in its earliest incarnation, was a business column and retains this function to this day. Initially responding to the needs of producers of mass entertainment who sought to create distinct personalities to sell their products, Parsons and other early film columnists offered relatively benign and often fictive stories about these entertainers culled from industry sources to boost newspaper sales. The professional and, increasingly, the personal lives of these celebrities provided the raw material Parsons and Hopper used to build their columns and their careers. Parsons and Hopper mastered a distinctive discourse and format and laid the foundations for the multi-media celebrity gossip industry of early-twenty-first America, a development often deplored but seldom analyzed in a sustained or detailed manner.<sup>5</sup>

The twentieth-century celebrity gossip column represents a new transformation in the meaning and uses of gossip. Gossip has always served as a form of social exchange for understanding the world, identifying shared values, and defining community. The term gossip, however, has not always been used to describe such activity. Gossip entered the English language as a noun and synonym for a godparent in a Christian baptism. By the mid-1700s, gossip had come to be understood as idle chatter that operated outside the

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<sup>4</sup>As Ponce de Leon has demonstrated in *Self-Exposure* (2002), celebrity journalism had its roots in the mid-nineteenth century. The rise of the film industry, however, sparked an upsurge in media coverage that far outpaced that of the other entertainment industries, as illustrated by the remarkable growth of the Hollywood press corps in the mid-twentieth-century United States.

<sup>5</sup>At present, there exists no historical monograph on the twentieth-century celebrity gossip industry. I have drawn upon various texts—some scholarly, some popular—in which gossip is the central organizing theme. These texts include Sissela Bok, *Secrets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Gail Collins, *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics* (New York: Morrow, 1998); Jack Levin and Arnold Arluke, *Gossip: The Inside Scoop* (New York: Plenum Press, 1987); Ralph L. Rosnow and Gary Alan Fine, *Rumor and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York: Elsevier Scientific Publishing Co., 1976); Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985); Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-class Neighbourhoods, 1880–1960* (London: Scholar Press, 1995); and Jeannette Walls, *Dish: How Gossip Became News and the News Became Just Another Show* (New York: Perennial Books, 2001).

bounds of formal political and legal institutions—as “women’s talk” in the birthing room and throughout the community. As Mary Beth Norton has demonstrated in her exploration of the use of gossip in female communities in colonial New England, gossip was a powerful tool for the disempowered and disenfranchised—those who lacked access to political and economic power in society.<sup>6</sup> By the nineteenth century, gossip was formally defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “idle talk, trifling or groundless rumour; tittle-tattle” and was widely identified as a uniquely feminine vice and weakness.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have begun to examine the gendered meanings of gossip and the significance of oral exchanges of gossip in community life in terms of both the maintenance and disruption of the social, legal, and political order, but there has been little attention paid to gossip as it was translated into print and disseminated to a mass audience via the twentieth-century media.<sup>8</sup> This project will help begin this discussion.

Benjamin Franklin wrote a series of essays in the form of letters by “Silence Dogood, the Boston Gossip,” which appeared in the *New England Courant* from April 12 to October 8, 1722. Franklin chose to mask his authorship using the persona of a gossiping widow who hoped to “add somewhat” to the “entertainment” of the *Courant*’s readers with, among other things, wicked satires of the leading political, clerical, and

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 222–39.

<sup>7</sup> Spacks, *Gossip*, 26. On the shifting definition of gossip, see also Collins, *Scorpion Tongues*, 6–8; Levin and Arluke, *Gossip*, 3–5; and Tebbutt, *Women’s Talk?*, 19–21.

<sup>8</sup> On the importance of reputation in colonial Virginia and the dangers of gossip, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (New York: Norton, 1982). On witchcraft testimony as local gossip in colonial New England, see John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). On political gossip in the early Republic, see Joanne B. Freeman, “Slander, Poison, and Fame: Jefferson’s ‘Anas’ and Political Gossip in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Spring 1995): 25–57, and *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

judicial figures in Boston.<sup>9</sup> Franklin's essays stand as perhaps one of the earliest examples of the gossip column in colonial American newspapers. Gossip, in one form or another, has always been a component of the nation's press. The society column, detailing the activities of the elite in local communities, was a forerunner of the twentieth-century entertainment gossip column, which in its turn promoted and chronicled the rise of a new elite in U.S. society. The gossip column is largely ignored or relegated to the disreputable fringes of American journalism in the scholarship, and this dissertation will reassess its significance in the shaping of the profession in the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup>

As scholar Leo Braudy has suggested, "[t]he history of fame is also the history of the shifting definition of achievement in a social world." At a moment when the points of entry to public life in the United States were increasing tenfold due to the development of the modern media and mass entertainment industries, Parsons and Hopper helped provide a new model and a new vocabulary for being a public person, a celebrated person. In a society growing ever more diverse and urbanized, traditional sources of guidance and deportment such as the clergy and the local community had to compete with the enticements of mass culture and its new role models. Celebrity gossip, running the gamut from the innocuous to the scandalous, offered a whole host of guidelines—what to wear, where to go, what not to do—and signaled the growth of a new entertainment elite and lifestyle deemed worthy of scrutiny and emulation. Parsons and

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<sup>9</sup>*New England Courant*, March 26–April 2, 1772, p. 1. On "Silence Dogood," see Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. J.A. Leo Lemay and P.M. Zall (New York: Norton, 1986), 15–6.

<sup>10</sup> On the history of American journalism, see, for example, Edward Bliss, *Now the News* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972); Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming of Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1607–1960*, 3rd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1962); and Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

Hopper fashioned themselves into gatekeepers with the power to determine who gained entrance via the stories they told. Perhaps the greatest measure of their craft and skill is the extent to which they successfully used their columns and broadcast in service to their own celebrity.<sup>11</sup>

Parsons and Hopper's promotion and legitimization of a new entertainment elite included the expansion of the scope of their columns to illustrate both real and imagined links to other social, political, and economic elites. They constructed elaborate informational networks, ranging from beauticians to lab technicians to press agents to law enforcement agencies that eventually extended into the highest reaches of the federal government as they gained access to high-ranking officials, such as F.B.I. director J. Edgar Hoover. The columns always had some political subtext—for example, demonstrating the patriotism of the entertainment world during World War I. With the economic and social upheaval of the Great Depression and the coming of World War II, the political commentary in the columns grew more pronounced and more controversial. With the onset of the Cold War, the line between the entertainment world and national political culture—once very separate realms—increasingly overlapped in the work of the gossip columnists. These reporters provided a model and forum for the investigation into and exposure of the private lives of public figures that came to be used for explicitly political purposes with often devastating results in blacklist Hollywood.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Braudy, *Frenzy of Renown*, 10. On the rise of an entertainment-based elite driven by the astounding growth of the film industry, see Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>12</sup>On the culture of the Cold War, see, for example, Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991). On blacklist Hollywood, see especially Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980); and Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

Industry members, reporters, and critics alike had long ascribed considerable power and influence to this mass entertainment. The hyperbole that was Parsons and Hopper's stock-in-trade contributed in no small measure to over-inflated and confused notions about the power of the motion picture industry to effect social change, both good and bad. In the battle to contain communism on the homefront in early Cold War America, the film industry came under suspicion as a potentially powerful agent of subversion. The vast influence ascribed to the film industry, as amplified by Parsons and Hopper, meant that Hollywood would be held accountable in this climate of crisis as never before.

When HUAC began its first successful investigation of the film industry in 1947, the Hollywood press corps had become the nation's second largest press corps with more than four hundred reporters. Only the political press corps in Washington, D.C. was larger. This fact, in and of itself, seemed proof to many of the power of the industry to shape opinions and actions. What it was undisputedly proof of, however, was the ability of this press corps to construct a new class of newsworthy events, and the "two aces in the pack of the 400-odd reporters who cover Hollywood" were Parsons and Hopper.<sup>13</sup>

With her segue from screenwriter to film journalist in 1915, Parsons embarked on a career that spanned six decades. In 1926, she became the first syndicated newspaper columnist in Los Angeles covering the film industry for the Hearst media empire. Thus began her reign as the "first lady" of a Hollywood press corps that initially consisted of only a handful of local reporters and fan magazine writers. By the mid-1940s, Parsons's

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<sup>13</sup> Dickson Hartwell, "End of a Beautiful Feud," *Collier's*, June 5, 1948, p. 22. On the size of the Hollywood press corps, see also Collie Small, "Gossip is Her Business," *Saturday Evening Post*, January 11, 1947, p. 15; and "Hollywood's Press: Why the Stars are in Your Eyes," *Newsweek*, February 22, 1954, p. 62.

column reached between ten and twenty million readers in more than four hundred newspapers worldwide. In addition, she played a decisive role in shaping the film content in more than one thousand newspapers (which included the Hearst papers as well as subscriber papers) in the United States and abroad as motion picture editor for the Hearst wire services. She also wrote two memoirs and a biography of actress Jean Harlow and contributed to a variety of mainstream and film periodicals. Her reach extended beyond print; she worked on stage, in film, and on the radio, most notably with her “Hollywood Hotel” gossip franchise begun as a popular radio broadcast and adapted for the stage and screen, starring the ubiquitous Parsons. In the process of covering Hollywood celebrities, Parsons became one herself. She remained a formidable and feared power broker in the Hollywood publicity machine until her retirement in December 1965.<sup>14</sup>

Parsons’s story has become inextricably intertwined with that of Hedda Hopper, who emerged as her chief rival in the Hollywood press corps in the early 1940s. Hopper, a down-on-her-luck actress, first tried her hand at gossip reporting in the late 1930s. This dissertation will explore the trajectory of their careers, but will focus initially on Parsons who had already logged nearly a quarter of a century in entertainment journalism before Hopper entered the field in 1937. Without Parsons, there very likely would have been no

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<sup>14</sup> From March 1926 until 1937, Parsons served as motion picture editor for the Universal Service, a Hearst wire service. When the Universal Service was merged with the other Hearst wire service, the International News Service (INS), in 1937, Parsons was appointed motion picture editor of the INS. On the Hearst wire services, see Richard A. Schwarzlose, *The Nation's Newsbrokers*, vol. 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 230. Parsons’s column was also syndicated by her wire service. Parsons’s syndication figures vary wildly from source to source, sometimes reflecting the entire client base of her wire service, sometimes not. Her readership was consistently given in the range between 10 and 20 million, which seems feasible given the estimates of her syndication that range from 372 newspapers in 1932 to 203 newspapers in 1943 to 625 newspapers in 1954 to a low of 70 newspapers in the final years of her career in the 1960s. On her syndication, see George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 154; “Lolly of Hollywood,” *Time*, January 4, 1943, p. 62; “Hollywood’s Press,” p. 63; and “Through a Keyhole Darkly,” *Time*, February 15, 1963, p. 52.

Hopper: Parsons crafted a style and a role that Hopper largely replicated. Hopper went on to distinguish herself with a remarkable hat collection, a more biting tone, and the extreme political agenda of a true ideologue, but Parsons created the prototype of the Hollywood columnist for those who followed in her footsteps.

Hopper's rapid ascent was predicated upon the success of those, like Parsons, who had come before her and whose successes had come under critical scrutiny by their peers in the media by the late 1930s. As one critic charged, "Gossip writing is at present like a spirochete in the body of journalism. . . . Conscious and unconscious acts of journalistic intrusion into private affairs . . . are recognizable in news stories today which the most conservative and high-minded newspapers print without qualms." Yet even critics were forced to acknowledge that "this lowering of journalistic standards" had also contributed to a rise in newspaper circulation. A gossip column was a valuable media franchise, and Hopper capitalized upon this development. She offered an alternative promotional venue for the film industry's producers, publicists, and talent agents who had grown weary of being "so dependent on one columnist"—that is, Parsons. Hopper's willingness to take on a shaken Hollywood establishment in the midst of the controversy over the film *Citizen Kane* (1941) was a major turning point in her career. By the mid-1940s—less than a decade after her journalism career had begun—Hopper's circulation rivaled that of Parsons with syndication in more than one hundred newspapers and a readership estimated at twenty million.<sup>15</sup>

Their rivalry, among other factors, expanded the purview of their columns in both the range of activities and behaviors disclosed about the subjects of their columns and the

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<sup>15</sup> St. Clair McKelway, "Profiles: Gossip Writer: VI—Legacy of an Ex-Hoofer," *The New Yorker*, July 20, 1940, p. 27; Hartwell, "End of Beautiful Feud," 22–3. On Hopper's syndication and readership, see Francis Sill Wickware, "Hedda Hopper," *Life*, November 20, 1944, p. 63; and "The Gossipist," 60.

range of individuals and institutions outside the film world included in their celebrity universe, particularly the politicians and power brokers of the nation's ruling elite. As a right-wing, anticommunist ideologue determined to insert her political agenda into her reporting, Hopper spearheaded the increasing politicization of the work of the Hollywood press corps and eagerly cooperated to bring the 1947 HUAC hearings on the film industry to fruition.

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From the beginning of her career in the early 1910s, Parsons's odyssey paralleled—on some occasions anticipating and on others following—that of Walter Winchell, the other towering figure in gossip reporting in twentieth-century America. Parsons and Winchell both began by working in the industries they later covered as journalists: Parsons as a screenwriter and Winchell as a vaudeville performer. They then moved into journalism and honed their craft on entertainment trade papers and daily newspapers. Both became Hearst columnists in the 1920s—Parsons in 1922 and Winchell in 1929—and achieved national exposure, syndication, and success. From November 1944 to December 1951, they shared what was arguably the most potent half hour of gossip on radio in back-to-back broadcasts that aired every Sunday evening.<sup>16</sup>

The synchronicity of Parsons and Winchell's careers has been overlooked in part because Parsons is identified so closely with Hopper. More importantly, it has been obscured because Winchell—despite his use of similar tactics and his equally single-minded and ruthless pursuit of a story no matter what the cost—has achieved a legitimacy

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<sup>16</sup> On Parsons and Winchell's tandem radio broadcasts, see Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 255–6; Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 371–2, 376; Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, 66; and unsourced newspaper clipping, December 23, 1951, Articles about Parsons—1951, 1952 folder, Louella Parsons collection, University of Southern California Regional History Collection, Doheny Memorial Library, USC, Los Angeles, California.

that remains elusive for Parsons and Hopper. Indeed, Neal Gabler, Winchell's otherwise excellent biographer, ultimately dismisses Parsons and Hopper as "conservative, prudish, narrow-minded small-town women" who "never had anywhere near the impact that Winchell had, even though their names became almost as well known as his" because they "fought to conserve the old order until the world passed them by." While a body of literature is growing on the life, work, and significance of Winchell, Parsons and Hopper have been the subject of only one joint popular biography, George Eells's *Hedda and Louella* (1973).<sup>17</sup>

When Parsons and Hopper's power and influence is acknowledged in the scholarly and popular literature on the film industry, it is seldom examined in any depth or with much analytical precision.<sup>18</sup> Many film biographies and autobiographies covering the early and mid-twentieth century include at least one generally scathing reference to these reporters. As actor David Niven has written, "Louella and Hedda . . . wielded, and frequently misused, enormous power. Only Hollywood could have spawned such a couple and only Hollywood, headline hunting, self-inflating, riddled with fear and insecurity, could have allowed itself to be dominated by them for so long."<sup>19</sup> Such characterizations of Parsons and Hopper are ubiquitous and are, in part, a product of their gender and the gendered nature of their work. Parsons and Hopper were of a

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<sup>17</sup>Gabler, *Winchell*, 256. On Winchell, see also Douglas, *Listening In*, 168–72; St. Clair McKelway, *Gossip: The Life and Times of Walter Winchell* (New York: Viking Press, 1940); and Ed Weiner, *Let's Go To Press: A Biography of Walter Winchell* (New York: Putnam, 1955). The Eells biography has been an invaluable resource, providing information about Parsons and Hopper's early lives, personal lives, and careers that cannot be found elsewhere, given their skill at manipulating their own images and controlling the flow of information about their own lives.

<sup>18</sup> There are some notable exceptions. Scholars Samantha Barbas, Robert Sklar, and Garry Wills are among the few to devote more than a sentence or two to Parsons and Hopper, suggesting a significance and potential for study that has heretofore gone unexplored. See Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 91–6; Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 234–6; Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents At Home*, rev. ed (New York: Penguin, 2000), 188–91. Historian Jennifer Frost is also working on a biography of Hopper (forthcoming from New York University Press).

<sup>19</sup> David Niven, *Bring on the Empty Horses* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), 15.

generation of women who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century and benefited from the increased educational, economic, and occupational opportunities available to the “New Woman.” Yet they were also subject to the obstacles placed in the path of such women prompted by fears of what a debilitating impact greater economic and political freedom for women would have on the home, the family, and the very fabric of American life.<sup>20</sup> As single working mothers struggling to succeed in the white-collar workforce, Parsons and Hopper had to navigate gender conventions used to contain and undermine female ambition and success. In negotiating these gender conflicts, Parsons and later Hopper crafted personas that embraced (and even exaggerated) their perceived shortcomings as journalists and thereby disarmed critics with self-mockery. Parsons culled the title of *The Gay Illiterate*, her 1944 autobiography, from a scathing 1939 *Saturday Evening Post* profile, which indicted the U.S. press for “echoing her *gay illiteracies*.” Hopper in her 1952 memoir *From under my Hat* judged herself “a ham trying to be a reporter.” Both women’s frequent professions of ineptitude masked—with varying degrees of success—their considerable ambition and power. They were perhaps too successful in this endeavor and remain largely defined and diminished by the self-deprecating voices and personas they crafted to appeal to their audiences and navigate the gender politics of their time.<sup>21</sup>

Parsons, Hopper, and other female reporters were able to make a niche for themselves in the male-dominated newsroom through gossip reporting because gossip was widely considered a female vice in theory, if not in practice. Parsons and Hopper’s

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<sup>20</sup> Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 145–239; Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 217–49.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Wood, “The First Lady of Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1939, p. 8; Hedda Hopper, *From under my Hat* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1952), 297.

appropriation of the role of gossip-monger, amplified by the many new tools of mass communication available in the twentieth-century United States, fell within the bounds of mainstream constructions of femininity. As actress Evelyn Keyes noted in a 1985 profile of these “Warrior Queens of Gossip” in *People* magazine, the bible of the late-twentieth-century gossip industry, “Certain concepts have changed since the woman’s movement. . . . Women then were supposed to be catty to each other, were they not? I think their reputations came from that. It was our programming, like pink for girls. Gossip columnists were bitches—everybody knew that.” Indeed, Winchell and the other male gossip columnists had to contend with challenges to their masculinity, given the allegedly “feminine” nature of their work. For example, editor Marlen Pew of the influential journalism trade paper *Editor & Publisher*, reserved special scorn for the male gossip columnists whose work he characterized in January 1932 as “borrowed from gigolo society.” Winchell resented being “confused with the ladies who report such trivia” and strove throughout his career to be considered a political reporter who also covered the entertainment beat. As for “the ladies,” Parsons and Hopper exploited the gender politics of gossip reporting with great success. They both firmly believed, as Parsons once wrote, “Hollywood is news and Hollywood is my town.” They long refused to acknowledge or abide by any distinction between gossip reporting and other kinds of reporting, and their vision, for better or worse, has prevailed.<sup>22</sup>

This dissertation will begin with an exploration of Parsons’s rise to power within the context of the rise of the Hollywood studio system and the nationalization of the U.S. press. The emergence of actress-turned-columnist Hopper in the late 1930s will then be

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<sup>22</sup> As quoted in Richard Lemon, “The Warrior Queens of Gossip,” *People*, May 13, 1985, p. 136; as quoted in Gabler, Winchell, 134, 135; Louella O. Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, Sons, 1961), 7.

explored as well as the concurrent, overt politicization of the gossip column. Three pivotal news stories in the 1940s and early 1950s—the furor over *Citizen Kane*, the film community’s initial and short-lived protest against HUAC, and the Bergman-Rossellini scandal—illustrate Parsons and Hopper’s growing power, the politicization of their work in Cold War America, and most importantly the reconfiguration of the realm of celebrity culture and the parameters of news content.

Today we live in a world in which celebrity gossip is ubiquitous, and scandal sells. We must ask ourselves how this came to be. While gossip has always been news in one form or another, the establishment of a full-fledged, multimedia gossip industry in twentieth-century America and the considerable social, cultural, and political ramifications thereof demand serious consideration. So, too, do the careers of two of the industry’s pioneering reporters whose work helped to develop and promote a truly national popular culture that has reshaped the networks of power and influence in American society.

## Chapter 1: The “First” Movie Columnist in the World: Louella Parsons’s Rise to Power, 1910–1923

In 1915, thirty-four-year-old Louella O. Parsons, a former screenplay writer, began writing a daily film column in the *Chicago Record-Herald* for readers curious about the inner workings of this wildly popular new form of mass entertainment. Her job as a reporter covering the film industry and encouraging the consumption of this mass entertainment was a new one that derived from two major developments in early-twentieth-century U.S. society: the rise of the mass media and the mass consumer revolution. She was one of many reporters assigned to this new beat, but she outlasted most of them to become the grand dame of the Hollywood press corps, a press corps that was nonexistent when her reporting career began in 1915 but had become the second largest in the nation in 1954 with more than members as she entered the final decade of her career.<sup>1</sup> She honed a persona and method and style of reporting that would be widely emulated in the years to come. In doing so, she emerged as a powerful broker who helped her audience negotiate the rapidly expanding realm of mass entertainment and its attendant celebrity culture.

Parsons, however, faced considerable challenges in her new job. She had to convince an often skeptical and critical public that film was a respectable and legitimate medium in the face of rampant censorship efforts and fears of the social problems both

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<sup>1</sup> On the size of the Hollywood press corps, see “Hollywood’s Press: Why the Stars are in Your Eyes,” *Newsweek*, February 22, 1954, p. 62. On the rise of the Hollywood press corps, see Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie-Fan Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); and Richard Kozarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Picture*, vol. 3, *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Scribner’s, 1990), 191–7.

created and exacerbated by filmgoing. Through Parsons's early career the relatively mundane and circumspect beginnings of the celebrity gossip industry come into sharp focus. For entertainment reporters in the 1910s and early 1920s, scandal was to be avoided rather than embraced as they worked to legitimize a rising entertainment-based elite. Yet there was a market for scandal that posed a dilemma for these journalists, who were caught between the demands of their audience and employers and those of their sources. When a series of headline-grabbing scandals rocked the film industry in the early 1920s, Parsons struggled to resolve the disparity between public image and private reality. In the construction of the Hollywood publicity machine, this dilemma was resolved in favor of the film industry's need to neutralize controversy—at least on the entertainment pages. As a result, Parsons and other entertainment reporters gained greater latitude in the disclosure of less controversial details of the private lives of public figures. This erosion of privacy would begin with relatively innocuous commentary in the gossip columns, which would help normalize the increasing media scrutiny of the celebrated.

In the process of reporting on the lives of celebrities, Parsons became a celebrity in her own right. Parsons's life—as she told it and as it was widely reported in the media throughout her lifetime—seemed to begin at the age of thirty when her professional career began in earnest. Her considerable skills at image management are perhaps displayed to greatest advantage in the crafting and maintenance of her own image. Throughout her lifetime and beyond, media profiles of Parsons relied heavily upon her 1944 memoir *The Gay Illiterate*—an unreliable and highly selective source—for information. This “story of a great American reporter” provided very little information

about Parsons's life prior to her arrival in Chicago in the early 1910s. Indeed, her abridged version of her early personal and professional life was not called into question in print until the 1973 publication of George Eells's popular biography of Parsons. This volume did not appear until shortly after Parsons's death—a testament to her public relations skills and her ability to suppress information when it suited her purposes. Just as she did for the celebrities whose “reel” and “real” lives she chronicled, Parsons altered her personal history through omission, embellishment, and outright fabrication. As Eells has noted: “If Louella was relentless in exposing other people's secrets, she was equally deft in concealing her own.”<sup>2</sup>

What Parsons chose to reveal and especially what she chose to conceal about her early life illustrates some of the gender and religious constraints she had to negotiate in the workplace and as a public figure in the mid-twentieth-century United States. She crafted a durable identity as a woman of indeterminate age of Midwestern Protestant stock. Throughout her career, she equivocated about her exact age; when pressed to provide a date, she generally trimmed at least a decade off. She began her memoir, *The Gay Illiterate*, declaring, “[A]ll I intend to admit to” is “a half century on this earth.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, she was born Louella Rose Oettinger on August 6, 1881 in Freeport, Illinois, so she was sixty-three the year her memoir was published in 1944. Parsons's reticence reflected contemporaneous gender conventions: namely that a lady need not reveal her age. It also reflected the nature of the industry she covered, which demanded ruthless adherence to the beauty standards of the time, particularly for its female performers. Accordingly, she was under considerable pressure to dissemble and present a youthful façade to maintain

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<sup>2</sup> George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Louella O. Parsons, *The Gay Illiterate* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1944), 1.

her status. She did attempt to glamorize her image with film-star quality headshots and designer clothing and denials regarding her age. But she also used her rather ordinary appearance—a potential liability in Hollywood—and Midwestern background to her advantage with her readership. Parsons, the ultimate Hollywood insider, often cast herself as an outsider—like the great mass of her readers and listeners—to the glamorous (and increasingly morally suspect) world of Hollywood. She was perhaps most successful in deploying a fundamental rhetorical strategy of celebrity journalism—that, at bottom, celebrities were just like everyone else—for her own benefit.<sup>4</sup>

Parsons also made no mention of her Jewish heritage. She was most commonly described as “the daughter of third generation Freeportians of German-Irish extraction.”<sup>5</sup> According to her biographer Eells, Parsons’s parents, Helen Stine and Joshua Oettinger, were of Jewish descent. The pressure to assimilate in a small Midwestern town with no synagogue would likely have been intense, and her parents may well have chosen to obscure their Jewish heritage since Parsons seems to have been raised as an Episcopalian. When Parsons was eight, her father died. A year and a half later—in December 1891—her mother was remarried to John H. Edwards. The reconfigured family, including Parsons’s younger brother Edwin, her only sibling to survive past infancy, settled in Dixon, Illinois, in 1897. Helen Oettinger’s remarriage to a non-Jew after her husband’s death would have marked a further erasure of the family’s Jewish identity.<sup>6</sup>

Parsons covered an industry in which Jewish performers, among others, often changed and Anglicized their names (willingly or not)—from silent film star Theda Bara

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<sup>4</sup> On the rhetorical strategies of celebrity journalism, see Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 106–40.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Wood, “The First Lady of Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1939, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 27–9, 33.

(nee Theodosia Goodman) to actor Edward G. Robinson (nee Emanuel Goldenberg)—to create a vaguely Protestant or vaguely ethnic identity and thereby circumvent anti-Semitism. Most of the Jewish entrepreneurs who entered the industry when it was a staple of poor and working-class immigrant neighborhoods and helped turn it into a cultural and economic powerhouse neither renounced nor denied their religious and cultural background. But this meant a constant struggle with anti-Semitism—what Steven Carr has termed the “Hollywood Question,” a twentieth-century manifestation of the “Jewish Question.” Indeed, anti-Semitism fueled much criticism of the motion picture industry, with its phalanx of prominent Jewish leaders. If Parsons did have a sense of a Jewish identity, she likely might have chosen to suppress it given the religious and cultural politics of the film industry and the considerable anti-Semitism of the larger society.<sup>7</sup>

What little we do know is that Parsons completed high school in Dixon, Illinois, in 1901, just shy of her twentieth birthday. She attended college and briefly entered the workforce—possibly as a teacher and a reporter—before marrying her first husband, John Parsons, in October 1905. The newlyweds moved to Burlington, Iowa, where Louella gave birth to her only child, Harriet Oettinger Parsons on August 23, 1906. But the couple’s troubled marriage did not survive long after the birth of their daughter.<sup>8</sup>

The course of her personal life for the next decade or so is unclear because, as an expert at image control, she wished it to be so. Parsons conceded that her first “marriage was not a happy one” and they “just drifted apart” when their daughter was still an infant.

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<sup>7</sup> On anti-Semitism in Hollywood, see Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History Up to World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor, 1988).

<sup>8</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 34–5, 37.

According to Parsons, she was a war widow of sorts: she and John Parsons had long been estranged but were considering reconciliation while he was fighting in World War I. His alleged death as he headed back to the United States on a military transport meant that they “were never granted that chance” to reconcile. There is no evidence—beyond her assertions—to support this scenario, but the role of war widow was an inspired choice. It cast her failed marriage in the best possible light and elicited sympathy for Parsons at a time when divorce was still controversial. As a cover story, it posed a considerable challenge to skeptics who would be forced to defame a World War I widow to make their case. It also silenced those who might criticize Parsons’s single working motherhood.<sup>9</sup>

Parsons was part of a generation of women who came of age at the turn of the century and undermined the sex segregation of the white-collar workplace, at a time when suffrage activists were simultaneously making major strides on the state and federal levels in the campaign for the right to vote. Women’s political and professional gains inspired fear of what havoc this “New Woman” might wreak on the social fabric of the nation and the gender identity of its citizens. The male breadwinner remained the ideal despite the necessity of wage labor for many women, and working women such as Parsons faced much resistance and hostility upon their entrance into the workforce. Parsons chose to mask her ambition and success as simply a byproduct of her dire financial circumstances as a widow with a young child to support. As Parsons told it, “Without her [Harriet] I am afraid I would not have tried too hard to amount to much.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Parsons, she was a single working mother with no time for romance after the collapse of her first marriage in about 1907 until her move to New York in 1918.

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<sup>9</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 17, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

Parsons confessed in her 1944 autobiography that sometime after her move to New York, she “fell in love with a man who was not free to marry,” though she never revealed his identity. That relationship ended after she met Dr. Harry Martin in June 1928. Parsons and Martin married on January 5, 1930.<sup>11</sup>

Her biographer George Eells suggests that Parsons’s romantic history was far more complicated. Based on largely anecdotal evidence, he contends that she divorced John Parsons, married another man during her supposedly lovelorn years, and had the acknowledged relationship with a married man prior to meeting and marrying Martin.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the true story might be, Parsons did not discuss her personal life except in very broad terms and stuck to this script throughout her life. If Eells was correct in casting Parsons as a twice-divorced and thrice-married woman, she would have had good reason to conceal this information. Her complex marital history would have compromised her role as arbiter of the equally complex marital history of Hollywood’s citizens. Her persona as a well-informed and respectable outsider from middle America reporting upon

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>12</sup> According to Eells, Louella and John Parsons divorced sometime prior to her marriage to Jack McCaffrey, a riverboat captain, in the mid-1910s. This second marriage later ended in either divorce or annulment. Eells’s scenario has become accepted as fact despite the relative paucity of evidence. Eells relied upon the recollections of Parsons’s neighbors and friends in Illinois and Iowa more than fifty years after these events took place. According to one interviewee, “Louella and Jack McCaffrey met in late December 1914. . . . They were probably married in Chicago the next year some time.” Another source concluded, “I don’t think they were married long. Maybe . . . 8 years.” Typed notes on Parsons, Box 6, George Eells Collection, Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Arizona State University. There are no extant legal records and the only other corroborating evidence on the union with McCaffrey is a 1957 notice in the *Hollywood Citizen-News* that “Jack McCaffrey, 84, a retired river boat captain who was once married to Hollywood columnist Louella Parsons died Tuesday.” “Louella Parsons’ Ex-Husband Dies,” *Hollywood Citizen-News*, August 5, 1957, LP bio files. Eells also identified New York labor leader and politico Peter J. Brady as the unnamed man with whom Parsons had a long-term relationship throughout the 1920s. Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 92. Indeed, Brady also cropped up in her column on occasion in items such as “Seldom has the Woman Pays Club had a more successful meeting than the luncheon yesterday at which Peter J. Brady, chairman of Education of the State Federation of Labor, spoke on education in the public school.” Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” *MT*, April 20, 1922.

the tempestuous and suspect ethical realm of Hollywood would have been undermined as would her moral authority.<sup>13</sup>

### *To the Windy City*

Parsons drew a veil of secrecy over the first thirty years of her life that remains largely impenetrable. But in the early 1910s, she made a move that changed her life and began her rise through the ranks of the two industries—film and newspaper—that would make her a household name by the late 1920s. In the early 1910s—possibly as early as 1910—Parsons and her daughter moved to Chicago, which then served as a major production center for the film industry. The motion picture industry was in its infancy but would grow over the course of the 1910s into a multi-million dollar business of considerable cultural and social influence. Parsons entered the industry early in this decade of phenomenal growth and opportunity. According to Parsons, Chicago “gave me my chance in the movie industry and in the newspaper business.” She secured secretarial work at a stereopticon company (the stereoscope was popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for viewing three-dimensional images) and at the *Chicago Tribune*.<sup>14</sup>

Parsons wrote scenarios—the earliest version of the screenplay—in her spare time, which she hoped to sell to the local film studios. Her aspirations mirrored those of thousands of hopefuls from the late 1900s through late 1910s, when film studios were flooded with scenario submissions from across the nation. The silent films of this period required only brief, action-oriented plotlines with little or no dialogue and inspired the

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons’s conversion to Catholicism in 1929 before she married Dr. Harry Martin might also have played a role in her desire to bury evidence of any divorces in her past because she would have needed to secure annulments to participate fully in the life and liturgy of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church. On Parsons’s conversion to Catholicism, see “Louella Parsons,” *Look*, October 10, 1950, LP bio files.

<sup>14</sup> Louella Parsons, “The Essanay Days,” *Theatre Arts* 35 (July 1951): 33.

dreams of amateurs, many of whom did indeed sell their work to the studios.<sup>15</sup> Parsons then secured a full-time position at the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, thanks in part to the industry contacts of her younger first cousin Margaret Oettinger. (Parsons returned the favor and later helped Ettinger, who dropped the “O” from her surname, become a very successful Hollywood publicist.)<sup>16</sup>

Parsons worked in the scenario department at Essanay, reviewing the thousands of submissions from the general public as well as writing original scenarios. The job lasted for a few years in the early 1910s. Her boss George Spoor later remembered her as a “pretty good scriptwriter.” She became a figure of enough importance in the field to be included in a 1914 *Saturday Evening Post* profile of the industry’s most successful screenwriters, which billed Parsons as “a short-story writer of note.” (There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Parsons was ever a fiction writer of any note, making this comment perhaps an early example of her skill at burnishing her credentials.)

Essanay was one of the major studios and employed many of the screen’s earliest stars, including Gloria Swanson and Francis X. Bushman, the latter of whom starred in several of Parsons’s screenplays. Parsons had access to many of the major players—in front of and behind the camera—in this growing industry and gained valuable first-hand knowledge of the inner workings of the industry.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> On scenario writing, see Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 126–8.

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Oettinger had a summer job as a high school student at *Photoplay*, one of the first movie fan magazines then headquartered in Chicago. Her industry contacts helped Parsons land the Essanay job. Parsons later returned the favor and helped Ettinger succeed in public relations. Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 42; Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 20; “Maggie Ettinger—Publicist Supreme,” *LAT*, December 15, 1957, Margaret Ettinger biographical files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>17</sup> “Louella Parsons,” *Los Angeles Mirror*, May 5, 1953, LP bio files; Roy L. McCardell, “How to Write for the Movies,” *Saturday Evening Post*, May 16, 1914, p. 12. While at Essanay, Parsons also put her daughter to work. Credited as Baby Parsons, Harriet appeared in *Margaret’s Awakening* and *The Magic Wand*, films written by her mother. Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 43.

Parsons's success at Essanay was not anomalous. Throughout the silent era and particularly in the pre-World War I period, women held positions of importance in front of and behind the camera. Actress Mary Pickford, screenwriters Frances Marion and June Mathis, and director Lois Weber were among the most powerful figures in the industry in the 1910s, and many other less-storied women worked in a wide range of jobs both in front of and behind the camera. But beginning in the mid-1910s, the once-considerable professional opportunities available to women in the industry began to be eroded by corporate consolidation; as film became a lucrative big business and mainstream entertainment, female employees found less opportunity for employment and mobility in the growing bureaucracies and hierarchies of the studio system, both inside and out. As was the case with many industries in early-twentieth-century America, growing cultural and economic prestige and professionalization resulted in a narrowing opportunities for the women in the workforce. Indeed, Parsons lost her job at Essanay in 1915 in the midst of industry-wide reorganization as a result of vertical and horizontal integration, which gave rise by the late 1920s to an oligopoly of five major and three minor studios. In this harshly competitive business climate, Essanay also had to contend with antitrust and patent lawsuits due to its participation in the Motion Picture Patents Company's first, ultimately failed attempt to monopolize all aspects of film production and distribution. Essanay responded to rising legal expenses coupled with staff cutbacks. Thus Parsons's job loss was the result of the economic and organizational turmoil that gave rise to the classical Hollywood studio in which the gender parity that prevailed in the industry's early years was greatly eroded.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On the changing status of women in the film industry, see Ally Acker, *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896 to the Present* (New York: Continuum Pub. Co., 1991); Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to*

The year Parsons lost her job at Essanay was also the year in which D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* was released. Film scholars use this benchmark film to highlight the passing of the age of the nickelodeon and the triumph of a new mode of entertainment featuring multiple-reel films exhibited in more elaborate and upscale theaters at higher ticket prices. The shift to multiple-reel films in this period required screenplays of greater narrative complexity, which led to the professionalization of screenwriting. Increasingly, studios sought out published and established writers to adapt novels and plays and draft original screenplays. As Essanay studio head George Spoor remembered, "Louella's old job was disappearing . . . because the movies were starting to buy magazine stories and hire established writers to do the writing." Parsons was neither a director nor a playwright of note and lacked the professional credentials to succeed as the screenplay was elevated to an art form.<sup>19</sup>

Essanay was not, however, cutting costs in the fierce bidding wars that were developing around major talents and box-office draws. Charlie Chaplin joined Essanay in 1915 at the then-astronomical salary of \$1,250 a week. Chaplin, Essanay's new star, re-wrote Parsons's screenplay for the film *His New Job* before shooting began and received the sole screenwriting credit. The rewrite highlighted Essanay's priorities: Chaplin was not expendable, but Parsons, a comparative bargain at a salary of \$45 per week, was. She was a relatively low-level writer caught in the undertow as a wave of ascending superstar writer-directors like Chaplin and D.W. Griffith as well as

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*Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 223, 239; Steven Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 60–1; Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 235. On the rise of the studio system, see, for example, Douglas Gomery, "U.S. Film Exhibition: The Formation of a Big Business," in *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed., ed. Tino Balio, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 218–28; and Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 15–47.

<sup>19</sup> "Louella Parsons," *Los Angeles Mirror*, May 5, 1953, LP bio files.

professional writers crafted multiple-reel extravaganzas. But Parsons would quickly rebound from this setback by turning her talents to writing about these new superstars for the general public.<sup>20</sup>

*The “First” Movie Columnist in the World*

Essanay may not have valued her screenwriting skills sufficiently to keep her on staff, but this did not stop Parsons from marketing herself as an expert in the field. She sold a series on screenwriting to the *Chicago Record-Herald* that was also published as a book, *How to Write for the Movies* (1915). With her writing credentials and experience in the film industry, Parsons sought work as a film reporter. The *Chicago Record-Herald*, which had run her special series, was sufficiently impressed to offer her a regular column, titled “Seen on the Screen.” In a decade in which “experts” proliferated, offering advice on every aspect of life from work to home to play, the *Record-Herald* promoted Parsons as a film expert with “her own technical knowledge of the game,” courtesy of her years in the Essanay scenario department. Her column included a question-and-answer section—a standard feature in the fan magazines—in which Parsons fielded a wide range of queries from curious readers about the shape and functioning of the industry. For example, Parsons identified “Edna Purviance . . . [as] . . . the pretty girl who plays opposite Charlie Chaplin” in response to a reader query.<sup>21</sup>

Parsons later claimed the distinction of being “the *first* movie columnist in the world” with her *Record-Herald* column.<sup>22</sup> Parsons was not the *first* movie gossip

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<sup>20</sup> On Chaplin’s salary, see Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 74. On Parsons’s salary, see Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 43. On *His New Job*, see Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 43; and Internet Movie Database, accessed at: <http://us.imdb.com/title/tt0005489/fullcredits#writersIMDB>.

<sup>21</sup> Parsons, “Seen on the Screen,” CRH, n.d., scrapbook #1, LPC. The *Record-Herald* clippings in the scrapbooks in the LPC are compiled in chronological order but undated.

<sup>22</sup> Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, Sons, 1961), 19. Emphasis mine.

columnist, but she was among the first wave of film reporters to have a weekly column with a byline in a general interest newspaper. Her transition from screenwriting to film reporting was not serendipitous; the growing financial and cultural might of the film industry had sparked an upsurge in print media coverage and advertising. In 1915, film journalism was in its infancy but its ranks had been joined by the woman who would go on to define the genre of the film gossip column and use it to emerge as one of the most powerful women in the mid-twentieth-century film industry.

In the early 1910s, live theater in its many forms—vaudeville, dramatic and comedic plays, musicals, revues—remained the centerpiece of the entertainment pages in daily newspapers. Film, on the other hand, received little attention. “I remember when I started my column they used to run it next to the obituaries,” Parsons once reminisced. While this was an exaggeration, the column inches devoted to the film world in the early 1910s tended to be rather haphazard and scant, especially as compared to the coverage of vaudeville and other live entertainments. As the film industry eclipsed other existing entertainment media in scale, profits, and influence over the course of the 1910s, its importance in the print media grew accordingly.<sup>23</sup>

From informal neighborhood theaters to elaborate movie “palaces” built in the central business districts of the nation’s growing urban centers, the film-going experience grew more formalized and audiences increasingly found themselves viewing films amongst strangers in the second half of the 1910s. The well-documented urbanization of the opening decades of the early twentieth century was fueled by major internal and external population migrations. In her move from the small-town Midwest to Chicago,

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<sup>23</sup>As quoted in Joseph Alsop, Jr., “Miss Louella Parsons Speaking,” *New York Herald Tribune*, October 27, 1935.

Parsons numbered among such migrants. Film culture offered a common point of reference for these new city dwellers living in a world full of strangers: filmgoers began to gossip about the people they saw on the screen. Thus this new breed of journalists, including Parsons, helped to shape and fortify the emerging national popular culture.<sup>24</sup>

Until the advent of film, mass entertainment—be it theater, sports, or the like—had been experienced as live events, which facilitated “personal” contact between performer and audience even if this contact consisted solely of proximity in a common space. A critical component of fandom had resided in the immediacy of the performance, which provided the audience with the opportunity to observe the performer and provide immediate feedback in the form of cheers or catcalls or silence. Film, a new art form “in the age of mechanical reproduction,” required new methods for the cultivation and expression of fandom.<sup>25</sup> Theater impresarios first developed the star system in the 1840s and 1850s; film producers borrowed this marketing model in the 1910s, but had to modify it for motion picture audiences. Film audiences responded to images of performers rather than the performers themselves and needed to find new ways to express their opinions about films and connect with the performers.

The limitations of this new medium were resolved in part through columns such as Parsons’s. As Richard deCordova has argued in his study of the development of the star system: “Journalism provided the institutional setting for much, if not most, of the discourse on stars. The trade press, fan magazines, the popular press, and newspapers all

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<sup>24</sup> On the rise of the movie palace and a truly national popular culture, see Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 147–66; and David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 221–40.

<sup>25</sup> This phrase is borrowed from Walter Benjamin’s germinal essay in media studies and criticism, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

constituted specific positions from which to speak the star.”<sup>26</sup> Parsons was a pioneer in the considerable public relations apparatus that developed to allow audiences to interrogate and “interact” with the performers of the silver screen. Theater columns had existed since the late 1800s to provide forums for discussion and promotion, but such columns were not as critical to the functioning of the live entertainment industries as they would come to be for film. Particularly in the silent era that lasted until 1930, Parsons’s column “gave voice” to the silent film star and helped bridge the divide between the film-going public and the stars of the silver screen.<sup>27</sup>

Parsons began writing her column during this critical transitional period as the U.S. print media struggled to accommodate coverage of film, given its growing cultural and economic importance. Specialty publications devoted exclusively to this new mass entertainment and its fans proliferated. *Motion Picture Story Magazine* and *Photoplay*, established in 1911 and 1912, were among the first of the specialty publications to arise to accommodate the “explosion of publicity about film actors.” By the end of the decade, *Photoplay* and five other leading movie fan magazines achieved a combined circulation of over one million. Trade papers also proliferated. *Variety* and other previously existing entertainment trade papers devoted increasing coverage to film; new papers such as *Moving Picture World*, established in 1907, and *Motion Picture News*, established in 1913, focused exclusively on the film industry.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 12.

<sup>27</sup> On this new experience of fandom, see Barbas, *Movie Crazy*, 9–33; deCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 98–114; and Fuller, *At the Picture Show*.

<sup>28</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 73. On the trade papers, see Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment*, 191–97; Janet Staiger, “Standardization and differentiation: the reinforcement and dispersion of Hollywood’s practices” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, ed. David Bordwell, Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 99.

The nation's daily newspapers also devoted ever more column inches to the film industry. By the mid-1910s, most of the nation's major newspapers had established distinct film sections with staff reporters dedicated to this new beat. This trend can be tracked in the pages of the *New York Times*. The *Times* entertainment pages were among the last to accommodate the growing phenomenon of film in the mid-1910s, and this shift corresponds with and supports the notion that in this period the film industry achieved a truly mass audience, drawing consumers from all socio-economic levels of U.S. society. In the years leading up to 1915, the *Times* coverage of the film world was minimal and focused exclusively upon debates over the safety of theaters, the impact of this new medium on children and other members of its growing audience, and crises over film content and censorship. With the release of *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, the *Times* devoted considerable attention to the controversy that ensued over the highly charged racial content of this film, which led to bans and protests across the nation, including a high-profile NAACP campaign. The *Times* also reported upon the unprecedented cost of making the film, its high ticket prices, its length, its technological and stylistic innovations, and its remarkable success at the box office. "After two showings today," the *Times* reported early in 1916, "Griffith's picture, 'The Birth of a Nation,' will end an engagement in the Liberty Theatre that has never been approached in filmland. . . . [I]t is estimated 5,000,000 have already seen it." In the wake of its coverage of what can be rightly considered the first blockbuster in film history, the *Times* entertainment section expanded in 1916 to include film reviews and a new daily film column, "Written on the Screen," run without a byline.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>"Written on the Screen," NYT, January 2, 1916. The NYT index from the years 1914 to 1916 provided a map of the newspaper's changing coverage of the film industry.

The film industry's rapidly growing contribution to newspaper advertising revenue played no small role in the development of this genre of entertainment journalism. The drive for mass circulation in the nation's press had cut deeply into profits, and advertising revenue was used to make up the shortfall. From 1880 to 1920, newspaper revenue gleaned from advertising jumped from 44 to 75 percent.<sup>30</sup> The motion picture industry contributed significantly to this increased ad revenue: by 1926, the Motion Picture Producer and Distributors Association (MPPDA) estimated that the film industry spent \$100 million on advertising, a considerable proportion of which was spent on newspaper print ads.<sup>31</sup>

*"Balancing on a Tightrope"*

At the *Record-Herald*, Parsons had to please two masters: her sources and her mass audience. Her column always had two important and distinct audiences: members of the industry and the general public. She had to cultivate and protect her industry sources but also maintain her journalistic integrity and credibility—a delicate balancing act required of all journalists. As a fledgling reporter, she had to establish herself within the industry as a reliable and worthwhile conduit of information; her work depended almost wholly on the willingness of performers and other personnel as well as talent agents and studio publicists to take advantage of her column as a promotional tool. But her column also needed to be accessible and entertaining reading for industry outsiders. Playing to this dual audience in a single column was not an easy task and would only grow more difficult as the years passed. Parsons acknowledged this tension, which she aptly described: "It is like balancing on a tight-rope, many times . . . [In the] case of a star or

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<sup>30</sup> On the rise of advertising in the press, see Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming of Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 162–4.

<sup>31</sup> "Hays Thanks Press for Free Space," *Editor & Publisher*, April 3, 1926, p. 4.

any other professional person it is wiser to sacrifice one scoop for the sake of friendship. If you don't, *you never get another story from that same person.*" While this remains a dilemma all journalists must wrestle with, it was exacerbated in Parsons's case because of the nature of her specialty—the gossip column. She had to retain the goodwill and trust of her sources, but the nature of her work also required that she sometimes had to dig for and print information her sources did not want published.<sup>32</sup>

As she was building her reputation and power base in the 1910s, Parsons's column was relatively circumspect and filled with innocuous content regarding the personal behavior of her subjects. Her discussion of the personal lives of industry employees was carefully circumscribed and bears little resemblance to the intimate and often scandalous private details that are central to the early-twenty-first-century celebrity gossip industry. Today the exposure of the transgressive behavior of celebrities is commonplace: this is a critical component that sells papers and brings in listeners and viewers. But this was not always the case. In the 1910s, the "gossip" in Parsons's column and other such columns in a wide-range of publications—from newspapers to fan magazines—was relatively innocuous: who had been cast in what film, who was producing a film, which studio was building a sound stage, what producers had created an alliance. She reported on the formation and dissolution and reconfiguration of film companies, including the spectacular creation and failure of the Triangle Film Corporation. She also conducted lengthy interviews with such industry executives as Harry Aitken, Lewis J. Selznick, and George K. Spoor, her former boss at Essanay. Her column was filled with mundane notices about professional developments, often

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<sup>32</sup> As quoted in Gladys Hall, "Hollywood's Secret Ruler," n.d., Folder 375, Gladys Hall collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. On the "paradox of celebrity journalism," see Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 76–105.

recounted in a breathless tone that suggested but did not truly deliver intrigue and excitement. Her column and those of her peers were not perceived as business columns, but at bottom that is what they were (and still are). The allure of the industry was such that people were willing to read about negotiations, salaries, and other business information—spiced up in the beginning with rather innocuous personal details—that would otherwise be of little or no interest to the general public. Parsons did not divulge sensitive personal information such as extramarital affairs and divorces. She provided only the most general personal details—marital status and children—to tell the story of their private lives as when she shared with her readers that “Mr. [Charlie] Chaplin is not married.”<sup>33</sup>

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the content of newspapers was constrained by professional standards and legal concerns. Until a personal matter, such as a divorce, became a matter of public record in the courts, journalists avoided printing such stories to avoid libel litigation. There were, of course, exceptions to this rule, as in the rather scurrilous society gazette *Town Topics*, published from the 1880s through the 1930s, that printed highly personal and speculative rumor and innuendo on New York’s high society and entertainment world. The rise of the tabloids in the 1920s would further erode the privacy of public and private figures in the media. But at the *Record-Herald* in the 1910s, Parsons was bound by formal and informal professional standards to avoid at least explicit discussion of personal improprieties.

Parsons had other compelling reasons to temper the tone of her column. Her professional well-being was dependent upon the well-being of the film industry, which was then the target of considerable criticism and could ill-afford negative publicity

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<sup>33</sup> Parsons, “Seen on the Screen,” CRH, n.d., scrapbook #1, LPc.

regarding the private behavior of its employees. Considerable effort had been made by film producers and promoters to differentiate film stars from stars of the stage. The long history of the stage tradition had bred a perception of players who were glamorous and interesting, but whose moral and ethical conduct was outside the realm of respectable behavior and society. Stage actors were considered a breed apart whose late hours, by virtue of the theatrical mode of production, led to carousing and scandal, a perception reinforced by the journalists who covered the theater world. Thus the emphasis in columns, such as Parsons, was on avoiding the taint of scandal and establishing the respectability of film actors. She wrote, for example, "I have come to the conclusion that one reason that Lillian Gish at 19 is such a recognized success is because of her sweet nature. . . . She is a lovable child." This was representative commentary on the screen's biggest stars, who were presented to the public as paragons of virtue and rectitude.<sup>34</sup>

Establishing the respectability of film actors and actresses in the 1910s was part of a wider effort to allay rampant concerns regarding every aspect of the film-going experience, from the content of film to conditions in the theaters, voiced by progressive reformers of every stripe: politicians, law enforcement officials, and social commentators. The regulation of film content provoked heated conflict throughout the 1910s (and beyond). Various governmental and private factions debated standards and who should implement them, while the industry remained steadfastly opposed to external censorship and regulation. The number of municipal, state, and civic regulatory boards increased dramatically in the 1910s, and each regulatory body created its own ambiguous and highly subjective set of standards for films under review. The industry faced a real

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. On the press coverage and public perceptions of stage actors, see deCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 102–5; and Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure*, 209–10, 215–6.

crisis: failure to comply threatened to erode profits at the box office due to bans and boycotts, but compliance entailed considerable post-production costs and delayed distribution.<sup>35</sup>

Parsons understood the threat that external regulation, governmental or otherwise, posed to the industry. Her career had begun in Chicago, the first major city in which an influential coalition of progressive reformers, led by Jane Addams, successfully lobbied for the 1907 creation of a municipal censorship board empowered to censor and ban films and license theaters. At Essanay, Parsons had experienced firsthand the disruptions to film production and distribution that could be wrought by external regulation. As a reporter she learned of the difficulties faced by the entire industry with regard to outside intervention and opposed it throughout her career. Parsons lobbied against censorship, beginning with the controversial *Birth of a Nation*, a film she considered “the most stupendous human achievement of this age.” Parsons took every opportunity to praise this film and its producer and director D. W. Griffith. “It was the first great test of screen censorship and Mr. Griffith’s attorney called on a group of ‘experts’ to testify,” Parsons once said. “I was among them.”<sup>36</sup>

Regarding early media coverage of the film industry, film scholar Richard Koszarski has argued that the medium was understood and written about as both “a social problem” and “an economic statistic.” As has been demonstrated, Parsons labored mightily to undermine the perception that film contributed to a host of social ills. She

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<sup>35</sup> The same year Parsons began her movie column, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of prior censorship by governmental agencies in *Mutual Film Corporation v. the Industrial Commission of Ohio* (1915). On early censorship efforts, see Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 30–2, 122–40.

<sup>36</sup> Parsons, “Seen on the Screen,” CRH, n.d., scrapbook #1, LPc; Parsons, *Tell It*, 55. For a complete discussion of censorship in Chicago, see Kathleen D. McCarthy, “Nickel Vice and Virtue: Movie Censorship in Chicago, 1907–1915,” *Journal of Popular Film* 1 (1976): 37–55.

also revealed in the economic might of the industry, particularly as it related to the lives of its employees. While there was much Parsons did not report about her subjects' personal lives, one aspect she did report upon in considerable detail was their conspicuous consumption. She devoted much ink to the star as voracious consumer of the goods and services newly available as a result of the mass-market consumer revolution of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-centuries. Her column detailed both the personal fortunes to be made in the industry and how this newfound wealth was spent: on luxurious homes, vacations, clothing, cars, and the like. As historian Lary May has argued in his study of the birth of the film industry, "film idols presented national models as leisure experts," and much of this work was accomplished in Parsons's column and others like it. Public interest in private life was rooted in the opulence and material excess available to Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and other members of the film community who reaped the benefits of the enormous profits generated by the film industry. Parsons prominently discussed salaries, hobbies, homes, fashion, and leisure time pursuits: "The salary to be paid Miss Marsh is not made public, but it is understood to be enough to keep ten or twelve families supplied with the necessaries of life." "New York shops are doing a thriving business. The reason is the scores of film stars who are here, . . . to spend their cheerful salaries on new clothes," intoned Parsons in representative commentary on the subject.<sup>37</sup>

Columnists such as Parsons offered up examples of individuals who had risen above the crowd—indeed inclusion in their newspaper columns seemed proof of this to readers—and offered new models for how to succeed in U.S. society. Take, for example,

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<sup>37</sup> Kozarski, *An Evening's Entertainment*, 191; May, *Screening Out the Past*, 190; Parsons, "Mae Marsh is Coming Back to Big Screen," MT, November 1, 1919; Parsons, "Speaking of New York's Visitors," MT, November 2, 1919.

Parsons's discussion of the comedian and actor Harold Lloyd. "From a comedian of several hundred dollars a week he became a stock owner in his company with a drawing account in lieu of a salary of enough dollars to warrant buying all the clothes he wants." Parsons measured Lloyd's success by his consumption.<sup>38</sup>

### *New York, New York*

In May 1918, the *Chicago Record-Herald* merged with the *Chicago Examiner* and became part of the Hearst newspaper empire. Parsons and many others lost their jobs. According to Parsons, she approached Arthur Brisbane, the new editor, in an effort to save her column and his response was: "There's not enough general interest in motion pictures." Parsons's job loss was not rooted in a lack of interest in or coverage of film in the Hearst newspapers; Hearst and his advisors had eagerly embraced and exploited the potential of this new mass medium in a variety of ways. In 1913, the International Film Company, a Hearst subsidiary, began producing and distributing newsreels and, the following year, expanded into serial films. The Hearst newspapers and magazines promoted these films, among others, and provided ample coverage of the film world, but this promotion generally consisted of brief articles without bylines in the 1910s. The truth was that the Hearst papers were very interested in film coverage, but were not interested in Parsons. At this point in her career, her services as a columnist were not deemed valuable enough to be retained by the Hearst press. Five years hence they would change their opinion, but for the time being she was out of work.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, November 16, 1919.

<sup>39</sup>As quoted in Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 39. On the Hearst corporation's early forays into film, see David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 234–7, 256–8; and Louis Pizzatola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1–178.

Parsons had made many valuable contacts in the newspaper industry and set her sights on New York, which was both a major production center for the film industry and the most coveted posting in U.S. journalism. Over the course of Parsons's professional career in Chicago, the city's status as a film industry center had declined precipitously.

Parsons's access to industry insiders was compromised as she later remembered:

I was as familiar a figure meeting trains through Chicago as any redcap. I spent my lunch hours gossiping at the best hotels with happy and unhappy commuters to and from Hollywood—Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Mae Marsh, D.W. Griffith, Mary Pickford, Dorothy Dalton, Thomas Ince, C.B. DeMille, lovable little Mabel Dormand, Mack Sennett, and hundreds of others less celebrated.<sup>40</sup>

Many of Parsons's "happy and unhappy commuters" were actually commuting between *New York* and Hollywood. As Chicago production facilities were closing down, Parsons was forced to use the Chicago layover of the transcontinental train to gather first-hand accounts for her column. As the industry relocated nearly exclusively on both coasts, so too, did Parsons.

Less than a month after her termination at the *Record-Herald*, Parsons had a new home, a new job, and a new job title as motion picture editor of *The [New York] Morning Telegraph*. Though the Hearst organization was not interested in retaining her services, Parsons's stature in the realm of entertainment reporting was rising. Her June 1918 move to New York represented a promotion for Parsons from motion picture columnist to motion picture editor with a staff of six. She now was reporting from one of the two centers of industry activity: New York was emerging as the financial center while the exodus to Hollywood for production was in high gear. Indeed, Parsons's *Morning Telegraph* staff included Frances Agnew, a correspondent based in Los Angeles, whose "Happenings in Hollywood" column appeared every Sunday. During Parsons's tenure in

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<sup>40</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 30.

New York from 1918 to 1925, the city still served as an adequate base of operations because it remained the industry's financial headquarters and home to some production facilities.<sup>41</sup>

*The Morning Telegraph* was not a mass-market newspaper but a paper directed at those with a particular interest and/or investment in the growing realm of entertainment, including theater, film, and sports. *The Morning Telegraph* claimed distinction as the "greatest amusement and dramatic publication in the world"; its Sunday edition featured expanded film coverage and was billed "The Newspaper of the Motion Picture Industry." This newspaper did provide national and local news of note as well as sporting and financial news, but its primary focus was news from the entertainment and horse racing worlds. The announcement of Parsons's appointment to the paper illustrates the rather specialized nature of its audience: "She will tell what is happening each day in moving picture circles. . . . [L]ive, current gossip, such as every one, from property boy to film president, likes to read." Here a critical segment of the paper's audience is identified as members of the industry.<sup>42</sup>

In announcing her appointment, *The Morning Telegraph* presented her as a well-known and well-connected entertainment reporter:

Louella O. Parsons, whose special moving picture stories and film criticisms are familiar to everyone in the moving picture industry, has joined the staff of the *Morning Telegraph*. . . . Miss Parsons has a large personal acquaintance with the stars, producers and directors, and is especially noted for her chatty, intimate

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<sup>41</sup> The temperate climate, diverse topography, open shops, and cheap, available land in southern California led studios to colonize Hollywood, a gradual process that began as early as 1909 and was not complete until the mid-1920s. In 1918, Hollywood produced more than 50 percent of U.S. films; by 1922 that figure rose to 84 percent with 12 percent shot in New York and 4 percent shot elsewhere. Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 105; and Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood*, 121 n. 16.

<sup>42</sup> "Louella O. Parsons Joins the Morning Telegraph," MT, June 9, 1918. On the mission, content, and audience of *The Morning Telegraph*, see Pizzatola, *Hearst Over Hollywood*, 95; and Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1607-1960*, 3rd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 658.

interviews with them. This, as well as a daily department, will be one of the features of her work for the *Morning Telegraph*.

Parsons was unquestionably a rising star in the field, but she was still in the process of accruing access and influence. Even as the *Morning Telegraph* assured its readers that she was an important figure, it solicited help from those same readers on Parsons's behalf: "[E]very one with a moving picture secret to tell can send or give it to Miss Parsons for The Morning Telegraph." Parsons asked her readers "to help me keep the ball of news activity rolling by sending me all of their choicest tidbits of news and gossip." This solicitation would have been very tempting to those struggling to succeed in the profession. Such "tidbits of news and gossip" could be used as leverage to secure valuable publicity in Parsons's column.<sup>43</sup>

Parsons's column ran every day except Monday. In addition to her column, she wrote film reviews, interviews, and other special features and supervised her staff of writers. Her inaugural *Morning Telegraph* column on June 23, 1918 focused on establishing her credentials as a film reporter and insider. She told her readers about the "stack of telegrams, letters and good wishes piled high on my desk" from luminaries in the motion picture industry. "Here is a wire from Adolph Zukor, one from David. W. Griffith, Carl Laemmle and Thomas H. Ince," she wrote. "Here are letters from Lewis J. Selznick, Jesse Lasky, Winfield Sheehan, Samuel Goldfish, Harry MacRae Webster, Aaron Jones, James Quirk, Julian Johnson, Tom North, Joseph Brandt, William Sherrill,

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<sup>43</sup> "Louella O. Parsons Joins the Morning Telegraph"; Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, June 23, 1918.

John E. Finn and many others. The stars, too, have most of them sent me a line of welcome.”<sup>44</sup>

Parsons’s notables are noteworthy: she listed only producers and directors by name; actors and actresses were mentioned only collectively and after the fact. Parsons’s access depended upon cultivating those in positions of power—the gatekeepers who provided access to the information she needed. As had her *Record-Herald* column, her *Morning Telegraph* column devoted considerable space to the activities of producers and directors and other studio executives, including projects in development, casting decisions, and changes in employment. For example, Parsons wrote, “Famous Players-Lasky transacted considerable important business yesterday . . . the completion of a contract with the Danish-American Film Company, Ltd., of Copenhagen, Denmark, for the distribution of Paramount-Artcraft pictures throughout Central Europe.”<sup>45</sup>

Parsons also lavished praise on the heads of the studio publicity departments. This ambitious reporter included them in her column alongside the producers and performers, thereby elevating them to the status of celebrity by virtue of proximity. Parsons claimed credit for convincing Louis Sherwin, former film critic turned “chief publicity purveyor of Goldwyn [Studios] publicity,” to “give us an account of his first week” at his new job. According to Parsons, “[H]e has listened to our pleading and consented to do a story for the Sunday edition of *The Morning Telegraph*.” At this juncture in her career, as she was building her informational network, Parsons celebrated all those who provided her with material, including her peers in the trade and specialty press. “James Quirk, of *Photoplay Magazine*, has been in town the past week getting

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. Producer Samuel Goldfish changed his name to Goldwyn a few months later. On Goldwyn’s name change, see A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 68, 82–3.

<sup>45</sup> Parsons, “Mae Marsh is Coming Back to Big Screen.”

material for his Chicago publication. Mr. Quirk always has a good time when he is in our midst and probably has as large an acquaintance with the stars as any one in the film business. They all know Jimmie and Jimmie knows them,” wrote Parsons. In her senior position at the *Morning Telegraph*, Parsons also attended all of the important distribution and exhibition trade conventions and developed contacts at every level of the industry.<sup>46</sup>

Her commentary on film censorship grew more heated and combative on the *Morning Telegraph*. She was, after all, writing for a very sympathetic readership, given the quasi-trade nature of her paper. Parsons’s opposition to film censorship has generally been understood as evidence of her unabashed boosterism of the industry. Yet her understanding and articulation of this issue was often more nuanced and sophisticated than her detractors might allow. She was not opposed to external regulation simply because it was bad for the film business. In criticizing a 1919 New York City law that banned unaccompanied children from movie theaters, Parsons argued that “a child would be safer and better cared for in a motion picture theater than it will running on the streets of New York.” While she conceded, “[t]here are some pictures a child should certainly not see,” she argued such films were “not great in number.” And she went on to ask, “[A]ren’t the parents the best censors for their children? . . . If a mother finds a motion picture theatre the very place she needs to keep Rosie off the streets, has *anyone else* the right to offer a long harangue on the bad effect it has on the child’s morals?” Parsons then named the “anyone else” who believed they had the right to regulate the lives of others: “women’s clubs, church organizations and literary societies without number” and other municipal housekeepers who supported such legislation. Here Parsons

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<sup>46</sup> Parsons, “Annie Russell to Have Cavell Role in Picture,” MT, October 2, 1918; Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, August 11, 1918.

acknowledged the needs of poor and working-class New Yorkers who used the city streets, theaters, and other non-domestic spaces very differently than middle- and upper-class New Yorkers. She challenged the legitimacy of these self-appointed municipal housekeepers who sought to criminalize behavior that deviated from their social norms. While professional self-interest unquestionably dictated her anti-censorship views, Parsons's rhetoric reveals an understanding of the complex and competing agendas at work, making her more than just an industry sycophant.<sup>47</sup>

Parsons devised a strategy to voice her opposition to censorship and disprove that there was a "motion picture problem" that needed to be solved through legislation. She informed her readers of "Some Things You've Missed": scenes that had been cut from films; drugs, sex, and strikes were just some of the content deemed objectionable.<sup>48</sup> This clever ploy circumvented censorship efforts by making public material deemed unfit for public consumption. In doing so, Parsons raised public awareness of the censorship battles and defied the dictates of censors. Of course, this strategy also allowed her to interject risqué content into her column and possibly increase her audience. Her motives, in this instance, were complex and conflicted: both principled *and* opportunistic. Parsons did more than just inveigh against censorship in her column. According to Jerry Hoffman, a writer and publicist who worked for Parsons in the late 1920s and early 1930s: "[w]hen she was . . . on the *New York Telegraph*, she used to travel around to legislatures in New York and other states where censorship rules were pending and fight

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<sup>47</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, November 16, 1919. Emphasis mine.

<sup>48</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, September 29, 1918.

against them.”<sup>49</sup> Parsons sometimes discussed film content she found objectionable, but her solution was not censorship.<sup>50</sup> Instead she exhorted the industry to police itself and chided producers to maintain oversight and standards. Parsons’s anti-censorship writing also often functioned in a dual capacity: not only as an explicit expression of her views on a clearly delineated issue but also as a code to indicate her position vis-à-vis controversial incidents and individuals she chose not to discuss directly in her column.

The political content in Parsons’s column was not limited to the issue of censorship. Her early columns for the *Morning Telegraph*, written while World War I was still raging, emphasized the patriotism of the film industry and its contributions to the war effort. Even at this early stage, she paid attention to the political realm as it related to the well being of the industry, and this attention to politics would grow more pronounced over the course of her career. Given the significant number of immigrant entrepreneurs who had made considerable fortunes in the film business and ran the major studios, demonstrations of loyalty were of particular importance. Parsons discussed at great length the Liberty Loan war propaganda films that Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Thomas Ince, and other major industry figures collaborated on. Parsons boasted that these efforts would prove “[m]oving pictures did their part toward helping put the Germans in their place.” Parsons featured industry members fighting in the war as well as those who sold war bonds. She characterized popular actor William S. Hart’s success at selling war bonds as a form of military service: “The Government realizing the power of his personality and his exceptional ability in

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<sup>49</sup> Oral history with Jerry Hoffman (George Jeremiah Hoffman) by Bob Nero (1975), T5B/P185-186, The American Film Institute/Louis B. Mayer Film History Program, Center for Advanced Film Studies, Beverly Hills, California.

<sup>50</sup> On Parsons and censorship, see Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 47–8.

assisting the drive, requested him to come East and serve, that is exactly what he is doing now." Parsons repeatedly trumpeted the industry's war contributions and struggled to demonstrate that film had more to offer than just distraction from the serious events of the day: "The educational side of the film industry will also be a feature [at a War Expo]. The part the films have played in the world's present history and other things of which this fifth estate has a right to be proud."<sup>51</sup>

World War I was not the only political issue Parsons covered in her column. In 1918, she reported on a slide show sponsored by the New York City Woman Suffrage Party—encouraging women to register to vote—that would be shown before the main feature film in 1,600 theaters throughout the metropolitan area.<sup>52</sup> Women in New York State had been granted the franchise the previous year, but the national battle to secure Congressional passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and ratification by two-thirds of the states was still raging. In her own fashion, this single, working mother supported women's suffrage and the fight for equal rights. For example, she discussed the conflict between vaudeville performer Frank Mayo and his wife Dagmar Godowsky over "whether she was to be called Mrs. Mayo or retain her maiden name of Godowsky." Parsons wondered "why some stage producer hasn't seen the possibilities in this fascinating woman." But Mayo, as Parsons noted, wanted his wife to just be "Mrs. Frank Mayo." "It's a great problem. One the Lucy Stone League is trying to solve, the question of where the woman's place is—home, or where frequently her heart takes her, the stage, the studio or the business office," opined Parsons.<sup>53</sup> In her 1944 memoir, Parsons championed "the movie Queens" who "are supposed to be spoiled darlings and

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<sup>51</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, August 11 and September 29, 1918.

<sup>52</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, October 3, 1918.

<sup>53</sup> Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, February 3, 1922.

difficult to get along with.” Parsons disagreed with this characterization: “I can frankly say that I have known few of them—and few other career women in my time—who didn’t boast more than their share of those qualities of loyalty, square shooting, and straight thinking supposedly so exclusive to the masculine sex.” Here Parsons explicitly identified these women as “career women,” a fact often obscured by the publicity that surrounded them. Parsons went on to acknowledge that her “stand for women” was a result of her “responsibilities of . . . motherhood . . . and a livelihood to earn.”<sup>54</sup> As a career woman herself, she identified with the travails of these women and the obstacles they faced.

Parsons affirmed that she “was always violently on the side of ‘the Woman’ [and] . . . this prejudice in favor of my own sex has followed me along my entire career.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, by the early 1920s Parsons’s column was a female-centered universe, and she was the expert at the core of it all. A photo of a female entertainer often accompanied her column, and women in the industry predominated in the text as well. While the photos of young, attractive actresses were calculated to catch the eye of both male and female readers, there is no question that Parsons’s target audience, outside the industry, was young women. While the fan magazines in the early 1910s initially embraced and targeted a gender-neutral audience, this more inclusive understanding of filmdom’s fan base was short-lived. As the star system developed, these magazines dropped discussion of the technological aspects of filmmaking designed to appeal to male amateurs and focused exclusively on adulation of the players. Male fans were mocked in these periodicals as stargazing was deemed an unsuitable masculine pursuit. By the time

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<sup>54</sup>Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 12.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

Parsons began her column in 1915, the young, female devotee had emerged as the ideal movie consumer in the fan magazines, in part because of the appeal of this consumer profile to advertisers. The need to attract a subscriber base meant that these periodicals quickly focused on a specific segment of the wildly diverse film audience. These developments in the specialty magazines shaped understandings of the movie fan in the nation's newspapers, including in Parsons's column.<sup>56</sup>

Parsons's early columns addressed female readers not only as spectators and fans but also as aspiring actresses. The *Chicago Record-Herald* promoted her column as a resource for "girls who are eager to enter the motion picture field." Female readers were counseled, "Others have become rich and famous. Why not YOU?"<sup>57</sup> Parsons wrote special features on how to become a movie actress, how to apply makeup for the motion picture camera, and a host of other specialized skills. She also tried to explain what qualities were needed to succeed as an actor and how to get work as an extra: "A person blessed with good looks, of a photographical type, with the ability to register expression and an understanding of human nature can be taught to become a motion picture actor."<sup>58</sup> She also warned starry-eyed readers about the rigors of the profession. Parsons did not always paint a glamorous portrait of actors' lives and discussed the hard work and long hours required to succeed. For example, she cautioned, "The shop girls who sigh and long to be a motion picture star ought to hear about some of the hot, hard work done by the stars in the studios during the scorching heat of last week. . . . [A]ctress Alice Brady

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<sup>56</sup> On the gender shift in the fan magazines, see Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 142–9.

<sup>57</sup> Parsons, "Seen on the Screen," CRH, n.d., scrapbook #1, LPc.

<sup>58</sup> Parsons, "Seen on the Screen," CRH, September 12, 1915, scrapbook #1, LPc.

finished a day of working in the hot sun in pictures by rehearsing the rest of the night in [the play] 'Forever After.'"<sup>59</sup>

Parsons's celebrity universe was not limited to denizens of the film industry. The newspaper has long served as a critical mechanism for imposing a sense of continuity and connectedness to arbitrary and disparate events and creating a sense of nation and community for its readers. Parsons early on began to construct within the confines of her column a celebrity universe composed of disparate individuals whose only connection often was their fame or aspirations to become famous. *The Morning Telegraph* offered in-depth coverage of the sporting world, and Parsons quickly began to include athletes in her column, especially those who began to find film work. Football star Maurice Flynn's movie work made Parsons's column: "Now he plans to substitute outdoor thrills for film honors as a Fox star." Parsons also reported that heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey was "ready to take his initial plunge into the art of picture making." The celebrity universe she delineated was focused on but not limited to the film industry. Her intermingling of actors, athletes, politicians, society figures, and others would only increase as the realm of celebrity expanded; indeed her pioneering work contributed to this shift.<sup>60</sup>

### *Managing Scandal*

Despite the relatively innocuous tone of Parsons's early columns, a tension existed in her work. By the turn of the century, entertainment journalists had developed the rhetorical practice of holding up the entertainer under discussion as a professional and moral

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<sup>59</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, August 11, 1918.

<sup>60</sup>Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, September 2 and November 14, 1921. On newspapers and imagined communities, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Press, 1983), 36–40.

exemplar thereby implying that there were nameless others who fell victim to the excesses available to them by virtue of their stature in the entertainment world. Thus the specter of scandal hovered just off-stage and just off-camera as the star system was modified for the silver screen. Film scholar Richard deCordova has suggested that the “potential for scandal was both addressed and denied in early discourse on the star.” A lengthy 1919 interview Parsons conducted with comedian Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle demonstrates this potential in practice. Parsons acknowledged Arbuckle’s considerable appetite for good food and good times: a simple working lunch with Arbuckle turned into “a banquet with oysters, bouillon, salad and Cliquot.” Yet she was also careful to assure readers that Arbuckle “is like a big boy in wanting to share with his friends the good things which have come his way. He is quite unspoiled.” The implication here was that Arbuckle *could* be spoiled. But casting Arbuckle as childlike defused potential concerns about his appetites since the excess of a child fell within the bounds of acceptable behavior. Two years later, this potential for scandal could no longer be contained when Arbuckle found himself on trial for murder—his childlike and child-friendly persona a thing of the past—in one of a series of scandals regarding the private lives of film stars and executives in the early 1920s.<sup>61</sup>

Though her overall commentary was focused on the professional lives and mundane details of the private lives of her subjects, Parsons was on the leading edge of a shift to greater disclosure of the intimate and often salacious details of the private lives of industry figures. After her 1918 move to the *Morning Telegraph*, Parsons began to discuss divorce with greater frequency and sometimes interjected more sensational information, though such information was usually drawn from court records available to

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<sup>61</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 104; Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, March 2, 1919.

the public to avoid libel suits. For example, in June 1918 she identified an acting couple by name who were getting a divorce, with an unidentified “French comedienne . . . named as respondent.”<sup>62</sup>

Then in the early 1920s, a series of scandals erupted involving leading industry figures, which made headlines coast to coast. This considerable and largely negative publicity reinvigorated criticism of the industry and prompted renewed threats of federal investigation and regulation. These scandals coincided with a downward trend in box office revenue that predated the scandals, but continued as they unfolded. Industry critics attributed the lost profits to the displeasure of the U.S. film-going public; in other words, audiences—in the opinion of some—were staying away from theaters because of the scandals. Industry leaders realized action needed to be taken to repair the industry’s battered public image and forestall federal intervention.

Parsons freely discussed the 1920 Olive Thomas case—the first in a spate of controversial news stories—in her column, but quickly learned her lesson and changed her tactics. Subsequently, she banished explicit discussion of headline-garnering film industry scandals from her column and from the film section entirely. Instead she focused on what she considered wrong-headed censorship efforts—technically unrelated to the controversy at hand though often inspired by it—to indicate in a coded manner her support of industry figures under assault in the headlines. Even if she might privately disapprove of behavior that generated negative press, she did not believe the entire industry deserved wholesale indictment or should become subject to external regulation as a result. This seems to have been her own decision, based on her assessment of the situation, rather than a move dictated by others. Her livelihood depended upon the well-

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<sup>62</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, June 14, 1918.

being of an industry that she knew would not benefit from such sensational headlines, at least on the entertainment pages. Instead she defended the industry and talked about the moral rectitude of the film centers in New York and Hollywood. In particular she focused upon the dangers of censorship. Through her column, the industry's dilemma and its partial solution can be traced.

On September 10, 1920, actress Olive Thomas, wife of actor Jack Pickford (actress Mary Pickford's brother), died under mysterious circumstances while on an industry junket in Paris that included her husband, her famous sister-in-law, Parsons, and many other of the film world's leading figures. Thomas's death was eventually ruled the result of an accidental drug overdose, and rumors of drug addiction, mental illness, and suicide received much play in the press. There was much speculation in the media—including the front page of Parsons's own newspaper—as to the nature of Thomas's "nervous ailment," "the amount and kind of poison she swallowed," and if she was "sober" or "somewhat exhilarated" the night of her death.<sup>63</sup> Upon her return from Europe, Parsons reported that she "saw her [Thomas] at a restaurant with her husband . . . a few nights before she swallowed the poison."<sup>64</sup> Parsons informed her readers of the esteemed personages in the film industry who attended Thomas's funeral, including Myron and David Selznick who served as pallbearer and usher respectively. Notably absent was Thomas's famous sister-in-law who, Parsons reported, was unable to attend because she was not "very strong since her ambitious European trip."<sup>65</sup> Parsons addressed "The Passing of Olive Thomas" and the "gossip that follows such a tragedy" head-on in her column. "The stories have been many and confusing," Parsons wrote,

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<sup>63</sup> "Order Autopsy on Body of Actress," MT, September 12, 1920.

<sup>64</sup> Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, September 26, 1920.

<sup>65</sup> Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, September 25, 1920.

“but to those who saw her gay and happy, it is difficult to believe she consciously took her life.” Parsons counted herself among “the friends who had seen her in Paris . . . before the tragic end” who did not believe the overdose was intentional.<sup>66</sup> Though refuting them, Parsons gave the rumors of suicide and drug addiction play simply by discussing them in her column. This would not be the case in her coverage of the next major scandal to rock the film world.

Exactly one year after Thomas’s death, actress Virginia Rappe died after falling ill at a weekend party hosted by screen star Fatty Arbuckle. Two days later the headlines screamed: “FATTY ARBUCKLE IN JAIL ON A CHARGE OF MURDER.” Arbuckle was arrested and charged with the rape and murder of Rappe and the front page of the *Morning Telegraph* cast Arbuckle as a man “privately known to the . . . motion picture colonies of Los Angeles and New York as a thorough Bohemian.”<sup>67</sup> There was no mention of this incident in the *Morning Telegraph*’s entertainment pages. Three days later the New York-based Theater Owners Chamber of Commerce announced its decision to “BAR ARBUCKLE FILMS.” “Owners of more than 600 motion picture theaters in Greater New York, including the Loew, Keith, Fox and Moss houses voted . . . to suspend the showing of films in which Roscoe (Fatty) Arbuckle appears,” reported the *Morning Telegraph*. In that same edition of the *Morning Telegraph*, Parsons’s headline read: “BILLY SUNDAY TO FIGHT THE ABUSES OF CENSORSHIP.”<sup>68</sup>

Parsons publicized the battle waged by powerful figures inside the film industry and their allies—herself and evangelist Billy Sunday among them—against “the partisans

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<sup>66</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, September 25, 1920.

<sup>67</sup> “Fatty Arbuckle in Jail on a Charge of Murder,” MT, September 12, 1921.

<sup>68</sup> “600 Houses to Bar Arbuckle Films,” MT, September 14, 1921; Parsons, “Billy Sunday to Fight Abuses of Censorship,” MT, September 14, 1921.

of screen censorship.” Parsons quoted Sunday at length who argued, “There is no more justice . . . in allowing a few people to say what shall be on the screen than there would be in setting up a policeman to teach Sunday school class.” Indeed, she did not explicitly discuss the Arbuckle case at this time or for the next six months; she did not do so until Arbuckle’s April 1922 acquittal. As Arbuckle endured three separate trials from the fall of 1921 through the spring of 1922, Parsons marked the key events, including the two mistrials, with ferocious and pointed attacks on film censorship in the place of direct commentary on the case. Parsons’s defense of Arbuckle—and by extension the entire industry—was conducted indirectly through attacks on censorship in unrelated cases.<sup>69</sup>

The week after Arbuckle was arrested, Parsons invoked the Revolutionary War rhetoric and imagery of “George Washington and his famous colonial troops” to denounce a decision to ban Sunday shows in Trenton, New Jersey movie theaters. She argued that the workingman was being deprived on his only day of rest of “blessed peace in the motion picture theatre.” She called for “action . . . to keep the reformers from getting in their pernicious work in other towns.” “Wake up,” she warned the “sleeping public” in late September 1921, and beware “the foot of the tyrant” with this blue law.<sup>70</sup>

Parsons also worked hard to counter the perception of Hollywood as “Sodom & Gomorrhah,” a perception that had always been operative that gained greater power in the hands of industry critics as the Arbuckle case dragged on. She interviewed screenwriter Rita Weiman, recently returned to New York City after a six-month sojourn in Hollywood. Weiman waxed poetic about Hollywood:

I love the [West] Coast, the people and the studios. Why I have never met such earnest, hard-working people anywhere . . . so engaged in self-improvement and

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, September 18, 1921.

creating beauty *they neither had the time nor the inclination for an orgy of anything but work.*

Parsons further reported,

Miss Weiman said that Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Fairbanks seldom left their home in Beverly Hills, and were never seen about the cafes. Charlie Chaplin adored charades, and at several dinner parties was the ringleader in this most exciting game. *Another blow to the readers of the yellow journals, who believe life in picture circles is one round of drink and dissipation.*<sup>71</sup>

On December 4, 1921, the day a mistrial was declared because of a deadlocked jury in the first Arbuckle trial, Parsons wrote of a censorship decision she applauded. A British censor board had banned a film that suggested Lord Horatio Kitchener, a British soldier and imperial administrator who served as British secretary of war during World War I, was a “dupe in a [German] spy case.” Parsons supported this U.K. ban because “[n]o one has any proof that Lord Kitchener was tricked into betraying his country, and no one has any right to suggest such a thing. . . . Any time any of our public heroes is featured in an unfavorable light we hope the American censor boards will take the same stand.” Parsons’s outburst at this particular moment was no coincidence: Arbuckle had been tried and found guilty in the court of public opinion and his films had been banned before he had had his day in court. In highlighting this rare censorship decision of which she approved, Parsons indicated her disapproval of the preemptive censorship of Arbuckle. Parsons sought to use this ban to demonstrate the importance of avoiding the infliction of “grave discredit” upon an individual if his or her alleged transgression “had never been proved.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>72</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, December 4, 1921.

A few days later Parsons announced the formation of a “new trade association to effect a better understanding of those interested in the producing and distributing branches of the business; to combat adverse legislation; and to work in harmony with exhibitors.”<sup>73</sup> Film industry leaders established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) to repair the public relations damage inflicted by these scandals, stem falling revenues, and banish the specter of federal regulation. The creation of the MPPDA was a major step toward institutionalized self-regulation over the course of the twentieth century that allowed the corporations that dominated the U.S. film industry to respond to protest from the public and private sectors while continuing to operate with very little governmental oversight or interference. Like many other businesses, the film industry’s experience with public-private partnerships during mobilization for World War I resulted in a new approach to the problem of reconciling corporate interests with the public good.<sup>74</sup>

The MPPDA stands as a model of the “associational” ideal that developed in the 1920s to bridge the gap between the needs and rights of the individual consumer and the economic imperatives of big business. In this case, it was an entirely private agency controlled by the film industry with the gloss of public disinterestedness, thanks to the politician placed at its head. The MPPDA, as Parsons reported, set out to “secure the services of a man of national reputation to head this proposed trade organization, and one

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<sup>73</sup> Parsons, “Film Interests Frame New Trade Association,” MT, December 9, 1921.

<sup>74</sup> The MPPDA assumed the work of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), which had been formed in August 1916. NAMPI’s wartime partnership with the Committee on Public Information had helped to prove the patriotism of the industry through the fundraising efforts and through the production and dissemination of both propaganda films and feature films. But NAMPI’s effectiveness in the postwar world was comprised by the broad-based nature of its membership, which as Parsons noted included “the laboratory, the supply men, the editors of the trade papers.” NAMPI, however, proved unable to deal adequately with the new (and old) problems plaguing the industry. Parsons, “Film Interests Frame New Trade Association.”

who was in no way, directly or indirectly, interested in the motion picture business.”

Will H. Hays, the Postmaster General in Harding’s presidential cabinet, was the man chosen to serve as president of the MPPDA. The choice of Hays was an inspired move. Placing a former political appointee with no obvious ties to the industry in a position of oversight helped silence critics calling for federal intervention while providing the film industry with a politically connected leader. Hays proved to be both a remarkably effective broker who mediated all manner of disputes for the industry and was a master at public relations. He needed all of these skills when he assumed his new post in February 1922, a month in which industry scandals again dominated the headlines.<sup>75</sup>

“Fatty’s Jury Still Out” shared the headlines with the breaking news, “Motion Picture Director Shot to Death by Unknown Murderer . . . Hollywood Colony Shocked.”<sup>76</sup> While the second Arbuckle jury deliberated, acclaimed director William Desmond Taylor was murdered. Regarding Taylor’s murder, Parsons reported only that with “the death of William Taylor, it was necessary to find someone to take his place” directing a film he had been scheduled to begin work on just days after his death.<sup>77</sup> In the days following the outbreak of this new scandal, coupled with news that Arbuckle’s jury had once again deadlocked, Parsons discussed the major politicians scheduled to attend the New York State convention of the Motion Picture Theatre Owners, among them State Senator Jimmy Walker and New York City Mayor John Hylan. Here she indicated the political support the industry still garnered in the face of controversy. She also announced that the Famous Players-Lasky studio, former employer of both Arbuckle and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. On associationalism, see, for example, Ellis Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for Modern Order* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979). On the creation of MPPDA and the appointment of Hays, see, for example, Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 78–81.

<sup>76</sup> MT, February 3, 1922.

<sup>77</sup> Parsons, “Fox Film Company Busy on Its New Productions,” MT, February 3, 1922.

Taylor, planned “new quarters for its exchange” in Washington, D.C., a definite boost for a studio in need of positive press.<sup>78</sup>

On April 12, 1922, Arbuckle was finally acquitted of manslaughter in connection with the death of Rappe in his third trial. Two days later, Parsons dropped the allusions and pretense and directly addressed the Arbuckle situation for the first time since the scandal had broken the previous fall. Her column headline read: “WILL TRY OUT ARBUCKLE PICTURES ON BROADWAY.” “Roscoe Arbuckle’s first appearance on the screen since his arrest last September will be on Broadway,” Parsons reported. She quoted at great length from the statement released by Famous Players-Lasky, Arbuckle’s studio, in support of a limited release of the three films banned in many locales after Arbuckle’s arrest the previous September and then shelved indefinitely. According to the studio’s spokesman and general sales manager, “We feel the jury was the best judge, and it has held him innocent. The fair-minded public, we believe, will hold the same opinion.” Parsons concurred: “The acquittal of Arbuckle, it is believed, will restore all of these films to circulation again. It hardly seems possible these rentals can be permanently lost.” Parsons, however, had spoken too soon.<sup>79</sup>

Five days after Parsons’s report on the planned re-release of Arbuckle’s films, Hays announced that all Arbuckle films would be permanently shelved, in what amounted to banishment from the industry. On April 19, 1922, Hays announced, “At my request, they [Famous Players-Lasky] have cancelled all showings and all bookings of the Arbuckle films.” Parsons had been working to rehabilitate Arbuckle’s image, but her efforts were cut short by this MPPDA decision that clearly caught her by surprise. In the

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<sup>78</sup> Parsons, “Exhibitors in Albany,” MT, February 4, 1922.

<sup>79</sup> Parsons, “Will Try Out Arbuckle Pictures on Broadway,” MT, April 14, 1922.

wake of this announcement, Parsons once again reverted to silence on the topic of Arbuckle. Whatever her personal opinion on the subject, she was not willing to take on the MPPDA and she abided by their decree. Hays encouraged the trade and popular press to curtail discussion of the scandals and he was very successful on this score with the trade and fan press, which were most dependent on the goodwill and largesse of the studios. The MPPDA, also known as the Hays office, took definitive action to monitor media representations of the industry. In September 1923, Parsons announced, "The Will H. Hays office has instituted a new service for motion picture producers in the form of a reprint of editorial comment on motion pictures taken from newspapers and magazines all over the United States." Hays formalized the process of monitoring U.S. press coverage of the film industry coverage. While cast merely as a "service" to the studios, there is no question that this clipping service allowed industry leaders to identify supportive as well as recalcitrant editors and reporters and improve public relations. Since this clipping service provided the industry with a far more systematic and accurate assessment of the overall tenor of press coverage of the industry, it no doubt heightened appreciation for the boosterism of Parson's column.<sup>80</sup>

Neither a clipping service nor behind-the-scenes pressure could stop the headlines in the popular press. Since the Arbuckle and Taylor stories had appeared on the front pages, Parsons and other film journalists could rely upon their coworkers in other departments to cover these stories and thereby not jeopardize their own standing in the industry. Parsons, for one, did not need pressure from the Hays office to curtail her discussion of these scandals. After Olive Thomas's death in 1920, Parsons abbreviated

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<sup>80</sup> "'Fatty Arbuckle' and All His Films Outlawed By Hays," MT, April 19, 1922; Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, September 21, 1923. Arbuckle worked in the industry under a pseudonym for the next decade and mounted a successful comeback in 1932 that was cut short by his unexpected death in 1933.

her coverage of the subsequent scandals and worked instead to thwart the efforts of industry watchdogs eager to use the scandals to impose greater governmental regulation and oversight of the industry. As she acknowledged, “the motion picture business is in bad repute with some of the people in this country” and she set out to repair this damage to the industry’s reputation and credibility.<sup>81</sup>

Yet despite the considerable and on-going efforts of industry leaders, it had become clear that star scandal sold newspapers. As deCordova has argued: “In the early twenties, . . . references to divorce, adultery, and moral transgression became a regular feature of star discourse, a part of the formula for writing about stars.” While Parsons devoted very little space to the post-Thomas scandals, her coverage of other personal travails began to change. In the midst of the Arbuckle scandal, Parsons reported that actress Gloria Swanson “would start legal action soon, and endeavor to obtain a legal separation from her husband, Herbert K. Somborn.” This represented a shift from reporting divorces in process to forecasting separations that had not yet entered the courts. Such a report seemed tame in comparison to the murder and mayhem in the Arbuckle and Taylor cases, yet represented an easing of the rules that bound gossip reporters in the 1920s to allow greater intrusion in the private lives of Hollywood’s public figures.<sup>82</sup>

The film industry weathered these scandals and emerged with a powerful trade organization, designed in part to manage the press and the industry’s image in the wake of the scandals sure to follow. Will Hays became a constant presence—even a star—in Parsons’s column in 1922. Parsons reported on his activities: “Hays Sends Telegram” to

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<sup>81</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, April 23, 1922.

<sup>82</sup> DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 120; Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, September 16, 1921. Swanson and Somborn were divorced in 1922.

Minnesota theater owners made her column as did a “Hays luncheon,” which was billed as “the most constructive meeting held in this industry since Thomas Edison discovered it.” This ambitious journalist recognized the importance of cultivating such a powerful figure in the film industry. Hays was not the only power broker Parsons cultivated in her rise to the top. Another was media magnate William Randolph Hearst. On December 2, 1923, Parsons wrote her final column at the *Morning Telegraph*: “We say au revoir. This is the last article we shall write for The Morning Telegraph, and we want to thank all our good friends for their co-operation and interest during the six years we have been motion picture editor on this publication.” Her years of hard work and experience had paid off with a job offer—editor at one of Hearst’s largest newspapers—that few ambitious reporters would have turned down.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, April 14 and February 13, 1922 and December 2 1923.

## Chapter 2: Louella Parsons is “the First Lady of Hollywood”: The Rise of a Truly National Mass Media, 1924–1937

In December 1923, Parsons’s eight years of toil and steady rise through the ranks in the newspaper business paid off when she was appointed motion picture editor of the *New York American*, the Hearst chain’s flagship morning newspaper. At the time, the Sunday edition of the *American* had the largest circulation—over 750,000—in the nation, making this Hearst newspaper among the most profitable and influential in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The comics, Sunday magazine, and other supplements as well as the entertainment pages were a key to the *American*’s success. William Randolph Hearst and his executives needed a skilled and experienced editor for film content, which had come to dominate the entertainment pages of the *American*. From his early days in the newspaper industry with the *San Francisco Examiner* in the 1880s, Hearst had aggressively pursued the most talented and capable editors, writers, and cartoonists, hiring them away from rival papers.<sup>2</sup> Hearst’s decision to hire Parsons, a well-known and successful journalist at the *Morning Telegraph*, was very much in line with this strategy.

Between 1924 and 1937, Louella Parsons became the first and most powerful syndicated columnist in the Hollywood press corps with the might of the Hearst media empire behind her. Parsons’s rise to power was, in part, a result of the consolidation and standardization of news content in the U.S. press during this period as the total number of newspapers in the nation sharply dropped while syndicates and wire services were on the

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<sup>1</sup> From 1914 to 1926, the Sunday edition of the *New York American* had the largest circulation in the nation. The Sunday edition of the *New York Daily News* surpassed the Sunday *American* as tops in the nation with circulation of a million in 1926. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1607–1960*, 3rd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 658.

<sup>2</sup> David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 72–3.

ascendance. As a print reporter on the film industry who also served as a radio broadcaster and occasional film actress, Parsons fully exploited these means of mass communication and mass entertainment to fashion a career and persona as “the Hollywood gossip columnist,” which made her one of the industry’s power brokers and a national celebrity in her own right.<sup>3</sup>

Parsons’s “spectacular journalistic success in Hollywood” was punctuated by a radio program—“Hollywood Hotel”—that brought her into millions of homes across the nation and also helped make Los Angeles a center of radio broadcasting by the mid-1930s.<sup>4</sup> Her success, however, also began to elicit critical scrutiny from the FBI, from her peers in the print media, and from within the film industry itself because of fears of the power of the new media news brokers to shape public opinion and re-shape the public sphere. Her willingness to cast aside her journalistic objectivity in pursuit of a story and her candor on this subject alarmed fellow journalists. To serve her sources, Parsons looked the other way on many matters; to serve her audience, her methods grew more invasive. These contradictory motives became increasingly impossible to resolve or contain and contributed to the growing chorus of criticism. Parsons’s triumph was the triumph of a powerful mass media that spawned a newly enlarged celebrity culture. But her power was not absolute, as she would learn only too well.

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<sup>3</sup> One clear indication of this press consolidation can be seen in the precipitous drop in the total number of newspapers, particularly as it related to the rise of one-newspaper cities and towns across the nation. Between 1910 and 1930, there was a net loss of 258 daily newspapers in the United States due to suspension of publication and mergers. Many dailies became weekly newspapers. Most importantly, competition amongst newspapers in towns and cities across the nation became a thing of the past. Between 1910 and 1930, the percentage of cities with one daily newspaper rose from 42 to 72 percent while the percentage of cities with competing dailies dropped from 57 to 21 percent. Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), 442–4.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Wood, “The First Lady of Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1939, p. 8. On the impact of “Hollywood Hotel” on radio broadcasting in Los Angeles, see Wood, “First Lady,” 9; and Michelle Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 67.

Actor David Niven, a man who devoted an entire (and acerbic) chapter in one of his literate and clear-eyed memoirs of Hollywood to Parsons, was among the few performers subject to Parsons's dictates who was willing to acknowledge that "[t]he truth of her beginnings with Hearst was that she was a very good reporter . . . and Hearst knew a good reporter when he saw one." This was, however, a rare instance in which Parsons was credited with obtaining this key job at one of the nation's leading newspapers on her own merit and as a result of her journalistic credentials. Rumor and innuendo have obscured her considerable professional experience, first as a screenwriter and then as a reporter, which led to her 1923 appointment to the *American*. In eight years in the newspaper business, she had advanced from motion picture columnist to motion picture editor, responsible not only for her own column but also for all film coverage. This demanding job required assigning and editing the work of her staff and pulling it all together in a final layout on a daily basis. Parsons established a network of sources and contacts at every level of the film industry, from the stars and the studio executives to the film distributors and the theater owners. Nevertheless these factors have most often been ignored in favor of a host of explanations—some just inaccurate, others downright nefarious—put forward to explain her employment and subsequent promotions within the Hearst media empire.<sup>5</sup>

Many of these explanations center around her personal and professional relationship with actress Marion Davies, Hearst's longtime companion. "She owed a lot to Marion Davies. . . . Over the years Marion shielded Louella from boss trouble more than once," wrote Hedda Hopper, who became Parsons's peer and rival in the Hollywood press corps in the 1940s and 1950s and helped perpetuate this erasure of Parsons's

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<sup>5</sup> David Niven, *Bring on the Empty Horses* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1975), 17.

qualifications. “Thanks to Marion [Davies], Louella’s job was enlarged for her, with steady increases in salary. Through Marion, she got to know all the stars and greats of the world.” The standard explanation for how Parsons came to work for Hearst also appeared in Parsons’s 1940 profile in *Current Biography*. According to this biographical sketch, “after she [Parsons] had praised Marion Davies in a review . . . Hearst was trying to get her” services.<sup>6</sup>

There is no question that upon her 1918 arrival in New York, Parsons quickly realized that favorable and flattering notices of Hearst’s favorite actress might help advance the career of an ambitious journalist. She cultivated a relationship with Davies and provided flattering reviews and commentary while working on the *Morning Telegraph*. Hearst, however, had a plethora of writers ready and willing to promote Davies’s career. Scores of Hearst reporters had been doing so since the beginning of the Hearst-Davies relationship in 1916, two years prior to Parsons’s arrival in New York. One Hearst reporter—in a *New York American* article trumpeting the success of the Hearst-owned Cosmopolitan Production’s film *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922) starring Marion Davies—wrote that “women have sighed over the beauty of Marion Davies and the tenderly romantic scenes in which she appears” and lauded “the fine restraint and delightfully convincing portrayal of the Princess by Miss Davies, an interpretation that stands out as the greatest thing this young star has done.” This news item was only the tip of the iceberg regarding the kind of publicity campaign rolled out

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<sup>6</sup> Hedda Hopper and James Brough, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 62, 192; *Current Biography: Who’s News and Why*, ed. Maxine Block (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1940), 631. In a posthumously published memoir, Davies perpetuated this notion. As she remembered, “W.R. [Hearst] immediately hired her [Parsons] for the *New York American*” because of Parsons’s positive commentary about a Davies’s performance. Marion Davies, *The Times We Had: Life with William Randolph Hearst*, ed. Pamela Pfau and Kenneth S. Marx (New York: Ballantine Books, 1977), 33.

for Davies and her starring vehicles by the early 1920s. Promotion for *When Knighthood Was in Flower*, for example, was considerable: a Times Square billboard went up emblazoned with Davies's image, and merchandise, including portraits and movie stills of Davies, filled the shelves in department stores and movie theaters.<sup>7</sup>

Hearst did not need Parsons to promote Davies though promote her she did. Parsons called Davies "one of the world's biggest and most popular stars" and regaled readers with Davies stories. It was "Marion Davies to the Rescue" when a stuntman on her movie set nearly drowned; Davies "tried to assist the struggling actor by throwing him a scarf she was wearing." Parsons's decision to feature Davies was clearly calculated in part to win Hearst's attention and favor, but a whole host of performers received such treatment. In a September 17, 1921 column, for example, an item on "Marion Davies's next picture" was sandwiched between a report that "Lillian Gish has promised" to make a rare personal appearance in support of her latest film and Parsons's pronouncement that actress Elinor Glyn "is always good copy." Parsons may have reported more than once that "Marion Davies never looked lovelier," but she used various permutations of this phrase for women in the industry throughout her career. Such hyperbole was common in the entertainment press and was much criticized. "No woman since Helen of Troy is so beautiful, no woman since St. Catherine of Siena is so good, as practically all the movie actresses are in the magazines," argued one commentator critical

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<sup>7</sup> "Public Interest in 'Knighthood' at High Pitch," NYA, November 19, 1922. On the promotion of *Knighthood*, see Nasaw, *The Chief*, 323–5.

of Hollywood and its impact on U.S. culture. Parsons certainly applied such standards to Davies, but she did not reserve them for Davies alone.<sup>8</sup>

Another explanation for Parsons's success—put forward by *Time* magazine, among other sources—was that “[e]arly in her career Louella introduced her boss to blonde young Cinemactress Marion Davies. . . . In the following years her influence and her Hearst salary have grown apace.” But Parsons did not introduce Hearst and Davies. The couple met in New York City in 1916 while Parsons was toiling away in relative obscurity at the *Chicago Record-Herald*. As a struggling reporter based in Chicago, Parsons was in no position to introduce Hearst, the newspaper magnate, to Davies, a then-unknown chorus girl who worked exclusively in live theater on and off Broadway. Parsons and Davies first met when Parsons interviewed Davies shortly after the release of the film *Cecelia of the Pink Roses* in June 1918. Parsons later acknowledged that it was Davies who brokered her first meeting with Hearst.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding her employment with Hearst, Parsons once remarked, “Some of the rumors are enough to make your hair stand on end.” This was, no doubt, a reference to her alleged first-hand observation of the November 1924 death of film producer Thomas Ince under mysterious circumstances. The Peter Bogdanovich film *The Cat's Meow* (2001) has most recently resurrected this story: that Parsons witnessed Hearst's accidental shooting of Ince during a yachting party and used this information to blackmail Hearst. *Hollywood Babylon*, a popular compendium of filmdom's greatest

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<sup>8</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” August 12 and September 10, 1920 and September 17, 1921, MT, September 17, 1921; Katherine Fullerton Gerould, “Hollywood: An American State of Mind,” *Harper's Magazine* 146 (May 1923): 692.

<sup>9</sup> “Hollywood Hotel,” *Time*, January 24, 1938, p. 38. On the circumstances of Hearst and Davies's meeting, see Nasaw, *The Chief*, 253–6. On Parsons and Davies's first meeting, see George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 90; Parsons, *The Gay Illiterate* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1944), 69.

scandals, charged that it was “no coincidence that Louella Parsons was awarded a lifetime contract with Hearst soon after this incident, with her syndication expanded. It was rumored she had seen it all.” As her daughter, film producer Harriet Parsons, remembered, “That rumor got told and retold so often that some people took it for fact.”<sup>10</sup>

What Parsons was rumored to have seen—had she been in attendance at the yacht party—was not murder. Ince suffered what seems to have been a massive heart attack during his forty-third birthday celebration aboard the *Oneida*, Hearst’s yacht. The rumors surrounding Ince’s death stemmed from Hearst’s attempts to cover up when and where Ince fell ill. Hearst wanted to avoid the negative publicity that was sure to follow if it came to light that Hearst’s mistress Davies and possibly the married Ince’s mistress were members of the yachting party and that liquor, illegal because of Prohibition, had flowed freely during the festivities and possibly contributed to Ince’s death. Hearst’s attempts at a cover-up backfired. Instead of being cast as the host of a rather decadent party, Hearst was dogged by rumors for the rest of his life that he was a murderer. And one of his star reporters was cast as an eyewitness who used this knowledge to further her own career.<sup>11</sup>

Parsons was, however, not onboard the *Oneida* during that fateful weekend trip to San Diego. On November 20 when Ince’s death made it into the papers, Parsons reported that the Morenos, a popular young couple, “are due *here* in New York.” Parsons was on

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<sup>10</sup> Parsons, *Gay Iliterate*, 69; Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Dell, 1975), 151; As quoted in Tricia Crane, “Parsons Jr.: She Produced What Mom Juiced,” *Valley News*, April 11, 1980, LP bio files.

<sup>11</sup> Hearst’s desire to avoid negative publicity was heightened by events of the previous summer. Hearst and Davies’s relationship had become tabloid fodder during the trial of lawyer William J. Fallon. Hearst’s *New York American* had played a pivotal role in exposing Fallon’s jury tampering on behalf of two of his politically connected clients, which resulted in their acquittal. When charges were brought against Fallon, the lawyer’s defense was that Hearst was out to destroy him because Fallon possessed sensitive information regarding Hearst’s relationship with “an unnamed moving-picture actress.” Hearst was desperate to protect his mistress Davies and his wife Millicent from more negative publicity, which would be sure to follow if it became public knowledge of what Ince was doing and with whom just before his death. Nasaw, *The Chief*, 337–40, quote at 338.

the other side of the continent—in New York where she lived and worked—with her first visit to California still months away. Parsons was not named as a member of the yachting party until many years after the events occurred. Only after she had become a widely syndicated columnist and a celebrity in her own did the story that Parsons had been an eyewitness and an accessory begin to circulate.<sup>12</sup>

Why did Parsons's employment history become the subject of such wild speculation? Part of the answer lies in the nature of her work and the power she wielded: Parsons dealt in the currency of rumor and innuendo and made many enemies in her rise to the top of her profession—enemies who then turned her own weapons against her. Her extraordinary success in making the Parsons byline and face familiar in households across the nation, while many of her peers continued to toil in relative anonymity, made her a prime target for criticism and derision.

Another factor was Parsons's willingness to acknowledge and openly discuss her personal relationships with Davies, Hearst, and many other leading figures in the film world. Parsons publicly discussed "Marion, Mr. Hearst, and other close friends." By the early twentieth century, objectivity had emerged as a central tenet of journalism as part of a wider spirit of professionalization that prevailed in the Progressive Era. The creation of the Columbia School of Journalism and the Pulitzer Prizes—both inspired and funded by newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer—in the 1910s were among the more high-profile of on-going efforts to establish professional standards, training, associations, and awards.

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<sup>12</sup> Parsons, "Film," NYA, November 20, 1924. It could be argued that Parsons was simply filing columns from Los Angeles, but there would have been no need for subterfuge since there was no way to anticipate Ince's death. If Parsons had been in Los Angeles and on the yacht, her readers would have heard about it since this would have been her first trip to Los Angeles. Much fanfare would have transpired as did transpire when she traveled to Los Angeles in June 1925. Her biographer George Eells also has asserted that Parsons was not on the yacht. Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 84–7.

By the mid-1920s, objectivity had become part of the professional canon and many advocated that reporting needed to “take on more and more the spirit of the university” to create a “higher journalism.” Even those in the profession who scorned the “empty vanity” of the awards and certificates embraced the ideal of objectivity and argued that “[t]he only badge that any newspaper man finds valuable and desirable is his independence.”<sup>13</sup>

All journalists share a dilemma: the struggle to balance the insider status that bestows access to subjects with the journalistic ideals and standards of objective observation. In the case of the celebrity gossip columnist, this conflict is compounded by the need to extract personal information, which demands a heightened level of intimacy between reporter and source. The relatively small group of journalists who covered the entertainment world and its celebrities in the early twentieth century most often knew and socialized with their subjects and had to sacrifice journalistic independence to maintain access. Actress-turned-gossip columnist Hedda Hopper captured this tension when she wrote, “My beat differs from that of the average reporter. All the people I write about I meet socially as well as professionally. . . . Yet, my job says: ‘You must write about them detachedly. Report the bad as well as the good.’”<sup>14</sup>

One critic of the “intimacy” between the film industry and its press corps wrote in 1929, “[t]he ladies who write about the stars use the male stars as their escorts . . . and . . . [s]creen actresses are their pals. They ride in their cars, borrow their underwear, advise them in their love affairs. . . . This demand for intimacy with the elect is probably the

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 81; “Journalism Entering New Epoch of Service,” *Editor & Publisher*, March 27, 1926, p. 5; “Editorial: Professional Status,” *Editor & Publisher*, March 13, 1926, p. 32. On professionalization in journalism, see Emery, *The Press and America*, 722–9; and Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America’s Coming of Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 204–6.

<sup>14</sup> “Hedda Urges Fact Diet on Film Folk,” *LAT*, September 8, 1946.

fault of the movie press people who originated the system of parties to get publicity at the opening of big films.”<sup>15</sup> Press agents and publicists, members of a class of image brokers that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mediated and orchestrated interactions between journalists and their celebrated subjects. In the case of the U.S. film industry, the studios created a highly regimented publicity machine. Journalists thus confronted several layers of bureaucracy—talent agents, studio publicists, as well as the watchful eye of the Hays Office—and were carefully policed. Those who cooperated were rewarded with “[b]reakfasts, luncheons, teas and dinners, cigarettes and taxi-rides, Christmas presents and birthday presents.”<sup>16</sup> As Dorothy Manners, columnist and long-time assistant to Parsons remembered, “The press was really pampered.”<sup>17</sup> But reporters who deviated from the script before them might find their access curtailed. To do their job, film reporters needed to maintain the goodwill of the studios, the talent agencies, and the Hays Office, but doing so compromised the objectivity and autonomy that had become guiding precepts of U.S. journalism. Throughout her career, Parsons delighted in demonstrating her insider status and thereby flouted the newly ascendant ideals of her profession. In doing so, she exposed the professional conundrum that faced all journalists, especially those on the entertainment beat. Because of this, Parsons incurred the wrath of fellow journalists who attacked her as an unqualified, incompetent reporter whose success lay solely in her cultivation of powerful friends.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Leda V. Bauer, “Movie Critics,” *The American Mercury* 16 (January 1929): 73.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Manners oral history, folder 15-f.437 1990: oral histories, HWPCc.

<sup>18</sup> On this professional conundrum, see Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human-Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 98–100.

Parsons was not the only reporter to celebrate her celebrated friends: Broadway columnist Walter Winchell was the toast of New York's café society from his fabled table at New York's Stork Club. Yet Winchell was neither criticized for his fraternizing nor was his employment by the Hearst chain (with his 1929 appointment to the *New York Daily Mirror*) characterized as a "gift" from his powerful friends. Instead his Hearst job was cast as a logical and well-deserved promotion. The very different understandings of the career trajectories of these two reporters, who often trod parallel paths on their rise to the top of their profession, rests in part in the different public relations apparatus of the industries they covered. The film studios achieved near-total control over the images of and access to their talent by exacting long-term contractual agreements and developing highly bureaucratized publicity departments. Parsons operated within a relatively closed system—which she did not attempt to disguise—though she enjoyed greater latitude than most of her peers because of her status within the Hearst hierarchy. Winchell's realm, the New York theater world, was organized very differently. While corporate interests controlled much Broadway production, most talent was hired on a freelance basis, production by production. Broadway performers had more control over their public images: they hired their own press agents and had more latitude to deal with the media on their own terms. Thus Winchell enjoyed a degree of autonomy that Parsons did not. If he antagonized an important actor, he did not risk antagonizing an entire corporation that might then retaliate by restricting his access to said actor. Accordingly, Winchell had more freedom to act as independent observer and cultivated a reputation as a loose cannon. Yet he too was part of a public relations apparatus that he could not fully transcend, despite his best efforts at self-promotion and self-aggrandizement.

With her late 1923 move to the *American*, Parsons made the transition from the trade press to a daily less than a year before Winchell made a similar change, moving from the *Vaudeville News* to the *New York Evening Graphic*. At the *American*, Parsons's column appeared side-by-side with the society column written by Cholly Knickerbocker, a pseudonym for blue-blood reporter Maury H. Biddle Paul. For a time, their columns even shared a running head to further conflate the realms of FILMS and SOCIETY, which was not an obvious or automatic pairing in 1924.<sup>19</sup> This was among the earliest, most explicit, and high-profile examples of the pairing of film and society gossip columns. From the early days of the nickelodeon into the 1920s, the realm of the New York film actor and that of the New York society matron had been worlds apart. Even the respectable middle-class tried to keep its distance, as illustrated by a 1918 anecdote Parsons shared with her readers. She told the story of her cousin Margaret Ettinger's experiences as an up-and-coming publicist for a film production company, a job Parsons had helped her secure. Traveling by rail from New York to Los Angeles, Ettinger's fellow passengers included members of a movie company. One of these actresses, whom Ettinger "had known by reputation for several years," invited the young publicist to dine with them. Parsons wrote, "The luncheon invitation was overheard by two prim spinsters, who beckoned frantically." "'You are too young,' they told Ettinger, 'and you must not

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<sup>19</sup> David Nasaw points out this linkage in the pages of the *American*. Because Hearst's wife, Millicent, (a former chorus girl risen to the top of New York society by virtue of her marriage, wealth, and personal striving) was a favorite of Knickerbocker and Hearst's longtime companion, Marion Davies, was a favorite of Parsons, great care was taken so "that Millicent and Marion's name never appeared together on the same page on the same day." Nasaw, *The Chief*, 353. This juxtaposition of film and society in the pages of his newspaper also provides a brilliant illustration of Hearst's efforts to reconcile the different social and business worlds in which he operated. The cultural legitimacy bestowed by this linkage benefited not only Davies but the entire film community and therefore benefited Hearst's personal and professional investments in the industry.

have anything to do with moving picture people. Why, that young woman uses rouge.”<sup>20</sup>

By the mid-1920s, the film industry’s elite had begun to take its place among the nation’s social, political, and economic elites. This shift was still in process and could be viewed in the pages of the *American* with the double-bill of Parsons and Knickerbocker. Yet social commentators continued to debate the impact of film on U.S. society, concerned that “nowhere outside of the motion-picture world does a boy or girl without education, or breeding, or experience of life, or brains . . . stand such a good chance of getting both cash and adulation over night.” Parsons later remarked on these shifting class perceptions in mid-1920s Hollywood: “The social barriers had relaxed a little. It had become smart for the local socialites to include an actor in a dinner party.”<sup>21</sup>

Based in New York, Parsons’s job became more difficult as the film colony of Hollywood became the undisputed center of the U.S. film industry. A constant theme in Parsons’s column during her years in New York was the gradual relocation of production to Hollywood. In November 1919, Parsons lamented that a special concert in New York drew a crowd that “looked like a gathering in the old days before all the picture folk moved West.” Parsons received dispatches from sources in Hollywood and attempted to provide her readers with a sense of this growing industry town: “Elinor Field, the youthful star in the Strand-Mutual comedies, has purchased a home in Glendale,” Parsons reported. “She has for neighbors Guy Price, Neil Shipman, and other California celebrities.” The latest upheaval on the set of Charlie Chaplin’s *The Gold Rush* (1925) came to Parsons from “a Los Angeles reporter, who sent us the news.” She increasingly

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<sup>20</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, October 3, 1918.

<sup>21</sup> Gerould, “Hollywood,” 692; Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 84.

relied on communiqués from those who had relocated to Hollywood: actress Hedda Hopper, who moved from New York to Hollywood in 1923, was a valued and frequent correspondent.<sup>22</sup>

*“Go West, Young Maid”: The Move to Hollywood*

Parsons had long been announcing the departure of industry figures like movie magazine editor-turned-Fox publicist Dorothea Herzog to the West Coast with encouragements to “Go West, Young Maid . . . [to] find the end of the rainbow.” At the start of 1924 Parsons reported that an estimated “\$100,000,000 will be spent by motion picture producers” on the West Coast in the coming year while only half that would be spent on the East Coast, a sign of the changing times. In the summer of 1925, Parsons paid her first visit to Los Angeles in a professional capacity to observe life and work in the film colony on the West Coast. Shortly thereafter, events conspired to bring Parsons back to Los Angeles for good. In November 1925, Parsons became seriously ill with tuberculosis. She returned to California, but this time to convalesce in the desert climate. When she was able to return to work in March 1926, Hearst decided that Parsons should make the *Los Angeles Examiner* her new home paper and Los Angeles her new home. The Chief—as he was known to intimates and employees—recognized that “the movies are in Hollywood,” making it the obvious destination for his “chief” film reporter. As Parsons remembered it, “Well, at last, . . . *the Hollywood writer is going to Hollywood!*”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, November 11, 1919 and October 1, 1918; Parsons, “Film,” NYA, February 19, 1924.

<sup>23</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, September 1, 1923; Parsons, “\$150,000,000 in Films in New Year,” NYA, January 1, 1924; Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 84.

Parsons's move to Los Angeles marked a pivotal moment in her career. Once Parsons had been content to operate in New York and trust the Hollywood scene to others such as Frances Agnew, the Hollywood correspondent on her staff at the *Morning Telegraph*. But those days were over. By the mid-1920s, she needed to be in Los Angeles to report upon the growing phenomenon that was Hollywood, a fact underscored by her promotion within the Hearst media empire with this move. With the move, Parsons was appointed motion picture editor for Hearst's Universal Service, the wire service created in 1918 to provide breaking news and feature stories for the Hearst morning dailies and subscriber papers.<sup>24</sup> Most importantly, her column became a regular feature in more than twenty Hearst-owned newspapers and also began to be syndicated in non-Hearst papers such as the *Denver Post* and the *Indianapolis Star*.<sup>25</sup> "My column was the first to be syndicated directly from Hollywood, and in the beginning I had only myself to worry about as competition," Parsons wrote.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Parsons was the first syndicated columnist in the then-miniscule Hollywood press corps. Thus began her reign as "queen of the gossip columnists."<sup>27</sup>

Parsons now could present Hollywood on a daily basis to readers across the nation while other reporters in Los Angeles had to be content with a local audience. For those reporters covering Hollywood from some geographical distance, Parsons's *Examiner* column served as one of the most valuable resources to mine for information. They might write about a fabulous party, but Parsons could write of her attendance at that

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<sup>24</sup> On the Universal Service, see Moses Koenigsberg, *King News: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia: F.A. Stokes Co., 1941), 453, 476; and Richard A. Schwarzlose, *The Nation's Newsbrokers*, vol. 2 (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 230.

<sup>25</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 115–6.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 122.

<sup>27</sup> "The Gay Louella," *Newsweek*, January 10, 1944, p. 85.

fabulous party and describe it in intimate detail. Her personal experience infused her column with a new level of detail and information. A contingent of reporters for the popular press and fan magazines already resided in Los Angeles, but none had the syndication or resources that Parsons had at her disposal. Fan magazine writers were dependent on the goodwill of the studios and the MPPDA and operated within very proscribed limits regarding content. Their work also appeared much more sporadically—on a weekly or monthly basis—depending upon the publishing schedule of their magazines. The format they worked within thus lacked the immediacy of Parsons's work. She reported the most important breaking stories and hers became the most important pen on the Hollywood scene.

Parsons's syndication and wire service post were absolutely critical to her success and illustrate a larger trend in U.S. journalism: the centralization and nationalization of newsgathering and distribution in the 1920s and into the 1930s. The 1920s is commonly characterized as the decade of "jazz journalism," with the rise of the tabloid as "a journalistic mirror of the era."<sup>28</sup> This interpretation was derived originally from Frederick Lewis Allen in his germinal study of the 1920s. "The tabloids, indeed, were booming—and not without effect," asserted Allen. "They presented American life not as a political and economic struggle, but as a three-ring circus of sport, crime, and sex, and in varying degrees *the other papers followed their lead* under the pressure of competition."<sup>29</sup> This emphasis on tabloids and sensational content has meant that trends in the newspaper industry of which the tabloid was the most extreme example are

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Michael Bessie, *Jazz Journalism: The Story of the Tabloid Newspaper* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (New York: Harper, 1931), 67. Emphasis mine.

obscured or underemphasized: namely, shorter news stories, more photographs and illustrations, and more standardized content.

While tabloid journalism is now virtually synonymous with sensationalism, the term tabloid originally referred only to the smaller size and different structure of such newspapers. A tabloid was half the size of a standard daily with only one fold in the center and four or five columns of print. Its smaller size made for fewer and shorter articles and the tabloid offered a much more condensed version of the day's news. Most importantly its front page contained only banner headlines and photographs devoted to one or two of the day's lead stories. A standard daily paper might offer equally or even more sensational coverage of a lead story, but its text-heavy front page devoted to multiple stories did not provide the visual and rhetorical impact of the tabloid front page. The tabloid format had been experimented with for many years in the United States, but not until the 1919 creation of the *New York Illustrated Daily News* did this format achieve mainstream, mass-market success. In just five years the *Daily News* (*Illustrated* was almost immediately dropped from its name) became the nation's largest paper with a circulation of more than 800,000 in 1924. Its remarkable success sparked a slew of imitators and instigated a tabloid "war" in New York City in the second half of the decade. William Randolph Hearst's *Daily Mirror* and Bernarr Macfadden's *Evening Graphic* were established in the metropolis in 1924 to capitalize upon the success of the *Daily News*. Together these three papers vied for readership with increasingly lurid stories of murder and mayhem and a plethora of subscriber contests.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> On the history of the tabloid, see Emery, *The Press and America*, 553–62; Mott, *American Journalism*, 666–73; John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 118–54.

Journalism in the 1920s was not simply a tale of tabloidization and degradation of content. Only New York and other major metropolitan areas could support tabloids. Outside New York, tabloid content was much less sensational. The *Evening Graphic* represented the worst of the editorial excesses of the tabloids and became a lightning rod for criticism that led to a reigning in of the most sensational content. In 1931, even Walter Lippmann, caustic social critic, author, and political columnist, forecast the end of the era of the tabloid and heralded “another revolution in the history of journalism . . . the rise of an objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news.”<sup>31</sup> The 1932 demise of the *Evening Graphic* offered proof that unbridled sensationalism did not necessarily equal success. The tabloids of the 1920s unquestionably tested and expanded the parameters of printable material, both personal and professional, a trend that undoubtedly gave gossip columnists such as Parsons greater leeway. But sensational content was only part of the story of the tabloids. The tabloids also stand as perhaps the most extreme example of a long-term shift toward less text, more graphics, and more uniform content. This last development suggests another important paradigm that prevailed in journalism in the 1920s.

The 1920s might more aptly be characterized as one in which the nation’s press became truly national. Decades of ruinous competition led to the demise of some papers and the consolidation of others and an overall decrease in the total number of newspapers in the United States. Even as the number of newspapers shrank, content grew increasingly uniform with the rise of the wire services and press syndicates. These new agencies centralized newsgathering and distribution and allowed ever fewer numbers of

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<sup>31</sup> Walter Lippmann, “Two Revolutions in the American Press,” *The Yale Review* 20:3 (March 1931): 439.

reporters and editors to control stories and features in newspapers nationwide, as was the case with Parsons.

Wire service agencies supplied articles on national and international news to member papers. The Associated Press (AP) was the first major wire service established in 1848. Others followed, but it was not until the first decade of the 1900s that the dominance of the AP was challenged. In 1907, the Scripps newspaper chain consolidated its news-gathering agencies on both coasts and formed the United Press (UP). The Hearst corporation created the International News Service (INS) that same year and the Universal Service in 1918, and Parsons would later work for both agencies.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to the wire services, press syndicates flourished in the 1920s, offering comics, Sunday magazine supplements, and columns of all kinds. The key difference between the syndicates and the press associations lay in the content they offered—the press associations provided more “straight,” breaking news while the syndicates generally offered material that was less contingent upon timeliness and more focused on entertaining readers, though there was much overlap. Syndicated features had appeared sporadically in the press since the colonial period. The literary efforts of writers such as Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling as well as humor and women’s columns began to be syndicated more widely in the second half of the 1800s. In the early twentieth century, press syndicates proliferated because this content proved to be popular with readers and boosted circulation. Use of syndicated content offered small-market newspapers big-

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<sup>32</sup> On the rise of the wire services, see Emery, *The Press and America*, 465–83; and Mott, *American Journalism*, 591–2.

market bylines and allowed newspapers to cut costs by cutting staff, making syndication a standard practice in the industry.<sup>33</sup>

Parsons was among the first wave of syndicated reporters to have their bylines appear in papers across the nation. In the post–World War I period, syndicated columnists proliferated in the U.S. press covering a wide range of topics: politics, finance, science, law, fashion, cooking, and every facet of mass entertainment including film. Specialists in every field offered their insight and advice and opinions to the American public in the pages of the daily papers. (The well-documented rise of the expert in the early twentieth century infiltrated not just the daily press but also every arena of print culture, from magazines to books.) Parsons practiced this “highly charged type of personal journalism” and was of a new generation of syndicated columnists that achieved an unprecedented level of visibility and celebrity.<sup>34</sup>

Even as the importance of the syndicated columnist grew, a new kind of weekly news magazine was established that championed collective journalism, eschewed bylines, and would become fiercely critical of Parsons and other celebrity journalists. The same year Parsons moved to Hearst’s *American*, Henry R. Luce and Briton Hadden founded *Time* magazine. In a world perceived to be increasingly complex, *Time* offered its targeted middle-class readers a guided tour through the news—something its founders thought newspapers failed to do. *Time* offered pointed summaries and analyses of the week’s events, placing this magazine in the forefront of a shift toward synthesis in U.S. journalism. Throughout the 1920s, *Time* writers did no original reporting; they based their articles on clippings from dailies, notably the *New York Times*. The success of

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<sup>33</sup> On the syndicates, see Emery, *The Press and America*, 483–501.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Fisher, *The Columnists* (New York: Howell, Soskin, 1944), 2.

*Time*'s condensed and terse format paved the way for other weekly news magazines that sought to provide an overview of the week's events for a national audience. *Time* may have been geared to a different class of reader, but it shared the tabloid emphasis on brevity and simplification of content.<sup>35</sup>

Once established in Los Angeles in 1926, Parsons began to write for a now truly national audience. She created an informational network in Los Angeles, which included "volunteer tipsters from all over the world in all walks of life, government bureaus, travel agencies, a lowly clerk, a high official, a beauty parlor operator, a hotel clerk, a justice of the peace, a laboratory technician."<sup>36</sup> Of course, her most important contacts remained the stars, the aspiring stars, publicists, agents, and other image brokers.

Parsons quickly became a ubiquitous figure at the most important private and public parties and events in Hollywood. Her social calendar was booked solid as she covered the many events—film premieres, award shows, charity functions, and personal celebrations, such as birthdays and weddings—crucial to the construction and maintenance of public images in Hollywood. Advance film screenings were often the centerpiece of social events in private homes—a screening room was a standard component in the upscale greater Los Angeles housing market. However, as Parsons and all the other denizens of Hollywood knew well, the social scene was not just about window dressing; these events also served as sites for networking, deal making, and most of all performance, just as the executive offices and sound stages did.<sup>37</sup> In a one-industry

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<sup>35</sup> On *Time* magazine, Henry Luce, and the journalistic shift toward synthesis, see James Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); 1–7, 23–61.

<sup>36</sup> Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1961), 13.

<sup>37</sup> As Neal Gabler has aptly observed in his study of the film industry's leaders, "parties became individual performances of power by the guests." Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor, 1988), 253.

town like Hollywood, whose industry was the stuff of other towns' leisure, the line between work and play was blurred to an extent unmatched elsewhere. And Parsons was there to record it all.

After her marriage to Dr. Harry Martin in 1930, Parsons began to host her own parties at her Beverly Hills home and at Marsons Farm, the weekend retreat she and her new husband purchased in the San Fernando Valley. "She liked to give parties and she gave marvelous parties. Hers were the best in town," said Dorothy Manners. "She would have everyone in town who could possibly wangle an invitation." Invitations were widely sought by those seeking column inches. Even established industry figures turned down Parsons's invitations at their own peril. As "one of Hollywood's most successful party-givers," Parsons even emerged as an expert on this topic in the women's magazines of the period. She, for example, offered "some little ways to keep . . . guests happy," shared recipes for "Green Goddess Salad," and proved why she was "an outstanding hostess in a town famed for its parties."<sup>38</sup>

Parsons established her leadership of the Hollywood press corps not only in the workplace and after hours but also through associational activity. Dorothy Manners, Parsons's longtime assistant, claimed that Parsons "controlled a group of writers that supplied all of the material" on Hollywood.<sup>39</sup> Manners was referring to the Hollywood Women's Press Club (HWPC), an organization formed in 1928 by Parsons and eight other prominent female reporters who covered the film world in the trade and popular press. HWPC co-founders Katherine Albert, Ruth Biery, Regina Crewe, Dorothy Donnell, Gladys Hall, Maude Lathem, Dorothy Manners, and Rosalind Shaffer were an

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<sup>38</sup> Manners oral history, HWPCc; Sabina Ormsby Dean, "What Makes a Successful Party?" *House Beautiful* 87 (August 1945): 44, 45, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Manners oral history, HWPCc.

accomplished and prolific group of newspaper and magazine writers who covered the Hollywood beat in the second half of the 1920s. These women wrote for fan magazines including *Photoplay*, *Motion Picture Magazine*, and *Modern Screen*, as well as such daily newspapers as the *Hollywood Citizen-News* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Parsons, with the might of the Hearst media behind her, was unquestionably the most powerful member of the group and served as the first HWPC president, an office she held for half a decade.

The HWPC's official history is light-hearted and tongue-in-cheek. It reads in part:

A very small group of newspaper and magazine girls (and they were all girls in those days) had been getting together for lunch at their respective homes, for the simple reason that they liked each other. This seemed a good enough excuse to form a luncheon club and meet at a restaurant. . . . But when we decided to form a club . . . it was reasoned by some—we should have a purpose. And although a couple of small voices were heard to say, 'All I want to do is just have fun,' the purposeful made loud speeches. As it happened the Just-Have-Fun block won, but we have had trouble with the purposeful ever since.

Co-founder Manners struck a similar tone when she said that the HWPC was not "founded on lofty plateaus." Its "founders came to *eat* . . . and *dish* . . . and it was a lot of fun!" But these light-hearted reminiscences should not obscure the other reasons behind the formation of this organization. Women's professional associations, like the HWPC, proliferated in the 1920s. Even as women made considerable advances in a host of professions, they faced resistance and hostility. Organizations, like the HWPC, offered female professionals opportunities to network and address common concerns and problems. These "girls" banded together at a time when the newsroom remained very much a male preserve despite the advances women had made in the profession. Female reporters eager to cover national and international politics and other departments that appeared regularly on the front pages often found these ambitions thwarted. Women, like

those who founded the HWPC, often ended up on the entertainment beat because the theater, film, and radio pages (along with the society and women's pages) had become a stronghold for women in journalism. This stronghold could also become a reportorial ghetto for female journalists. But the entertainment world was also front-page news and only became more so as the years passed. The career that Louella Parsons, the "shining star and oracle" of the HWPC, built was a testament to this fact.<sup>40</sup>

Parsons used the HWPC to further her own career as she drafted group members to work for her. Ruth Waterbury—HWPC president from 1940 to 1944—was a member of the writing staff of Parsons's "Hollywood Hotel" radio show in the mid-1930s.<sup>41</sup> Most significantly, Dorothy Manners, an HWPC co-founder alongside Parsons, became Parsons's assistant and right-hand woman in 1934. They remained a team until Parsons's December 1, 1965 retirement when Manners officially took over the column.

In 1935, Parsons resigned from the HWPC—a resignation the HWPC "refused" to accept—and did not become an active member again until June 1954.<sup>42</sup> The years Parsons was not actively involved in the HWPC were the most hectic in her career. Her considerable professional commitments in addition to her newspaper work as editor and columnist included, but were not limited to, hosting a series of radio broadcasts; assorted film and stage work; writing a 1935 biography of Jean Harlow, a 1944 memoir, and a monthly column that ran in *Cosmopolitan* magazine from December 1945 to January 1956. Her multi-media responsibilities and celebrated status left Parsons with little time

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<sup>40</sup> "The New Improved Revised History of the HWPC," pp. 40–1, folder 2-f.106 1962 Membership Roster, HWPCc; text of Dorothy Manners's speech at 1967 Founder's Day, folder 4-f.161 1967: Miscellaneous, HWPCc. On the barriers women faced in the professions and their associational activity in the 1920s, see Nancy F. Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 217–39.

<sup>41</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 252.

<sup>42</sup> The HWPC newsletter, "Chatterbox," reported in June 1954, "Welcome, too, to Louella Parsons, who is resuming her active membership." Folder 1-f.69 1954: Newsletter, HWPCc.

to devote to the HWPC, which had already served its primary purpose of advancing her career. But three of her closest relatives and colleagues remained behind to tend to her interests. Manners not only went to work for Parsons just as Parsons withdrew from the HWPC, but she also remained actively involved in the club, where presumably she served as Parsons's proxy.

Margaret Ettinger, Parsons's first cousin, joined the HWPC in 1941, the first year publicists were invited to become members. The story of the intertwined careers of Parsons and Ettinger illustrates the often-nepotistic structure of the Hollywood publicity machine. Ettinger's career began with a summer job in Chicago at *Photoplay* in the mid-1910s; it is likely that Ettinger, a high-school student, stayed with Parsons, who was then living and working in Chicago. In fact, Parsons credited Ettinger with helping her land her screenwriting job at Essanay. When Parsons left for New York in 1918, Ettinger went with her and a job was secured for Parsons's "baby cousin" with D.W. Griffith's production company.<sup>43</sup> Parsons reported on the travels of Ettinger (who had not yet changed the spelling of her last name): "Margaret Oettinger, on her first motion picture mission, and, incidentally, perhaps, the youngest woman engaged in this line of business on the road, was traveling from New York westward."<sup>44</sup> Ettinger then went to work for the *New York Daily Telegram* and this paper sent her west in 1922 to serve as its Hollywood correspondent. Ettinger credited an unnamed "friend on the Morning Telegraph"—Parsons again—with helping her secure this job.<sup>45</sup> In 1924, she went to work in the MGM publicity department and set up her own publicity firm in 1926, just as Parsons was moving to Los Angeles. As Parsons recalled, "I arrived in the capital of the

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<sup>43</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 54.

<sup>44</sup> Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, October 3, 1918.

<sup>45</sup> "Maggie Ettinger—Publicist Supreme," LAT, December 15, 1957.

movies to make my home with my cousin, Margaret Ettinger, who . . . was faring well as a press agent of the glittering darlings of the cinema.” Parsons stayed with Ettinger and her young family upon her 1926 relocation to Los Angeles. Ettinger undoubtedly smoothed Parsons’s transition and helped her adjust to her new professional setting. According to Parsons, the cousins “gossiped endlessly about the merry-go-round of the town in which we were professional onlookers.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed they did more than that: they clearly helped each other in their rise to the top of their respective professions. Ettinger became a powerful publicist with a star-studded roster of clients, which included Edward G. Robinson, Loretta Young, Irene Dunne, Edgar Bergen, and her now-famous cousin Louella Parsons. Their seldom-publicized personal relationship was mutually beneficial, providing each of them with an important ally in the battleground of the Hollywood publicity machine.

Ettinger was not the only Parsons relative who worked in the industry and served on the HWPC. Parsons’s daughter Harriet was the tenth founding member of the HWPC. Harriet Parsons entered the “family business” upon her 1928 graduation from Wellesley, working first as a writer at MGM and then moving to New York to write for *Photoplay*. Upon her return to Los Angeles, Harriet went to work for her mother’s paper, the *Los Angeles Examiner*, where she was known as “Parsons Jr.” There she wrote on film and also composed the column in her mother’s absence. In 1933, Harriet became a producer at Columbia Pictures, but left that studio in 1940 to produce films at RKO. Throughout her career, Harriet remained active in the HWPC, serving as vice-president and president and on the board of directors over the years. Harriet was instrumental in setting up the

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<sup>46</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 86.

HWPC's Louella O. Parsons Award for presenting the best image of Hollywood to the world, the first of which went to entertainer Danny Thomas in December 1970.<sup>47</sup>

Harriet Parsons was quite candid in a 1980 interview about her struggle to achieve credibility in the film industry. Regarding her first job at MGM, she remarked, "I realized they had hired me because of mother, and I quit." When she signed on as a producer at Columbia, the job was another "favor to mother," but Harriet persevered and proved her worth.<sup>48</sup> Louella Parsons also used her influence to help Dr. Harry Watson Martin, the man she met in 1928 and married on January 5, 1930. Born on January 16, 1890 in Redfield, South Dakota, Martin graduated from the University of Illinois College of Medicine in June 1912 with a specialization in urology. In 1919, Martin relocated his practice from Illinois to Los Angeles. In the decade after Parsons and Martin's 1930 marriage, Martin worked as a technical advisor on films, signed on as a staff physician at Twentieth Century-Fox, and was appointed to the California state athletic commission.<sup>49</sup> An elaborate stag film shot at Martin's forty-seventh birthday party in 1937 contained footage of some of the guests including San Francisco financier and state athletic commission head Louis Lurie and Twentieth Century-Fox publicity head Harry Brand.<sup>50</sup> This guest list reflected the influential social circles in which Parsons and Martin moved.

Parsons's efforts to help her husband did not go unappreciated or unreciprocated. Martin seems to have returned the favor by using his credentials to help Parsons uncover medical information about the denizens of Hollywood. If Martin was in fact a

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<sup>47</sup> On Harriet Parsons, see Crane, "Parsons Jr." and various correspondence and clippings in HWPCc, including folder 11-f.322.

<sup>48</sup> Crane, "Parsons Jr."

<sup>49</sup> On Martin, see Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 148-51.

<sup>50</sup> "Dr. Harry Martin birthday 'roast,'" Louella Parsons collection, 35 mm, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

“successful Hollywood specialist in venereal diseases,” as reported by *Newsweek* and as whispered about in more scurrilous sources, he would certainly have had some interesting information to share with his wife.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the precise nature of his urology practice, this doctor was in a position to access information for his wife, particularly news of pregnancies. Expectant mothers in Hollywood—be they performers or production staff or the wives of performers, production staff, or executives—were hot news for the Hollywood press corps, and reporters avidly sought to be the first to tell. Parsons expected and very often got these exclusive stories. Parsons’s pursuit of such news items and her subjects’ willingness to accommodate her demands sometimes meant that she accompanied expectant mothers to their gynecologists’ offices to confirm their pregnancies as in the case of Francis Goldwyn, wife of producer Samuel Goldwyn.<sup>52</sup>

Seemingly apocryphal stories of Parsons’s reports of pregnancies before the patients found out began to gain wide currency in the 1930s. At first glance, these stories seem to be just more examples of the outlandish rumors that circulated about this journalist, adding to the legend of her power while detracting from the reality of her life. Yet Parsons did not discourage or deny these rumors. On the contrary, she came to encourage them. And why not? They only embellished her reputation as “THE FIRST TO KNOW” in Hollywood. Parsons never explained exactly how she procured such information. She never claimed to be clairvoyant, thus advance previews of medical records would be the only explanation. In *Tell It to Louella*, her 1961 memoir, Parsons hinted rather broadly that this was indeed the case. Parsons began the book with a

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<sup>51</sup> “Lolly of Hollywood,” *Newsweek*, January 4, 1943, p. 62. Parsons’s biographer George Eells also suggests that Martin’s specialty in Hollywood was the treatment of venereal diseases. Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 150.

<sup>52</sup>A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 146.

discussion of her sources and then launched into the story of how she was the first to inform actress Teresa Wright of her pregnancy. Parsons wrote:

[My sources included] volunteer tipsters from all over the world in all walks of life, government bureaus, travel agencies, a lowly clerk, a high official, a beauty parlor operator, a hotel clerk, a justice of the peace, *a laboratory technician*. You name 'em; they've all called me.

One day I received a report that Teresa Wright . . . was going to have a baby.

I immediately called Teresa to congratulate her; instead of thanking me, she said somewhat angrily . . . , "That's not true Louella." . . . I was about to retreat as tactfully as possible when she said, "Excuse me a moment, my other phone is ringing." A minute later, she was back on the line, laughing uproariously.

"I'll never doubt you again, Louella," she said. "You were right. *I am* going to have a baby. I'm glad you told me first. That was my doctor on the phone. *He just got the lab report.*"<sup>53</sup>

In the above excerpt, Parsons ended her list of informants with "laboratory technician" and launched immediately into the Wright story. Parsons's terse description of her receipt of "a report" regarding Wright's pregnancy echoes the "lab report" that the doctor consulted at the end of the above passage. In this passage, Parsons implied quite clearly that she got the results of the pregnancy test before Wright did. Since medical records are protected, Parsons could not acknowledge such illegal activity in print without making herself vulnerable to possible legal action. Throughout her career, Parsons was by all accounts extremely careful to avoid libel or slander lawsuits, and no records exist for such legal action being taken against her. (The same cannot be said for her peers Walter Winchell and Hedda Hopper.) Hopper, in a 1963 memoir, explicitly charged that Martin (known also as Docky) used his medical credentials to help his wife. "Through Docky's good offices," claimed Hopper, "Louella had a tie-in with testing laboratories, notably those making rabbit tests for pregnancy. This private line into the

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<sup>53</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 13-4. Emphasis mine.

womb could give her news that a star was pregnant before the girl knew it herself.”<sup>54</sup>

This tactic was a major intrusion into her subjects’ private lives, a further erosion of privacy that helped transform the criteria for “newsworthy” events.

This journalist did not print everything she saw and heard. As Dorothy Manners, Parsons’s assistant for thirty years, assessed her column: “[I]t was rather mild . . . most of her columns were really production stuff and all.”<sup>55</sup> On a day-to-day basis, Parsons’s column was filled with mundane casting information and other innocuous facts and anecdotes. The truly scandalous cropped up far less frequently than might be imagined given Parsons’s reputation. Even as she helped to erode safeguards to personal privacy over the course of her career, the amount of truly scandalous behavior revealed and discussed in her column accounts for only a fraction of the total text she generated. Indeed, she withheld a tremendous amount of information detrimental to the public profile of studio employees in front of and behind the cameras. Parsons kept certain information to herself to maintain the fantasy of Hollywood, but in turn she leveraged censored information for stories fit to print. David Niven, an actor who had felt the sting of Parsons’s pen while locked in a 1939 contract dispute with producer Samuel Goldwyn, termed it “a little gentle blackmail through the suppression routine.”<sup>56</sup> Censored behavior and events ranged from adultery, premarital and underage sex, drug and alcohol addiction, child abuse and neglect to far less serious infractions of prevailing moral,

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<sup>54</sup> Hopper and Brough, *Whole Truth*, 65.

<sup>55</sup> Manners oral history, HWPCc.

<sup>56</sup> Niven, *Bring on the Empty Horses*, 21. On Niven’s contract dispute, see Berg, *Goldwyn*, 335.

ethical, and religious mores, such as boorish, obnoxious, or offensive behavior and language.<sup>57</sup>

Parsons had many reasons for filtering out such information. First and foremost, she had a vested interest—that is, her own livelihood—in protecting the industry as best she could from scandal of a magnitude that might reinvigorate public and private calls for censorship, investigation, and external regulation. Parsons’s personal well-being was inextricably linked to the continued well-being of the U.S. film industry. Parsons wrote near the end of her career, “Hollywood is and has been my life.” This was not simply hyperbole. The movies had been at the center of her life since the early 1910s, before there was a Hollywood to speak of. Even her harshest critics conceded that Parsons possessed “a starry-eyed and unshakable faith” in an industry she considered “the most important mechanism of modern civilization.” Parsons also had to work within the limits of the law regarding defamation of character, which limited the scope of her published and spoken words to avoid libel and slander lawsuits.<sup>58</sup>

### *Hollywood Hotel*

In 1934, Parsons starred in her own radio broadcast, “Hollywood Hotel,” and became a truly national celebrity. Parsons had been working in the radio broadcasting industry from its inception. The New York radio station WOR began using material from her *Morning Telegraph* column in June 1923 when radio broadcasting was in its infancy and programming was local and sporadic. In 1928 and then again in 1931, Parsons hosted

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<sup>57</sup> As Garry Wills memorably described it, Parsons’s “weapon was truth, but it was a weapon in the sense that theorists of deterrence advocate: it was powerful so long as she never had to use it. She threatened selectively to stop pretending that everyone was her friend, that Hollywood was wonderland, that morals had fled to their last and safest refuge there . . . [and] few people called her bluff.” Garry Wills, *Reagan’s America: Innocents At Home*, rev. ed (New York: Penguin, 2000), 189.

<sup>58</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 8; Paul O’Neil, “The Little Queen Hollywood Deserved,” *Life*, June 4, 1965, pp. 74, 73.

short-lived radio broadcasts on film world gossip and happenings. Finally, in 1934, Parsons found the right format. The time was also right because of the growth of the radio broadcasting industry over the previous decade. The passage of the 1934 Communication Act by Congress signaled the triumph of the national, commercial radio networks of NBC and CBS. This legislation enabled these radio companies, funded by commercial advertising, to complete truly coast-to-coast broadcast networks and to construct national broadcast schedules, featuring the nation's top entertainers, including Rudy Vallee and Eddie Cantor. By 1934, the major studios had been legally barred from ownership of or even investment in the radio networks and instead focused their efforts on providing programming and using the airwaves for promotional purposes. Despite conflict over compensation of film studio performers for radio work and protest from exhibitors who felt their livelihood was threatened by this new entertainment medium, film producers increasingly turned to radio to publicize their films and performers. And Parsons was ready, willing, and able to bring her brand of promotion—of the film world and of herself—to the airwaves.<sup>59</sup>

Parsons was not the only gossip reporter to take a multi-media approach to her work. Walter Winchell had also experimented with various radio programs in the late 1920s and early 1930s until he found success and high ratings with the "Jergens Journal," which premiered on December 4, 1932. Winchell's approach brought his hard-hitting New York newspaperman's persona to life over the airwaves using a telegraph ticker to punctuate his rapid-fire delivery of a hodgepodge of news from the New York entertainment world. Parsons recognized that she, too, needed to find a format that

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<sup>59</sup> On radio and the film industry, see Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, 49–67.

would bring to life the beat she covered and highlight her persona as the all-knowing den mother presiding over the glamorous precincts of Hollywood.<sup>60</sup>

“Hollywood Hotel,” sponsored by Campbell’s Soup, premiered on October 5, 1934. The concept was a stroke of genius. “Hollywood Hotel” was a fictional hotel—based on the idea of a once glamorous, but faded Hollywood landmark—from which the hour-long broadcast originated. The scene was set “in the renowned Orchid Room of Hollywood Hotel, playground of the stars.” Parsons was seated at table four in the Orchid Room with a phone at the ready to relay news to the “city desk” of her newspaper, which she did at regular intervals throughout the broadcast between musical numbers and comedy skits. “Warner Brothers’ bright young star” Dick Powell served as the master of ceremonies and performed several songs throughout the broadcast. “Hollywood Hotel” announcer Ken Niles intoned at the top of each broadcast that “America’s foremost columnist brings with her each week a celebrated guest” or two.<sup>61</sup>

“Hollywood Hotel” was an immediate success. Parsons has been credited with helping establish “Los Angeles as a seat of national broadcasting.”<sup>62</sup> Indeed her show was among the first of the radio programs to be broadcast nationally from Los Angeles at a time when the cost to do so was prohibitively high. This would change in 1936 when the federal government forced AT&T to lower its wire service rates on shows that did not originate in New York.<sup>63</sup> Despite the high cost of transmission, Parsons was judged worth the gamble because of her already established audience and her ability to deliver

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<sup>60</sup> On Winchell and radio, see Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 159–63, 214–8.

<sup>61</sup> “Hollywood Hotel,” CBS radio broadcast, October 5, 1934, Museum of Television and Radio, New York.

<sup>62</sup> O’Neil, “Little Queen,” 79.

<sup>63</sup> Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*, 62–3.

Hollywood's biggest stars for the price of a case of Campbell's Soup. As reported in *Time*, "Broadcaster Parsons can get actors on the Campbell hour for nothing, whereas other radio programs lay out large sums for screen names."<sup>64</sup> According to one estimate, the show's weekly budget would have more than doubled—from \$12,500 to \$30,000—if performers had been paid to scale.<sup>65</sup>

A steady stream of actors and actresses appeared on the show, among them Ronald Coleman, Clark Gable, Carole Lombard, Rosalind Russell, and Loretta Young. These celebrities talked about a wide range of subjects from their personal and professional lives to their opinions on current events to all things Hollywood. The broadcast was, of course, laced with Parsons's gossip about the industry's leading figures. While her print column was often peopled with rather obscure and sometimes mundane figures because of the pressure to fill column inches on a daily basis, her weekly radio broadcast offered the opportunity to distill the previous week's items into a fine and powerful brew of mayhem and mishap. A titillating blind item—an anecdote about individuals who might be described in detail but left unnamed—was included in each broadcast. For example, Parsons told her listeners:

Here's a new angle in love. When a certain famous star left Hollywood telling her lovesick swain that [a] wife's first duty was at the bedside of a sick husband, the swain next day went into hospital and has kept the cables hot ever since describing his own symptoms. Three guesses girls as to who it is.<sup>66</sup>

The show gave Parsons the opportunity to map the celebrity universe of her column in a new format, in which she remained the star around which all others revolved. Most importantly, Parsons came to life for her audience in an entirely different manner

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<sup>64</sup> "Hollywood Hotel," *Time*.

<sup>65</sup> Wood, "First Lady," 9.

<sup>66</sup> "Hollywood Hotel," CBS radio broadcast.

than she had as a grainy black-and-white photograph on a news page. Just as the silent film star found his and her voice with the rise of the “talkies” in the late 1920s, so did Parsons add her own voice to the chorus. The broadcast offered a heightened sense of intimacy with an audience now able to listen to her in the privacy of the home. This aural experience more closely replicated an exchange of gossip amongst friends and helped to promote the perception that Parsons was discussing her “friends” with other “friends.” Freed from the formal constraints and distance of the print medium, her column as broadcast added a whole new dimension to her work.

Over the course of these “conversations,” listeners would learn “inside” information: who was getting married, who was getting divorced, who was building a house. After greeting each other, Parsons and the performer had an “intimate” conversation; this conversation might also have included tidbits about mutual acquaintances (who were actors and other well-known members of the film industry). The following excerpt from Parsons’s broadcast exemplifies its tone. It also illustrates the extent to which Parsons was celebrated in these broadcasts:

Louella Parsons: Still there city desk? Did you get that last item about Mary Pickford? . . . She’s going to San Francisco to be guest of honor at a Navy Ball. No, that’s all the news so far. Oh, just a minute. Here comes Claudette Colbert. She’s wearing the most stunning gown. I’ll have to call you back later. Hello Claudette. . . . Know any news for the column?

Claudette Colbert: Tell you some news? I have to read your column to find out what I’m doing myself!<sup>67</sup>

The studios benefited considerably from the free publicity Parsons’s show offered. The dramatic reenactments of not-yet-released films by the guest stars offered the studios a powerful vehicle for promotion. This was one reason they looked the other

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

way regarding the compensation (or lack thereof) their actors received for appearing on the broadcast. Rather than being paid to scale, Parsons's guests were paid in cases of Campbell's soup, a highly controversial practice that angered many performers and their agents. Yet they continued to appear because "[a]n invitation to appear on her radio program . . . was tantamount to a command."<sup>68</sup> While the studios may have had some qualms about loaning out their performers for free, this seemed a small price to pay to keep Parsons satisfied and churning out free publicity.

The same month "Hollywood Hotel" went on the air, the FBI opened a file on Parsons. This was no coincidence. With a national radio program in addition to her other media outlets, Parsons was now a media commentator to be reckoned with. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's success and longevity in his post (he served from 1924 to 1972) was due in part to his skillful manipulation of the media. Hoover used the media to turn the FBI into a sought-after brand—complete with books, action figures, and other merchandise—but a brand that could not be used without the explicit approval of Hoover. To this end, Hoover's FBI carefully monitored the nation's press to ensure that its publicity was accurate and positive. The contents of Parsons's FBI file demonstrate the thoroughness of this scrutiny. Unauthorized commentary was carefully tracked, and Parsons emerged as a troublesome source of misinformation and leaks.<sup>69</sup>

Beginning with the incident that opened her file, Hoover's FBI viewed Parsons as of a loose cannon who had to be kept under surveillance and, if need be, control. In October 1934 she wrote an article about a new Paramount film project allegedly

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<sup>68</sup> A.M. Sperber and Eric Lax, *Bogart* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 147.

<sup>69</sup> On Hoover and the media, see, for example, Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1983), and *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

authorized by the Department of Justice on the career of Special Agent Melvin Purvis. Hoover resented any attention given to Purvis, who had emerged as a public hero due to his role in the capture of gangster John Dillinger. The FBI contacted Purvis, who vehemently denied any knowledge of this project. Hoover then brought the matter to the attention of the Attorney General's office, which offered an official denial of any Justice Department authorization of the project. The FBI also contacted Paramount Studios, which characterized Parsons's article as "an unauthorized press statement" though the studio did admit to having "in mind such a picture."<sup>70</sup> Hoover termed the proposed project "a very undesirable . . . type of cheap, nauseating publicity" that would "break down some of the public respect which we have been trying to build up." This film does not seem to have been made, but in the process Parsons had established herself as a member of "a certain segment of the press . . . very repugnant" to the FBI, who needed to be monitored.<sup>71</sup>

This is typical of incidents that would occur over the next twenty years in which Parsons would report on Bureau activity in a manner that suggested she received her information from FBI sources and had a relationship with the FBI and Hoover that did not in fact exist. Her reporting, in some instances, also threatened to compromise ongoing Bureau investigations. For example, Parsons revealed in December 1936 that the FBI was trying to apprehend an individual who was attempting to extort actress Ginger Rogers. In the voluminous FBI correspondence on this matter, an agent reported to Hoover:

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<sup>70</sup> Hoover to William Stanley, Assistant to the Attorney General, October 30, 1934, Louella Parsons FBI file (in author's possession under FOIA).

<sup>71</sup> Hoover to Attorney General, October 26, 1934, Parsons FBI file.

The information concerning the receipt by Ginger of extortion letters had been given through some source to Louella Parsons, the Hollywood gossip writer, and as expected, information concerning the matter appeared in the papers on the morning of the day scheduled as the payoff. We decided at this time that despite the fact of this unfortunate publicity, . . . we would have to proceed with the investigation as if nothing had happened.

The Bureau labored to determine who had leaked the information to Parsons, who went to press with it despite an entreaty from Lela Rogers, Ginger's mother, to "withhold the story." Parsons refused to remain silent on the subject. According to an FBI memo, Parsons "stated that she could not [remain silent] . . . under any circumstances as she would then be 'scooped' by the other newspapers."<sup>72</sup> Bureau officials were irate that Parsons had compromised their investigation though the suspect was apprehended in due course. In a memo to Hoover, Special Agent J.H. Hanson reiterated several times that Parsons had made "no inquiry" of the FBI on this delicate subject though she had claimed to have contacted the FBI prior to going to press with the story.<sup>73</sup> This would not be the last time that Parsons would falsely claim the FBI and/or Hoover as her source.

She also implied that she had a personal relationship with Hoover, though they were never on a first-name basis and remained only acquaintances. In August 1945, for example, an FBI memo circulated regarding Parsons's report on an upcoming film on how "the FBI had protected the secret [of the atom bomb] from the enemy." She alleged to have "talked to Mr. Hoover about the picture and he told her that it was one of the best shows he had ever seen."<sup>74</sup> Parsons had not spoken with Hoover, but she liked to appear to be an FBI insider, like Winchell and other journalists who did in fact have direct access to Hoover. Parsons enhanced her aura of power by counting an influential federal

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<sup>72</sup> Unidentified agent to Hoover, December 8, 1936, Parsons FBI file.

<sup>73</sup> Hanson to Hoover, December 9, 1936, Parsons FBI file.

<sup>74</sup> L.B. Nichols to Clyde Tolson, August 13, 1945, Parsons FBI file.

official, such as Hoover, among her acquaintances and presumably her sources as did Winchell. Hoover did cultivate journalists, businessmen, and other influential Americans who could be of use. To this end, he created a class of “special correspondents,” which included Walter Winchell and later would include Hedda Hopper. Parsons, however, was not classified a special correspondent until March 1960, in the twilight of her career.<sup>75</sup>

Parsons may not have been one of Hoover’s special correspondents; she may in fact have been a thorn in the side of the FBI, but her power only increased in the late 1930s. Since 1926, Parsons had served as motion picture editor for the Universal Service, the Hearst wire service for the morning papers. The International News Service (INS) covered the evening papers. In 1937, the two wire services were merged, and Parsons was appointed the motion picture editor of the INS. This meant that Parsons could place her imprimatur on the motion picture content of the nine hundred papers that subscribed to the INS; it also guaranteed her syndication in a considerable proportion of these papers.

The newly minted motion picture editor of the INS had much to celebrate the following year. On January 15, 1938, *Hollywood Hotel*, the movie, was released. This was not Parsons’s first film project. She had made cameo appearances in the Hearst-owned Cosmopolitan studio films *Show People* (1928) and *The Bellamy Trail* (1929), but her role in this 1938 production was of a very different caliber. Based loosely on her radio broadcast of the same name (and trading on its popularity), the film told the story of a young performer seeking fame and fortune in Hollywood, with Parsons (appearing as herself) as a knowing narrator of sorts. Parsons’s name and her “Hollywood Hotel”

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<sup>75</sup> On Hoover and Winchell’s working relationship, see Gabler, *Winchell*, 197–202. On the special correspondents, see also Curt Gentry, *J. Edgar Hoover: The Man and the Secrets* (New York: Norton, 1991), 384.

franchise provided the foundation for the film's marketing campaign as exemplified by the keynote of the film's trailer: "Make the rounds of Hollywood with the columnist who knows all filmland's secrets . . . famous Louella Parsons."<sup>76</sup> Warner Brothers chose to make this film because of Parsons's importance to the studio. In 1934, Hearst had moved his Cosmopolitan film production company to Warner Brothers from its longtime home at MGM. This made Warner Brothers the chief "moving picture connection of the Hearst institution."<sup>77</sup> Just as MGM had once received special treatment from the Hearst press, including Parsons, now Warner Brothers benefited from this promotional windfall. Indeed Hearst's longtime assistant Joe Willicombe instructed the publisher of the *Los Angeles Examiner*, Parsons's home paper, "Anything you can do to help Warner Brothers will be appreciated."<sup>78</sup> The studio's decision to make this film, which as originally conceived featured Parsons prominently, was a gesture of reciprocity on Warner Brothers' part.

But Warner Brothers' decision to develop this project made good business sense in other respects. The rather lackluster final product—one in which most of Parsons's scenes were cut because of the poor quality of her performance—has obscured the real potential of the project, at least on paper. This property offered an opportunity to cash in on a lucrative genre. Beginning with the film *Front Page* (1931)—adapted from the successful Broadway play of the same name—the newsroom emerged as a popular setting and the reporter as frequent protagonist. In the wake of the commercial and critical success of *Front Page*, which garnered three Academy Award nominations including Best Picture, a deluge of films were produced venerating the journalist as a

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<sup>76</sup> Hollywood Hotel trailer, *Hollywood Hotel*, Warner Brothers, 1938, videocassette.

<sup>77</sup> Nasaw, *The Chief*, 451.

<sup>78</sup> As quoted in Nasaw, *The Chief*, 451.

straight talker in a world full of phonies. The Academy Award sweep (Best Actor, Actress, Director, Picture and Adapted Screenplay) of *It Happened One Night* (1934)—with its newsman hero—cemented the critical and commercial viability of this genre.

The triumph of the celluloid journalist was due in large measure to the legions of former journalists at work behind the camera. While Parsons had segued from film to journalism, many of her colleagues followed the reverse path—from the newsroom to the soundstage. Screenwriters Ben Hecht and Nunnally Johnson and directors Joseph Mankiewicz and Billy Wilder were among the many industry figures who had once made their living as reporters.<sup>79</sup> In thanking the newspaper industry for the “amount of publicity given to the [film] industry gratis” in 1926, Will Hays, head of the MPPDA, pointed to the fact that “more than 725 newspaper men [and women] are now holding key positions in the motion picture field” as a factor in this synergy.<sup>80</sup>

*Hollywood Hotel*, at least as it was originally conceived and organized around Parsons, seemed a very promising property. Busby Berkeley was attached as director—an indication of the studio’s commitment to the project. The film represented a departure of sorts since the journalist at its center was not a fictional character, but Hollywood’s leading reporter playing herself. In the increasingly self-referential world of Hollywood, however, this seemed an inspired casting choice.

But Parsons and Berkeley was not a match made in heaven. Parsons spoke disparagingly of her director, and rumors abounded of tension on the set and endless re-shoots. The finished product did not do well in previews. “I could weep whenever I think about it,” said Parsons of the previews. “I have never been more unhappy in my

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<sup>79</sup> For an insightful discussion of journalism onscreen and journalists behind the scenes, see Leonard, *News For All*, 210–20.

<sup>80</sup> “Hays Thanks Press for Free Space,” *Editor & Publisher*, April 3, 1926.

life.”<sup>81</sup> Her scenes were cut down to the bare minimum before the film went into wide release. This new cut of *Hollywood Hotel* received lukewarm reviews and broke no box-office records. “Aside from a tendency toward orchidaceous fluttering when Lolly holds court, *Hollywood Hotel* is a zippy modern tune & cutie show,” judged one reviewer.<sup>82</sup> A career on the big screen did not materialize for Parsons who acknowledged, “As an actress, I decided, I should be ‘read—and not seen.’”<sup>83</sup> *Hollywood Hotel*, however, was not solely as a vanity project that Warner Brothers brought to the screen to mollify its favorite reporter. This project offered a new twist on the popular and proven genre of journalist as fictional protagonist: a real journalist, playing herself, at the film’s center who brought to the project her unique combination of star power and access to vast media outlets for free publicity. *Hollywood Hotel* did not turn out to be a blockbuster (like hundreds of films released every year), but this project had real, if unrealized, potential in the marketplace this tends to get obscured because it is defined solely as a Parsons’s vanity project.

Through her *Hollywood Hotel* franchise and appointment at the INS, Parsons became a celebrity in her own right. Parsons’s success and unrivaled status as the key reporter in the Hollywood press corps now made her a target for criticism. Like those who peopled her column, Parsons had to endure greater media scrutiny as her fame grew—scrutiny that became increasingly critical and mainstream as the decade wore on. A series of articles appeared in the second half of the 1930s, which were notable not only for their vitriolic tone but also for the fact that such negative commentary appeared in print at all. Prior to this, Parsons had been the subject of little press attention, except for

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<sup>81</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 158.

<sup>82</sup> “Hollywood Hotel,” *Time*.

<sup>83</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 158.

vanity pieces, and this spate of negative publicity represented a major point in her career. Parsons's own gossip mongering was eventually turned against her—the climate of gossip and publicity she helped to create in Hollywood cast a shadow on her life just as she had cast such a shadow on the lives of countless of her subjects. Her wildly successful gossip columning (and that of Walter Winchell) also became a source of concern for her journalistic peers and other social commentators.

The opening salvo in the media attacks came in a 1935 profile (and lead article) in *New Theatre*, a Popular Front arts journal. That this initial critique came from the left was symptomatic of a nation politically polarized as it struggled through the Great Depression with little relief in sight. On both ends of the political spectrum, extreme solutions to the extreme social and economic conditions abounded in the 1930s. On the left, the Popular Front was coalescing. Popular Front organizers made serious inroads in Hollywood and made it a seedbed of left-wing politics, most notably in the widespread unionization of the 1930s. The formation of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) and the reinvigoration of the Screen Writers Guild (SWG) in 1933 marked the beginning of a more than decade-long struggle between management and the rank-and-file over working conditions, salaries, and film content. These labor conflicts played a critical role in polarizing the film industry into political camps on the left and right. Parsons, as a Hearst employee and entrenched member of the Hollywood establishment, was identified with the right and became a target of attacks from the left.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> On Popular Front politicking, union organizing, and political polarization in 1930s Hollywood, see Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 48–72; and Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 83, 88–9.

In California, this nascent political conflict was heightened in August 1934, when muckraking novelist and avowed socialist Upton Sinclair overwhelmingly won the Democratic nomination for California's upcoming gubernatorial race. His quasi-socialist End Poverty in California (EPIC) platform, which called for the state to take over idle factories and unused land for the benefit of the one-quarter of the state's population then on public relief, struck fear in the hearts of California's Republican establishment and business community, including the major studio heads and Hearst. Film industry leaders played a prominent role in the high-profile campaign to demolish Sinclair's candidacy, a campaign that "sparked nothing less than a revolution in American politics . . . [as] Sinclair's opponents virtually invented the modern media campaign."<sup>85</sup> MGM produced anti-Sinclair newsreels as well as a campaign "contribution" for Sinclair's Republican opponent, which was taken from the salaries of the employees of the major studios making more than \$100 a week. Hearst also played a prominent role in the attack on Sinclair, using the considerable media resources at his disposal. With this campaign, Hollywood had entered the national political fray like never before.

In this fraught political climate, Hearst became a particular target of the left. Hearst's widely publicized audience with Hitler in September 1934 and continuing support of Hitler in the face of growing persecution of German Jews and other minorities, his estrangement from and increasingly virulent attacks on the Roosevelt administration, and his anticommunism had, as Hearst biographer David Nasaw has noted, "succeeded in cementing an early Popular Front alliance against him." Thus, the *New Theatre* article

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<sup>85</sup> Greg Mitchell, *The Campaign of the Century: Upton Sinclair's Race for Governor of California and the Birth of Media Politics* (New York: Random House, 1992), xii.

was as much an attack on Hearst as it was on his employee. This profile of Parsons appeared as a Popular Front boycott of Hearst was underway, as noted in the article:

That this waddling drivel-monger, this venomous disagreeable woman can be respected by the big shots is a sad, sad commentary upon the industry. There is some hope, however, that *the increasingly successful boycott of Hearst's papers* will greatly weaken the influence of "the best friend a girl ever had."

The profile disclosed the extent of Parsons's power, announcing that she "is subject to the awe and envy of every Hollywood highbinder. She is feared and admired by filmland's leading executives." This assessment was not inaccurate, and the profile in general offered the most comprehensive discussion of Parsons's methods and influence; however, as an exposé, it got as much wrong as it got right. According to author Joel Faith, "Louella's chief function is to ballyhoo Marion Davies, the blond girl friend of her boss." Parsons did much more than this and to focus exclusively on Davies was to overlook the important role she played in the promotion of the entire film industry. She was denounced as "a poor reporter and a wretched writer" who had "taken it upon herself to give out more misinformation than any other newspaper or magazine writer in Hollywood. . . . Louella's is a bland, invincible stupidity." Such characterizations dismissed Parsons's considerable reporting skills and experience.<sup>86</sup>

Parsons and her allies were able to undermine and dismiss the *New Theatre* attack as leftist propaganda. *Variety*, the influential Hollywood trade paper, cast *New Theatre* as "out-and-out communistic" in its coverage of the controversy that ensued. Rumors abounded that "copies of the magazine were selling at a premium among film folk," as the journal rapidly disappeared from newsstands. Hollywood insiders were

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<sup>86</sup> Nasaw, *The Chief*, 506; Joel Faith, "Louella Parsons—Hearst's Hollywood Stoooge," *New Theatre* (August 1935): 3, 2.

unquestionably paying close attention to this exposé, but this radical journal reached a relatively small and specialized audience that accounted for, at best, a miniscule proportion of Parsons's audience.<sup>87</sup>

Two months later, another profile of Parsons appeared, this time in the *New York Herald Tribune*. This article assumed a more sardonic and patronizing, rather than outright hostile, tone: "Miss Louella O. Parsons is the most powerful of all those who pour their thoughts upon the screen's events into the ears of an eager public. . . . Like the tables of the law, her word comes down afresh each morning from that new Sinai, Beverly Hills, and lately the amateurs of radio have had the privilege of hearing her voice on the air."<sup>88</sup> This probing national publicity illustrated growing concerns about Parsons's power and influence. It was also part of a groundswell of interest in and analysis of the work of the gossip columnists and their place in American society. The remarkable success of Parsons (and Winchell) led many to begin to question their methods and the reasons for their popularity.

In the summer of 1938, Parsons faced her greatest professional challenge to date. In the months after the film *Hollywood Hotel* was released, industry performers successfully challenged the paltry compensation they received for appearances on the radio broadcast of the same name. SAG, the actors' union, finally managed to enforce Rule No. 6: "No member shall give a free performance on the radio. Acceptance of an amount of compensation so far below the member's usual standard to amount to evasion of this rule shall constitute violation of the rule."<sup>89</sup> Though SAG was first formed in 1933, it was not until 1937 that the studios finally recognized and signed a contract with

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<sup>87</sup> As quoted in "Louella Parsons: Reel Two," *New Theatre* (September 1935): 5.

<sup>88</sup> Joseph Alsop, Jr., "Miss Louella Parsons Speaking," *New York Herald Tribune*, October 27, 1935.

<sup>89</sup> "Screen Actors Guild Memo to Class A Members," March 1941, Screen Actors Guild folder, HHc.

SAG. The long labor struggle of film actors had finally achieved some success and greatly expanded the rights of studio performers. Performers and their agents who had long been disgruntled with payment in the form of soup for their work on “Hollywood Hotel” were able to achieve collectively through their union what they could not achieve as individuals. As one reporter put it: “What no individual actor had dared to say even privately the all-powerful organization of actors threatened to say publicly and loudly.”<sup>90</sup> “Hollywood Hotel” guests would have to be paid to scale or its sponsor, Campbell’s Soup, would face legal action. Parsons refused to alter the show’s format, but the cost of paying the guests that Parsons demanded—the screen’s major stars—proved to be too expensive for her sponsors who had already invested a great deal of money buying air-time to make this a national radio broadcast. As a result, she was dropped from the show and replaced with a host who was willing to forego on-the-air interviews with the leading actors and actresses of the day and readings from upcoming films. The ratings of “Hollywood Hotel,” minus its famous hostess, plummeted and the show went off the air in short order.

Recognition by the studios legitimized SAG and its efforts, and SAG played the pivotal role in ending actor “exploitation by ‘free’ talent shows” such as “Hollywood Hotel.” Yet there were other compelling reasons why Parsons was successfully challenged at this particular time. In 1938, the Hearst media empire was in receivership and on the verge of bankruptcy, thanks in part to the continued national economic crisis, which had steadily eroded revenue of the Hearst media empire. While his newspaper empire remained largely intact and Hearst maintained editorial control, he was vulnerable and could ill afford to cross SAG publicly, if Parsons called upon him for help. Though

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<sup>90</sup> Frederick Lewis, “Queen Louella: The Private Life,” *Liberty*, July 19, 1941, p. 17.

Parsons's radio broadcasting career was conducted independently from Hearst Enterprises, her place in the Hearst hierarchy had helped to silence critics and forestall action. With the Hearst empire in jeopardy, Parsons's questionable practices were called into question, and she lost this very public battle.<sup>91</sup>

On the heels of this defeat, the *Saturday Evening Post* published a scathing profile of "The First Lady of Hollywood":

[T]he solid success of Louella Parsons as a journalist might not unfairly be said to fall quite within this category of baffling phenomena, possibly a little below the luminous angels and just above the crucified cockroaches. In a particularly villainous field of letters—Hollywood of the gossip writers—she fought her way to the top a dozen years ago, and today, with more than 125 newspapers echoing her *gay illiteracies*, she is still a plump head and shoulders above the pack of cinematic scavengers who compete with her.

The *Saturday Evening Post* went on to charge: "[E]ven in her own field, where bad writing is as natural and as common as breathing, Louella's stands out like an asthmatic's gasps. Given any field at all, she is probably the most consistently inaccurate reporter who ever lived to draw \$600 a week. As a critic, her soul adventuring among the studio masterpieces, she employs no standard higher than your shoelace, and as often as not is a great deal nearer the heel." This *Post* profile echoed the *New Theatre* attack of four years earlier and was relentlessly critical—even Parsons's acknowledged generosity to down-on-their-luck actors and actresses, fellow journalists, and other acquaintances was dismissed as the actions of "a damply sentimental woman." A crucial difference, however, between these two articles was their audience: *New Theatre* was a small Popular Front journal while the *Saturday Evening Post* was one of the nation's most important mass circulation magazines with a readership of more than three million. The *Post* had a readership that overlapped significantly with that of Parsons's. Thomas

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<sup>91</sup> On the Hearst crisis, see Nasaw, *The Chief*, 534–42.

Wood, the author of this profile, suggested that her influence “is not what it was . . . [because] Hearst is no longer in the all-powerful position he once had to help her.”<sup>92</sup>

There is no question that the near bankruptcy that sent the Hearst Corporation into receivership in July 1937 and the breathless media coverage of this collapse freed Parsons’s many detractors to publicly air their opinions, without fear of retribution. Yet Wood would suffer from Parsons’s wrath for the rest of his career, in part because he greatly exaggerated Parsons’s so-called decline. While Parsons privately pursued a vendetta against Wood, publicly she seemed to accept it with good humor. Indeed, the title of her 1944 memoir *The Gay Illiterate* derived its title from Wood’s remark about the nation’s newspapers “echoing her gay illiteracies.” Parsons weathered this storm of negative publicity just as the Hearst empire weathered its financial storm.

But trouble lie ahead: a challenger to her throne of Hollywood gossip was being groomed. Actress Hedda Hopper began her career as a gossip columnist in 1937 and was steadily gaining on Parsons. Then in January 1941, Hopper broke a story that humiliated her rival Parsons personally and professionally. A rivalry was born that electrified the film world and helped usher in a new era of celebrity journalism.

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<sup>92</sup> Wood, “First Lady,” 8, 48. Emphasis mine. On the *Post* circulation, see Leonard, *News for All*, 170.

### Chapter 3: “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood”: Much Ado about *Kane* and A Worthy Rival, 1937–1943

Film columnist Louella Parsons and stage and screen actress Hedda Hopper became friends in the New York film community of late 1910s and established a mutually beneficial exchange of press coverage and industry gossip. As Parsons’s longtime assistant and successor, Dorothy Manners, remembered: “Louella and Hedda used to be very good friends. You see, Hedda started as an actress and she supplied Louella with quite a little bit of gossip.”<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1920s, the film columnist and the film actress were both single working mothers making new homes for themselves in the burgeoning West Coast film colony of Hollywood. In the mid-1930s, Parsons reigned supreme as the “First Lady of Hollywood.” For Hopper, the collapse of the stock market combined with the collapse of her nearly thirty-year-long acting career left her casting about for new sources of income. Hopper had watched Parsons build a lucrative career in gossip reporting and decided to follow in her footsteps in the mid-1930s. Hopper’s path to the top of the Hollywood press corps was circuitous, a product of her own hard work, her extensive contacts in the industry, her biting political commentary, as well as good luck and good timing.

As Hopper entered the field, Hearst reporters Louella Parsons and Walter Winchell, the two leading practitioners of the celebrity gossip column of the day, had begun to come under intense media scrutiny because of their considerable success and because of the nature of the political commentary in their columns as the world went to

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Manners oral history, folder 15-f.437 1990: oral histories, HWPCc.

war. Hopper, a neophyte in comparison to Parsons and Winchell's combined 40-plus years in journalism, benefited from and capitalized upon this media attention. She learned well from Parsons and Winchell's mistakes as well as their triumphs, particularly in their multi-media approach to their work.

Then another neophyte—in filmmaking—made a film, *Citizen Kane* (1941), which rocked the Hollywood establishment. Hopper was one of the first reporters to expose certain truths about this film. In doing so, she spectacularly scooped Parsons on this story. The result was the professional and personal humiliation of Parsons and the beginning of a rivalry that brought Parsons and Hopper greater fame and infamy than either of them might have achieved alone. By the early 1940s, their battle for supremacy in the Hollywood press corps would dramatically alter the tone and content of the syndicated gossip columns bearing the dateline Hollywood.

Stardom had eluded Hopper throughout her long career as an actress, a profession she had chosen before the glamorous precincts of Hollywood had come into being. Hedda Hopper was her stage name; she was born Elda Furry in rural Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania on May 2, 1885, and not in 1890 as she later claimed. (Like Parsons, Furry lied about her age later in life to succeed in an industry in which, as one of Hopper's profilers judged, it was "considered a sin for a woman to be even 40.") The middle child of the seven surviving children born to butcher David Furry and Margaret Miller, Elda grew up in the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. In 1898, she was forced to leave school while in the eighth grade because her full-time help was required at home and in the family's butcher shop.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Hopping Around Hollywood with Hedda Hopper," *Look*, September 10, 1940, p. 42 in HH bio files. On Hopper's early life, see George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 53–60.

Elda Furry, however, harbored ambitions that would lead her far from home. She wanted to be an actress despite the fact that her Quaker family “violently disapproved of the theater.” In 1903, Furry “fought her way out of the family once and for all” at the age of 18. She “ran away . . . and went on the stage” and for the next half decade worked in regional theater and attended the Carter Conservatory of Music in Pittsburgh. Furry moved to New York City, the nation’s theater capital, in 1908 to pursue her acting career. The twenty-three-year-old Furry first found work as a chorus girl touring with an opera Company. In December 1908 made her Broadway debut in the chorus of *The Pied Piper*, a musical featuring her future husband DeWolf Hopper. Furry and Hopper worked together again a year later, at which point a romance blossomed. For the next three-and-a-half years, Furry worked steadily in nationwide tours of Broadway shows, and her relationship with Hopper continued though there were obstacles: the fifty-one-year-old DeWolf Hopper was twice Furry’s age and was in the midst of his fourth marriage when they met. But he was a man of considerable charms. “His massive size, his voice, his storytelling gift—Wolfie was a six-foot-three riot,” Furry recounted. “From the moment I saw him he fascinated me.” He also offered Furry, a working actress heretofore confined largely to regional theater, entrée into the loftiest ranks of the New York entertainment and social world. “As Wolfie’s wife,” she said, “I didn’t hover around the fringes of the world of celebrated people; I was pitchforked right in amongst ‘em.”<sup>3</sup>

Furry and Hopper married on May 8, 1913; the bride was 28 and the groom was 55. “From that sensationally popular musical comedy star, Elda acquired a dressing room knowledge of practically everybody on the stage,” schooling that would serve her

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Sill Wickware, “Hedda Hopper,” *Life*, November 20, 1944, p. 64; “The Gossipist,” *Time*, July 28, 1947, p. 61; Hedda Hopper, *From under my Hat* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1952), 9, 46.

well in her mid-life career shift to Hollywood gossip columnist. Indeed the former Elda Furry acknowledged her debt to Hopper in her 1952 memoir. "But for DeWolf Hopper," she conceded, "this book would never have been written. Life with him was a liberal education. He set my feet upon the way." The new Mrs. Hopper gave up her acting career for the first three years of her marriage. Instead she accompanied her husband on his theatrical tours until she became pregnant. DeWolf William Hopper, Jr. (known as Bill) was born on January 26, 1915.<sup>4</sup>

In the summer of 1915, DeWolf, Sr. was offered a lucrative film contract. Shortly thereafter, the new family relocated to the film colony springing up just outside Los Angeles. Furry fondly remembered her first year in Hollywood: "[O]ur parties were simple, chummy, wholesome. We had barn dances in barns, not in places made over to look like them."<sup>5</sup> These might have been halcyon days for her, but not for her husband. While many stage actors gracefully made the transition to film, others did not; Elda was among the former and DeWolf, whose films were critical and box office failures, was among the latter. Elda returned to acting in the spring of 1916 in the motion picture *The Battle of Hearts*, which became the first of hundreds of film roles over the course of a long career. Despite Elda's modest success in this new medium, the Hoppers returned to New York that fall so that DeWolf could resume his career on the stage. Elda found steady film work in the studios in and around New York as well as theater roles. She would alternate between the stage and screen for the rest of her career.

In 1918, she landed the supporting role in the film *Virtuous Wives*, playing a "smart, sophisticated, Fifth Avenue matron type," the kind of role that later became her

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<sup>4</sup> "The Gossipist," 61; Hopper, *From under*, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Hopper, "Unmasking Hollywood Society," *Picture Play* 4 (June 1939): 20.

trademark. According to Hopper, “All the time that picture was being made a little round man kept getting in our way, peeking out from behind some bush just when we were ready for a take.” That man was producer Louis B. Mayer and that film gave him his first producer’s credit. *Virtuous Wives* also marked the beginning of a long and profitable working relationship between Hopper and Mayer.<sup>6</sup>

Elda billed herself as Mrs. DeWolf Hopper in the credits of *Virtuous Wives*. She had used a variety of names professionally since her 1908 arrival in New York: Elda Millar, Elda Curry, as well as her given and married names. After the release of *Virtuous Wives*, Elda changed her first name to Hedda, paired it with her married surname, and was known as Hedda Hopper thereafter. Once Hopper became a celebrity reporter, she frequently recounted the same amusing anecdote—amusing unless you happened to be DeWolf Hopper, Sr.—to explain her name change:

My husband, Wolfie, was much older than my father and had been married four times before. The wives’ names all sounded pretty much the same: Ella, Ida, Edna, and Nella. His memory wasn’t as sharp as it had been, and he couldn’t always remember that I was Elda.

As time went on, this started to irk me, so the numerologist came up with *Hedda* Hopper. I asked how much. “Ten dollars.” That’s exactly how it happened; *it changed my whole life*.<sup>7</sup>

With this self-deprecating anecdote, she seized the advantage from those who might use her marriage to a much older man and name change to denigrate her. She took control of her own story and deployed self-mockery to rectify disparities and disjunctions between her private and public personas. In this instance, Hopper followed the example set by Parsons in the creation and maintenance of the role of gossip columnist; Hopper would

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<sup>6</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 102, 105.

<sup>7</sup> Hedda Hopper and James Brough, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 7–8. Second emphasis mine.

adjust her persona to suit her own style and needs, but Parsons provided an invaluable blueprint for reporter as celebrity.

Her new name, however, was not the impetus for change, as Hopper tells it, but rather the result of considerable personal and professional growth. But by 1918 Hopper had built a promising career for herself in a medium in which her celebrated husband had failed. *Virtuous Wives* brought her critical accolades and notice from her peers. Her name change in the wake of this film was a declaration of independence. As she would later acknowledge about this critical juncture, “At last I had an identity of my own.”<sup>8</sup>

The same year “Hedda Hopper” came into being, Parsons arrived in New York, eager to make a name for herself in the nation’s entertainment and media center. Hopper, an up-and-coming film actress and wife of a Broadway star, was on a first-name basis with the Barrymores, the Fairbanks, and the lesser lights of the stage and screen, making her an ideal contact for Parsons. In turn, Parsons promoted Hopper, announcing, for example, in November 1919 that “Mrs. Hopper is one of the best screen actresses we know.”<sup>9</sup> According to screenwriter and director Frances Marion, Hopper considered Parsons a very good friend during her time in New York.<sup>10</sup>

As Hedda Hopper’s acting career flourished in the late 1910s, her marriage floundered. DeWolf’s career were dimming, and he found himself increasingly relegated to regional theater. While he was away from home much of the time on tour, his wife and young son remained in New York where Hedda worked seemingly around the clock on both film and theater projects. In 1922, the Hoppers divorced and Hedda was granted

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<sup>8</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Parsons, “In and Out of Focus,” MT, November 13, 1919.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Marion, *Off With Their Heads! A Serio-Comic Tale of Hollywood* (New York MacMillan, 1972), 97.

full custody of their son Bill. Like Parsons before her, she was now a single working mother in New York's entertainment world. Unlike Parsons, she never married again.

*Hedda Hopper in Hollywood*

In addition to *Virtuous Wives*, Hopper appeared in several Mayer productions between 1918 and 1923. In 1923, this veteran of more than twenty films for various production companies signed her first long-term film contract with Louis B. Mayer Productions. She relocated once again to Los Angeles where she resided at the famed Hollywood Hotel, after which Parsons's popular 1930s radio program would be named. With this move, Hopper became one of the many correspondents who supplied her friend Louella with news of life in the burgeoning film colony.<sup>11</sup>

In 1924, Loew's, the prestigious East Coast theater chain, acquired Mayer's production company and the Goldwyn studio and merged these production and distribution units with Metro Pictures, which Loew's already owned. Mayer was chosen to serve as general manager and vice president of the newly created Metro-Goldwyn, which officially became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) the following year. This merger was emblematic of an era of vertical and horizontal integration that transformed the corporate landscape of the film industry and had important consequences for members of this industry. With the formation of MGM, Hopper went from being a contract player at a middling independent production company to being a contract player at one of the largest and most important studios in Hollywood. "Being under contract to Metro gave you a 'high rating,'" Hopper conceded. "A player on the list at the top studio was in demand."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 124–5, 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

Another unit that became a part of MGM as a result of the merger was Hearst's Cosmopolitan Productions. In February 1923, Hearst had ended his four-year partnership with Adolph Zukor and had allied his production company with Goldwyn Pictures, a deal Parsons proclaimed "[o]ne of the largest and most important deals ever consummated in the motion picture industry." Goldwyn, however, became part of MGM in the May 1924 merger. After lengthy negotiations, Hearst finalized a deal in March 1925 to affiliate Cosmopolitan Productions with MGM. Hopper was now an employee of the same studio as actress Marion Davies. In 1925 Hopper appeared in her first Cosmopolitan production, *Zander the Great*, in which Davies starred. Hopper played the kindly Mrs. Caldwell who took in the orphaned Mamie, played by Davies. Off-screen, the two women struck up a friendship that would last for the rest of their lives. Hopper became a part of the Hearst-Davies social circle and spent considerable time at the Santa Monica beach house as well as the "castle" at San Simeon. The following year, Parsons settled in Los Angeles and entered this social world as well.<sup>13</sup>

Mayer, Hearst, Davies, and Parsons were among the scores of important relationships Hopper nurtured and sustained over the next nine years. As a contract player at MGM, Hopper appeared in more than seventy-five films and carved out a niche for herself as a professional, reliable character actress. As Hopper aptly put it, "I wasn't a star, only a featured player in support of the big shots. I was the mean woman who made the stars look good. . . . I was also the matron forever on the make; the title-hunting mama. . . . If there was no part for me at MGM, I visited other studios and rented myself

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<sup>13</sup> Parsons, "In and Out of Focus," MT, February 22, 1923. On Cosmopolitan Productions, see David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 280, 326-7; and Louis Pizzatola, *Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion, and Propaganda in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 208-9, 216-7, 224-5.

out.”<sup>14</sup> Under the terms of the standard contract, actors could and did work for other producers with the approval of their home studio, terms Hopper ably exploited.

Then, in 1932, Hopper’s contract at MGM was not renewed. “I’d been around too long; they grew tired of my face” was how Hopper explained why her contract was terminated.<sup>15</sup> In a youth-obsessed industry, Hopper had become expendable at the age of forty-seven; competition for the very limited number of roles available to women over forty was intense. Economic retrenchment came to the film studios, as it did to businesses across the nation in the midst of the Great Depression; staff cuts were one strategy used to save money and stem financial losses during the prolonged economic crisis. Since Hopper had also lost her savings in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, she needed to find alternative sources of income and spent the next five years struggling to make ends meet.

Hopper continued to perform on both stage and screen. From 1932 to 1937, she acted in some thirty films. She also tried her hand at a variety of occupations, including talent agent, real estate broker, and politician. Hopper avidly followed politics; as one fan magazine profile reported, “If there is anything you’d like to find out about . . . how things are going in Congress, in the Senate, in the White House . . . ask . . . Hedda Hopper!”<sup>16</sup> Hopper claimed, “I was 22 before I ever met a Republican, and it took me five years to discover they were people, too,” but by the 1930s she was a fiercely partisan Republican.<sup>17</sup> In 1932, she ran for Los Angeles county political office.<sup>18</sup> Her bid for

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<sup>14</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 229–30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>16</sup> Gladys Hall, “Lady-in-the-Know: A Conversation,” n.d., Folder 255, Gladys Hall collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>17</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” August 22, 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

<sup>18</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 130–1.

political office failed, but Hopper would later find an outlet for her political beliefs and passions in her reporting career—a career that got off to a rocky start in 1935.

Beginning in late 1935, Hopper wrote a weekly column on Hollywood for the *Washington Herald*. Eleanor “Cissy” Medill Patterson, a member of the Medill-Patterson-McCormick newspaper family that owned and ran the *Chicago Tribune* and *New York Daily News* and operated an influential newspaper syndicate service, was then leasing the *Herald* from a financially troubled Hearst. Hopper met Patterson through Davies and Hearst. According to Hopper, it was while both women were guests at Wynton, the Hearst estate in northern California, that Patterson suggested the column to Hopper: “[A]fter listening in on a conversation about Hollywood stars, Cissy said to me, ‘Why don’t you write about that?’” Patterson was not the first to suggest that Hopper write about Hollywood. In an interview conducted years before Hopper became a journalist, movie fan magazine writer Gladys Hall characterized Hopper, who had long served as a quotable and knowledgeable resource for the members of the Hollywood press corps, as “Lady-in-the-Know”: “If there is anything you’d like to find out about Hollywood . . . ask . . . Hedda Hopper . . . Hollywood’s MOST POPULAR GUEST.” Hall suggested Hopper turn her talents to “writing.” Hopper presciently replied, “It may not be too late yet.”<sup>19</sup>

Hopper’s employment at the *Herald* lasted only four months, but she continued to explore new opportunities in the media. She decided to put her acting skills to use in the relatively new medium of radio for the first time. Her initial attempts to find radio work proved fruitless, and a friend suggested she contact Dema Harshbarger, head of NBC’s talent bureau in Los Angeles. In 1936, Harshbarger took Hopper on as a client because

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<sup>19</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 265; Hall, “Lady-in-the-Know.”

“[i]n 45 minutes . . . Hedda told me as much about Hollywood as I could have learned in two years.” Harshbarger became a valuable ally, advocate, and then devoted friend who by the early 1940s was employed full-time as Hopper’s business manager. While Harshbarger was convinced of Hopper’s potential, it took a year to find Hopper radio work because others considered her a “has-been.”<sup>20</sup> “I was shunned,” Hopper said forthrightly of these lean years in which her status in the acting profession dropped precipitously. “In show business it’s always feast or famine. If you have a job, another bobs up. The logic being that if you’re working, you’re good; if you’re idle, you must be bad.”<sup>21</sup> In 1937, Hopper was once again invited to feast.

### *Laboring in a New Field*

Hopper began hosting a fifteen-minute Hollywood gossip program sponsored by Maro-Oil Shampoo in 1937. Though the show aired for only three months, it provided Hopper with much-needed exposure and attracted interest in a print version of the broadcast. Later that same year, she signed on with the Esquire Syndicate to write a gossip column that was sold initially to thirteen newspapers, including the *Los Angeles Times*. To succeed in the Hollywood press corps, Hopper needed to place her column in a local paper. A critical component of Hopper’s audience—the members of the film industry about whom she wrote—would pay little heed to her work unless her column was readily accessible. Thus her syndication in the *Times* offered some credibility and status for a novice reporter in a crowded field: the Hollywood press corps had more than three hundred members by the early 1940s.<sup>22</sup> Hopper denied that she had “made use of” her friendship with *Times* publisher Norman Chandler “to promote a sale,” but the ample

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<sup>20</sup> “Hedda Makes Hay,” *Time*, May 25, 1942, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 232, 262.

<sup>22</sup> Wickware, “Hedda Hopper,” 63.

evidence of her willingness to call upon her influential and powerful friends to advance her career suggests otherwise.<sup>23</sup> The conservative politics that prevailed at the Los Angeles *Times* also made it a good fit for Hopper.

In her inaugural column in February 1938, Hopper announced, “[T]oday I begin laboring in a new field. . . . I can only write about the Hollywood I know. About my friends, neighbors, and fellow workers.” This “fellow worker” highlighted her twenty-two years of experience in the film industry to establish her credentials. She continued, “A great deal of it [Hollywood] is ruled by fear. Fear that the next picture won’t be as good as the last. Fear of options. Bad publicity.” Here Hopper served notice that she was now in a position to deliver publicity—both good and bad—and that her place in the industry hierarchy had shifted.<sup>24</sup>

Hopper had embarked on a new career that placed her in competition with Parsons. But Hopper was at this stage a novice reporter with a miniscule circulation in thirteen small, regional newspapers, and she posed little threat to Parsons. When Hopper began writing her column the film *Hollywood Hotel*—Parsons’s starring vehicle—was still in theaters. Parsons was the grand dame of the Hollywood press corps, her column syndicated in more than three hundred newspapers for a total circulation estimated between ten and twenty million. But her place in the film industry hierarchy was becoming increasingly precarious. Plagued with serious financial difficulties, the Hearst Corporation just barely avoided bankruptcy by entering into receivership in mid-1937. This financial crisis, coupled with the anticommunist, anti-New Deal tone of the Hearst press—dictated in large part by the Chief himself—attracted not only criticism but a call

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<sup>23</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 266.

<sup>24</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” February 14, 1938, scrapbook #4, HHc.

to action in the form of Popular Front boycotts of the Hearst media. And Parsons became a lightning rod for criticism of this media empire. In the summer of 1938, Parsons lost her radio broadcast; the following summer, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran a critical profile of Parsons that judged her power compromised though “there is still no other gossip columnist to challenge her influence in the studios.” This would soon change.<sup>25</sup>

It has been suggested that studio executives eager to capitalize upon Parsons’s vulnerability orchestrated Hopper’s career in journalism. Parsons lent credence to this speculation when she remarked, “According to many widespread rumors, she [Hopper] was to be used primarily to offset me and my influence.” George Eells, author of a dual biography of Parsons and Hopper, contended that “L.B. Mayer, found her [Parsons’s] increasing demands disruptive, and along with several other titans, he set about creating a rival [Hopper] who would be strong enough to curb Louella’s power.” Hopper neither confirmed nor denied these rumors explicitly; she seemed to find them amusing and perhaps also enjoyed the discomfort they caused Parsons. Her comments about the genesis of her reporting career were often ambiguous and could be misleading, like this statement made in 1952: “Writing a column is the only job ever handed to me on a silver platter.” This was a rather remarkable statement for a woman not known for her modesty, especially given how hard she worked on the advancement of her journalism career. Hopper’s “modesty” in this instance was more likely an attempt to goad Parsons by seeming to substantiate the rumors surrounding the origins of Hopper’s newfound fame as a gossip columnist.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas Wood, “The First Lady of Hollywood,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 15, 1939, p. 48.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1961), 22; Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 171; Hopper, *From under*, 265.

Hopper reserved special praise for Ida Koverman: “Eight weeks after the column started, Ida Koverman, then assistant to Mr. Big, Louis B. Mayer, gave a hen party for me, which meant she was putting *her stamp of approval* on my new activity.” This was not the first time Koverman had acted to improve Hopper’s employment prospects. As former secretary of the Republican County Central Committee of Los Angeles, Koverman had supported Hopper’s failed bid for Los Angeles county political office in 1932. Koverman’s long career in Republican party politics was the reason Mayer hired her in 1928, the same year her former employer Herbert Hoover was elected president. Mayer valued her connections and savvy, given his efforts to leverage financial contributions and the considerable resources of MGM into political influence on the state and national level. Indeed Koverman was much more than just a secretary to Mayer. She also acted as a talent scout—Judy Garland and Mario Lanza were just two of the MGM stars she brought to Mayer’s attention—and was considered by many to be “the most important person in the studio next to Mayer and [production head Irving] Thalberg.” Thus Koverman’s support of Hopper was tantamount to a seal of approval from Mayer; Koverman advised Mayer to support her good friend Hopper’s career, just as she had advised him in other instances. And Mayer did, after all, have good reason for desiring an alternative to Parsons.<sup>27</sup>

Hearst’s Cosmopolitan Productions had been based at MGM from 1925 to 1934.

This meant MGM had received special treatment from the Hearst press—including, of

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 274. Emphasis mine; Charles Higham, *Merchant of Dreams: Louis B. Mayer, M.G.M. and the Secret Hollywood* (New York: Donald I. Fine, 1993), 153. A secretary to Herbert Hoover in the 1910s, Koverman worked as a Republican party official in California and liaison for Hoover in the state while he served as secretary of commerce in the Harding and Coolidge administrations. On Koverman, see Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 19–21; 29–31; Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 130–1; 171; Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor, 1988), 115–6; and Higham, *Merchant of Dreams*, 124, 126, 133, 153.

course, Parsons—for almost a decade, a significant promotional advantage that no doubt had helped MGM emerge as the most prestigious and profitable of the Hollywood studios during this period. Hearst, however, grew dissatisfied as the years passed and Davies's career stalled. In November 1934, *Cosmopolitan* moved to the Warner Brothers lot. MGM had lost its coveted position as the “moving picture connection of the Hearst institution,” giving Mayer good reason to promote the career of another columnist who might challenge Parsons's heretofore unrivaled status atop the Hollywood press corps.<sup>28</sup>

In a 1940 letter to “My dear Louis,” Hopper addressed the rumors that circulated about Mayer's role in her personal and professional life with considerable sarcasm:

You bought my little house on Fairfax, and you've been contributing to my support ever since I've been in Hollywood. All I can say is, you ought to be ashamed of yourself to have let me work as hard as I have! And if you couldn't buy your girl friend a bigger house than I'm now living in, you should sue the person who spread the report, and so should I.

She signed it ironically: “Your light o' love.”<sup>29</sup> But Hopper was neither Mayer's “light o' love” nor his “creation.” In the summer of 1938, shortly after she began writing her newspaper column, Hopper sought an advertising job with the Hearst Corporation. T.J. Buttikofer, a vice president at Hearst Magazines Inc., wrote Hopper, “Though we have West Coast representatives for our advertising divisions on the Coast, it is possible that you can be of much help. Just at this time, however, I believe we could work together editorially to much better advantage.” He advised Hopper to contact the editor of *Cosmopolitan* who “might be able to use a single feature story or two if you have any

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<sup>28</sup>As quoted in Nasaw, *The Chief*, 451. Mayer needed to remedy this publicity breach, but internal political strife at MGM required his attention. In late 1936, Mayer emerged from years of tumult as MGM's undisputed leader and could seek a solution to the loss of favored status with the Hearst press.

<sup>29</sup>Hopper to Mayer, September 6, 1940, Louis B. Mayer file, HHc.

definite ideas in mind.”<sup>30</sup> At this juncture, Hopper was not convinced that her fame and fortune lay in a career as a gossip columnist. If she had possessed Mayer’s explicit backing from the outset, she would not have needed to pursue other options. Indeed she would not have needed to work as hard as she did in the first two years of her career to eventually secure a more lucrative syndication deal and a radio broadcast. Her relatively rapid rise within the Hollywood press corps was due in part to the willingness of studio publicity departments to grant her favored status, but she won this status mostly through her own hard work and good timing. Once she had proven herself to be valuable, Hopper benefited from the largesse of many in the Hollywood publicity machine, including Mayer. In the beginning they no doubt viewed her as an “amusing, none-too-successful actress who was always grateful for work” thus making her “easy to control”—easier certainly to control than Parsons.<sup>31</sup> This perception would prove to be absolutely wrong.

Rebuffed in her attempt to change careers, Hopper followed Buttikofer’s advice and remained on the editorial side with her initial discretion as a writer giving way to a more biting tone. Hopper claimed that her earliest columns were discreet and complimentary: “I put all the juicy scandalous things I knew about my fellow workers in mothballs.”<sup>32</sup> She found, however, that this approach did not make her stand out in an industry “crawling with” columnists and began to adopt a more scolding tone. “Wonder why so many of our stars are antagonistic to studio still pictures when those pictures are carefully retouched, and players are safeguarded in every way? At private parties they’ll preen themselves before anybody’s camera,” Hopper wrote in December 1938 as her

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<sup>30</sup> Buttikofer to Hopper, August 31, 1938, William Randolph Hearst file, HHc.

<sup>31</sup> Eells, *Hedda and Louella*, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 274.

writing became more critical, opinionated, and idiosyncratic.<sup>33</sup> Reporting upon singer-actor Nelson Eddy's most recent film in late December 1938, for example, Hopper cruelly inquired: "Technicolor did things for Nelson Eddy, too. But is he getting a little roll around his waist, or did his chest slip?"<sup>34</sup>

Hopper had achieved a modest degree of success by the time she reached the year and a half mark in her new career, but she still needed to secure placement in a New York City newspaper, which was crucial to national success in her newly chosen profession. In June 1939, Hopper obtained a letter of recommendation from *Los Angeles Times* managing editor L.D. Hotchkiss to "attempt to place [her] . . . column in other newspapers." Hotchkiss extolled Hopper's column:

Situating as we are at the source of motion picture news our readers comprise a critical audience. Press agent hokum doesn't go. They want facts and they want these facts made interesting. Consequently we must get our news of Hollywood from someone who knows that magic place and isn't fooled by the glamour thereof. For the reasons enumerated your column is especially valuable to any other newspaper which desires an interesting and informative column on the activities of the motion picture industry and the people who comprise it.<sup>35</sup>

In particular, Hopper used this letter of recommendation to try to convince her "dear W.R." who ranked among her "very good friends and always a booster" to place her column in his *New York Daily Mirror*. In July 1939 she wrote Hearst: "I realize you can't get very far in the newspaper world without a New York outlet. And the outlet I have my heart set on is your Daily Mirror. I went to [Mirror publisher] Mr. McCabe when I was back there a few weeks ago. He was delightful. . . . But held out very little hope." The *Mirror* already ran Jimmie Fidler's column on Hollywood, but Hopper hoped

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<sup>33</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," December 26, 1938, scrapbook #1, HHc.

<sup>34</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," December 21, 1938, scrapbook #1, HHc.

<sup>35</sup> Hotchkiss to Hopper, June 23, 1939, LAT file, HHc.

that her column could be run side by side with Fidler's as it was in the *Los Angeles Times*. An anxious Hopper reminded Hearst, "[W]hile I've asked favors of you for other people . . . this is the first one I've ever asked for myself." Hearst responded immediately and graciously to Hopper's request and promised to "do what I can to place it there." But he also warned her that "[t]he Mirror is a small condensed paper . . . [so] there is difficulty in placing a new feature."<sup>36</sup>

Three months passed. Nothing transpired. In the interim, the popular MGM film *The Women*—adapted from the popular stage play written by Clare Boothe—was released. *The Women* explored the deleterious impact of gossip on members of New York's high society, both in private, communal exchanges and in print. Boothe, married to media magnate Henry Luce, explored themes of gossip in the media and the meaning of celebrity—wanted or unwanted—that were emerging as pressing concerns in U.S. society. Boothe, reflecting the growing alarm of many, explored the role and function of gossip in the media and shed light on the often destructive power of the gossip columnist. In the play, a fictional item from Walter Winchell's column was recited to illustrate how some of the characters' personal travails had become fodder for the press. For the screenplay, the character of gossip columnist Dolly Dupuyster was created to embody this critique of the entertainment press, and Hopper lobbied hard and won the role. In a fictional universe, Hopper-as-Dupuyster elevated Hopper to Parsons and Winchell's league, and she sought to profit from this not yet truly accurate comparison.

This instance of art imitating life raised Hopper's profile and emboldened her to once again petition Hearst in the fall of 1939. This time Hopper explicitly addressed the

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<sup>36</sup> Hopper to Hearst, July 27, 1939 and Hearst to Hopper, July 30, 1939, William Randolph Hearst file, HHc.

major impediment to her syndication in the *Mirror*. Hopper asked Hearst, “[W]ith Winchell covering the New York scene, don’t you think it might be a good idea to have a woman cover the western front *just as Louella does for the EXAMINER*? I’m just asking! In other words, a cat can speak to a king.” This ambitious “cat” sought Hearst’s assistance to become a gossip reporter of the caliber of Hearst columnists Parsons and Winchell, the two leading entertainment reporters of the day. The rest of the letter was a tribute to Hearst’s power and to his longtime generosity to and friendship with this supplicant. Hopper closed with: “My dearest love to Marion, and I think you know how I feel about you.” Her request, framed within the context of her longtime friendship with Hearst and Davies, was not granted. Parsons’s friendship and, more importantly, her lucrative business relationship with Hearst trumped that of Hopper in this instance. Hearst was unwilling to antagonize Parsons, who carefully guarded her place at the head of the Hollywood press corps and would no doubt have taken exception to Hopper’s invasion of her turf. Parsons employed and even mentored other women through the HWPC and in finding work in the Hearst empire, but always it was clear who was in charge. Hopper clearly had ambitions to challenge Parsons’s throne one day and was making some headway, which ultimately made it impossible for Hearst to hire her.<sup>37</sup>

While Hopper was struggling to increase her syndication in mid-1939, Parsons was preparing for a nationwide theatrical tour, starring herself. Parsons had come under intense and critical media scrutiny and suffered public setbacks like the loss of her radio program. Journalists and other social commentators began to view with alarm the power and influence amassed by Parsons and Winchell in the late 1930s for a whole host of reasons. This discussion was part of a wider critical analysis of the power of the media,

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<sup>37</sup> Hopper to Hearst, October 31, 1939, William Randolph Hearst file, HHc.

as perhaps most disturbingly illustrated by the rise of fascism and nazism as facilitated by the manipulation of the media. Parsons, linked so closely with her boss, also had to contend with the considerable negative attention focused on Hearst for personal, political, and professional reasons in the late 1930s. With this stage show, she sought to rehabilitate her image and demonstrate her continued power and influence. Her Hollywood Hotel franchise—the radio show and the film—was turned into a stage show starring Parsons and a group of young contract players from Warner Brothers. Actor Ronald Reagan, a special Parsons protégé because he was personable and hailed from her hometown of Dixon, Illinois, was prominently featured among “Louella Parsons Flying All-Stars.” Parsons, as herself, served as the main character and narrator of the lives and careers of the actors who played fictional versions of themselves.

The publicity campaign for the show included a Hearst newsreel spot in which “Hollywood stars wish Louella Parsons, screenland ace columnist, good luck as she starts on personal appearance tour.” Deanna Durbin, Errol Flynn, Fred Astaire, Tyrone Power, and Mickey Rooney were among the performers who appeared in the newsreel to wish her “lots of luck.” They testified to the impact of her patronage on their careers and in turn expressed their support for her tour. Mickey Rooney remarked, “You’ve always boosted me and I’ll never forget it.” Ice-skating champion turned actress Sonja Henie said, “After all you’ve done for me Louella, anything I can do for you would be a pleasure.” Viewers were informed that Louella Parsons “known to millions of radio fans as Hollywood’s First Lady” was also an honorary vice president of the Museum of Modern Art’s film division—an indication of her significance beyond the precincts of Hollywood. The show toured around the nation, with engagements in such cities as Santa

Barbara, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, and Chicago. Once underway, Hearst newsreels charted the progress of the “Stars of 1940.” Their arrival in Albuquerque, New Mexico, was greeted with the kind of pomp and circumstance accorded visiting heads of state. An elaborate ceremony was held on the tarmac with a throng eager to greet Parsons and her cast. After entertainment from Native American dancers and cowboys on horseback, the Native American performers presented Parsons with gifts. Then a contingent of soldiers in full dress uniform presented her with a saber courtesy of the governor of New Mexico.<sup>38</sup>

Parsons’s success, punctuated by the run of her popular stage show in late 1939 and early 1940, highlighted the value of her brand of journalism—celebrated columnist to the celebrities. Winchell, the other leading reporter of this ilk, was the subject of a six-part profile in the *New Yorker* in the summer of 1940—a profile that was assuredly critical but was also a declaration of his status and power. The surge of media attention devoted to these two multi-media reporters in the late 1930s and into 1940 made clear the value of a successful gossip reporter.

Hopper benefited from this swirl of publicity, which emphasized how lucrative a gossip franchise could be to reporter, newspaper, press syndicate, and radio sponsor alike. In June 1940, she finally secured a new syndication deal. Her column was acquired by the Des Moines Register-Tribune syndicate, which was run by Midwestern newspaper and magazine publishers John Cowles and Gardner Cowles, Jr. The Cowles brothers also published *Look*, which along with Luce’s *Life*, pioneered photojournalism in mass market

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<sup>38</sup> “Stars of 1940,” filmed prologue for Louella Parsons’ personal appearance tour, Hearst newsreel footage, Louella Parsons, Hedy Lamarr, VA4748 M, 35mm, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

magazines.<sup>39</sup> Hopper's syndication increased to 22 newspapers, and she now had the promotional backing of the Cowles brothers, which resulted in a feature article in *Look* on this "dynamic figure" who had "three man-sized jobs" as columnist, radio broadcaster, and actress.<sup>40</sup> Though she still lacked syndication in an all-important New York City newspaper, Hopper's profile was rising as celebrity journalism gained more legitimacy, adherents, and practitioners as the 1930s gave way to the 1940s.

*The Celebrity Gossip Columnist on "the Stage of Current Events"*

Hopper had begun writing her column in the tumultuous year and a half leading up to the outbreak of World War II. What set Hopper apart from Parsons from the outset was the ferocity and frequency of the political commentary in her column. From her attacks on censorship to her discussion of women's suffrage, Parsons had always incorporated political content in her column. She did so, however, with less frequency and much greater subtlety than Hopper. Her writing on political issues was more carefully integrated into the body of her work and tended to be tied more directly to matters of import to the film industry rather than bald statements of her political beliefs and opinions. Parsons was a longtime Democrat who continued to support Roosevelt and his New Deal even as her politics began a gradual drift to the right in the late 1930s. Parsons's turn from a progressive Democratic political orientation was far more gradual than that of her employer Hearst. Parsons did sometimes insert political commentary in her column that followed the increasingly reactionary Hearst press party line in the 1930s as mandated by the Chief, sometimes not. She knew she had to tread lightly regarding political views that clashed with those of her employer. But not until the 1950s and

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<sup>39</sup> James Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987), 96.

<sup>40</sup> "Hopping Around Hollywood with Hedda Hopper," 42.

1960s did she thoroughly and consistently embrace the conservative anticommunism that Hearst and Hopper shared by the mid-1930s. And even then her position was not unequivocal. For example, she whole-heartedly supported the candidacy of John F. Kennedy, whom she cabled in July 1960 to congratulate on his “great victory” at the Democratic convention: “I am so glad I was a good prophet and that you won the nomination.”<sup>41</sup> She was neither a political activist nor ideologue as was Hopper. As result, Parsons was often labeled “apolitical” in comparison, but to do so is to overlook a wide range of political commentary that was not the product of a fixation on the communist menace in America.

In terms of the intensity and explicitness (if not always the viewpoint) of her political commentary, Hopper’s column more closely resembled that of Walter Winchell. By the late 1930s, Winchell’s columns and broadcasts were heavily laden with political commentary, particularly in his attacks on fascism and in his constant references to the war in Europe. Winchell, who became a Hearst columnist in the spring of 1929, was increasingly at odds with Hearst over the political content of his column, particularly as the two men’s political beliefs and loyalties diverged. Winchell remained a vociferous supporter of the president until Roosevelt’s death and bitterly attacked Adolph Hitler, a leader Hearst supported longer than most in the Western world. Hearst contacted Winchell directly in February 1938 as a result of Winchell’s partisan commentary on the Spanish Civil War and call for support of the Republican forces. Hearst told Winchell:

“You were engaged to do a Broadway gossip column. You do a good one. You might be a good war correspondent, but that is not your job. I do not think . . . the

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<sup>41</sup> Parsons telegram to John F. Kennedy, July 14, 1960, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, Massachusetts. Accessed via U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) online database at: [http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital\\_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=193831&st=b&rp=details&nh=1](http://arcweb.archives.gov/arc/digital_detail.jsp?&pg=1&rn=1&tn=193831&st=b&rp=details&nh=1)

gossip writers [should not cover] controversial politics. Moreover, any political columns written in my papers will be American in spirit, not alien.”<sup>42</sup>

This last sentence reveals the true source of Hearst’s displeasure: it was the nature of and not the fact of Winchell’s political statements to which his publisher objected. For Hearst, support of Spain’s besieged Republican government was tantamount to support of communism. By March 1938, Hearst had grown so unhappy with Winchell’s political commentary that he instructed his newspaper executives to “edit Winchell very carefully and leave out any dangerous or disagreeable paragraphs.” They were further instructed to “leave out the whole column,” if necessary.<sup>43</sup> Hearst and Winchell continued to clash though ultimately neither man was willing to walk away from a most profitable working relationship. Parsons knew well the extent of Hearst’s anger at Winchell. In August 1938 she complained to Hearst regarding Winchell’s commentary about her. Hearst replied, “Your hands are not tied. You are at perfect liberty to sue.” Winchell was already in Hearst’s disfavor for his continued politicking in his columns as Hearst related to Parsons, “I am sore at Winchell myself. He has no institutional loyalty, and furthermore is a pink.”<sup>44</sup> Parsons did not sue, satisfied perhaps that she had the support of Hearst. This exchange also highlighted for Parsons the importance of maintaining her employer’s goodwill, an art she had almost perfected until the 1941 controversy over *Citizen Kane*.

Hearst was not the only one to object to Winchell’s increasingly potent blend of gossip and current events. Indeed, many journalists and cultural observers were aghast at

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<sup>42</sup> As quoted in Nasaw, *The Chief*, 552.

<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 273.

<sup>44</sup> Hearst to Parsons, August 15, 1938, carton 27, W.R. Hearst correspondence (1977), Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

Winchell's popularity and power, but flummoxed by the remarkable persona he had crafted. The *Saturday Evening Post* remarked upon the increasing political commentary in Winchell's column: "Lately he has been flying further afield—picking up political scraps from Washington, London, Berlin and Rome." The slightly patronizing tone of this comment was representative of media discussion of Winchell in the mid-to-late 1930s in which any criticism was muted and qualified: "Winchell is the Fourth Estate's greatest enigma," reported *Newsweek*. "[M]any newspapermen dismiss him as a vindictive, boastful boor. But none will deny that he is the hardest working reporter in the country." Then the *New Yorker* published a scathing six-part profile of Winchell in the summer of 1940, and the gloves were off. Why did Winchell come under criticism at this juncture? His radio broadcast, *Jergen's Journal*, had remained among the highest-rated programs for nearly a decade, thus making it clear that Winchell's was to be no short-lived popularity, no mere blip in the media. Winchell's long-time and vociferous support of the Roosevelt administration had earned him scores of enemies among the president's many detractors though it was perhaps Winchell's criticism of FDR as World War II began that gained this reporter greater notoriety. Winchell was a staunch interventionist, a position he fiercely advocated in his column and broadcast. This politicking, in particular, struck a chord of dismay in observers who noted the gross disparity between Winchell's calls for the United States to enter the war interspersed with reports of socialites and entertainers' marriages, pregnancies, divorces, and infidelities. Author and newspaperman St. Clair McKelway, author of the 1940 *New Yorker* profile suggested, "There are probably critics who would say it is ridiculous for a mere gossip writer to put his nose into serious international affairs." McKelway was among those

critics, and he thoroughly mocked Winchell's role "as an actor on the stage of current events."<sup>45</sup> Winchell had been interjecting national and international political commentary into his work in ever-greater doses as the 1930s drew to a close; his interventionist stance—before the war had even begun—was highly controversial and helped to bring closer and oft-times unflattering scrutiny.

While Winchell (and later Hopper) were criticized for their political commentary, Parsons was criticized for her alleged lack of political commentary. Richard Watts, Jr., the *New York Herald Tribune's* drama critic once suggested in an oft-quoted article that Parsons should be made "the official spokesman for that august school of critical thought that would keep a reasonably dramatic outside world from intruding upon the loftier world of art and letters." Watts mocked her reference to the "deadly dullness of the last week," a week in April 1939 in which Italian forces invaded Albania in the tumultuous months leading to the outbreak of World War II.<sup>46</sup> Parsons did not refer to the events in Albania. Instead she singled out the development of a Shirley Temple film project as the most notable event of the week. Clearly the jury was still out on this politicization of the gossip column: on the one hand it made a rather disreputable journalistic form more relevant and serious, but it also threatened to trivialize "serious" news. Celebrity gossip columnists had officially emerged as "baffling phenomena," who could no longer be marginalized and dismissed as mere dispensers of trivia.

The rising tide of Winchell's political commentary in the mid-to-late 1930s had its roots in the course of current events, Winchell's personal and political beliefs, and,

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<sup>45</sup> J.P. McEvoy, "He Stoops to Conquer," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 13, 1938, p. 44; Winchell: The Man Who Burns Broadway Scandal at Both Ends," *Newsweek*, April 11, 1936, p. 29; St. Clair McKelway, "Profiles: Gossip Writer," *New Yorker*, June 15, 1940, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Watts, Jr., "Love and Mathematics Via London," *New York Herald Tribune*, April 16, 1939.

most importantly, in his newfound access to policymakers and newsmakers in Washington, D.C. Politicians, business leaders, and other members of the nation's ruling elite had—with varying degrees of reluctance—embraced Winchell and his work, recognizing the valuable promotional forum he offered. President Roosevelt, though wary of Winchell, gave him limited access to the White House, in an effort to counter the overwhelming negative media coverage his administration received throughout the nation by the mid-1930s, especially in the Hearst press. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was another powerful federal official who courted the columnists. Winchell had supported the work of Hoover and the FBI in his column in the late 1920s and early 1930s and in his column suggested a personal and working relationship that did not exist prior to 1934. Hoover, who closely monitored media coverage of his agency, recognized that Winchell could be a useful ally and made personal contact with him in 1934, which was the start of a longtime friendship and fruitful professional collaboration. Winchell became one of Hoover's "Special Correspondents"—a privilege bestowed upon influential journalists, businessmen, politicians and other power brokers in U.S. society who exchanged information with Hoover and as a result received special treatment and exemption from FBI investigation. Special Correspondent Winchell gloried in his connection to Hoover and the information Hoover's FBI supplied to him. Likewise Hoover used Winchell as a media outlet and information source. Hopper would follow much the same path.<sup>47</sup>

Hopper did not have a working relationship with Hoover until the mid-1940s though she implied as much at the very start of her reporting career. In mid-1938, Hopper wrote: "Hope it's true that Lela Rogers will marry J. Edgar Hoover. It would be

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<sup>47</sup> On Winchell, FDR, and Hoover, see Gabler, *Winchell*, 190–4, 199–202.

a grand combination. They've known each other a long time."<sup>48</sup> This erroneous report—Rogers and Hoover were never romantically involved—stands as a very early example of Hopper's anticommunist activism. This linkage of Rogers—an erstwhile screenwriter whose greatest claim to fame was her actress daughter Ginger—and Hoover provided a measure of legitimacy and credibility to Hollywood conservatives, among whom Hopper and Rogers numbered. Indeed both women became prominent members of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI), a group formed in 1944 dedicated to exposing communist activity in the film industry. Under the auspices of the MPAPAI, Hopper and Rogers played a pivotal role in the 1947 HUAC investigation of Hollywood. The triumph of the MPAPAI in 1947 was due in part to the kind of groundwork laid by Hopper in the decade prior with her promotion of the nation's anticommunist elite.

Hopper emulated Winchell's blend of politics and entertainment news and followed his lead in currying Hoover's favor, but the columnists' political orientations diverged sharply before and during World War II. Winchell was a liberal Democratic partisan who was fiercely supportive of the Roosevelt administration as well as U.S. intervention in World War II. Hopper was an anti-New Deal Republican who opposed U.S. entrance into World War II. As a fierce partisan, Hopper had no problem endorsing the activities of those who shared her political beliefs, but was highly critical of those who did not. "That motion picture Democratic committee, pro-Roosevelt, pro-New Deal, . . . is rushing full steam ahead. It's none of my business, but actors are entertainers, who make their living from the public, and I don't believe the public is interested in their political, racial, or religious affiliation. What do you think?" Hopper asked readers in

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<sup>48</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," June 15, 1938, scrapbook #1, HHc.

August 1938.<sup>49</sup> Hopper was referring to the Motion Picture Democratic Committee (MPDC) formed in June 1938 by a group of Hollywood liberals to support the Democratic party on the local, state, and national level. This committee attracted activists across the full spectrum of the Hollywood left, which was dominated by well-organized Popular Front alliances. Indeed, the MPDC would splinter in late 1939 when its founders tried to purge communists from the group.

*The Dies Committee Comes to Hollywood*

As world war raged, the political commentary in the gossip columns grew more heated. “I wonder why J. Edgar Hoover chose this time to vacation at La Jolla,” Hopper wrote, “when spies and espionage agents are even driving our stars out of the spotlight. If we delay much longer in exposing what’s happening under our very noses daily, France will look like a crushed peanut, compared to what will happen to America.”<sup>50</sup> The German offensive against France had ended only a month and a half after it had begun with France’s surrender in June 1940, which left most of central and western Europe under German and Italian control. Hopper did not support U.S. entrance into World War II at this juncture, but used the example of the fate of the French to exhort the discovery and capture of subversive forces—both communist and fascist—widely believed to be active in the United States.

Hopper’s warnings of “spies and subversives” in August 1940 had a particular urgency not only because a world war was raging and the United States was negotiating a still-neutral course but also because of events in her own backyard. Her chastisement of Hoover—a man she usually celebrated and deferred to—in this item was prompted by her

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<sup>49</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” August 6, 1938, scrapbook #1, HHc.

<sup>50</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” August 26, 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

sense of concern regarding a pending federal investigation of the film industry. Congressman Martin Dies (D-Texas), chairman of the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities (later known as HUAC), had come to Hollywood.<sup>51</sup> Since its inception in May 1938, the Dies Committee (as it was popularly known during Dies's tenure as chairman) had leveled charges of communist infiltration at the film industry, calculated to capture media attention. Like many politicians before and after him, Dies sought to bask in the star power generated by Hollywood. In February 1940, Dies announced that the committee had placed Hollywood at the top of its agenda. That July, John L. Leech, a man who claimed to be a former Communist party functionary, testified and named more than forty communists in Hollywood: an all-star list that included actors Humphrey Bogart, James Cagney, Frederic March, Luise Rainer, and Franchot Tone, screenwriter Philip Dunne, and producer B.P. "Bud" Schulberg. Based on these charges leveled by Leech—a man characterized as "a pathological liar" in his FBI file—Dies headed to Los Angeles in August.<sup>52</sup> Leech testified before a grand jury in Los Angeles. His inflammatory testimony was promptly leaked to the press, resulting in a media firestorm. Those accused then met in closed sessions with Dies in a Los Angeles hotel room to clear their names.<sup>53</sup>

Hopper entered this fray. She conceded that there were communists in Hollywood, but she did not consider such people representative of the entire industry. Nor did she consider them threats to the well-being of the industry or the nation. At this

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<sup>51</sup> When Martin Dies left Congress in 1945, his committee became a standing rather than temporary committee and was renamed the House Committee on Un-American Activities, at which point it became popularly known by the acronym HUAC.

<sup>52</sup> A.M. Sperber and Eric Lax, *Bogart* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 132.

<sup>53</sup> On the 1940 HUAC investigation of Hollywood, see, for example, Brownstein, *The Glitter and the Power*, 67–8; Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 353–4; and Sperber and Lax, *Bogart*, 130–4.

juncture, Hopper defended “her” industry from these charges. She assured readers that the title of the film *Comrade X* had to be changed because it “has a communistic flavor and that is taboo in Hollywood.” After Dies left Hollywood, Hopper even mocked him in her column. She wrote, “Is it true Martin Dies will get a contract at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer when all this Hollywood Red scare is ended? I hear he’s terrific.”<sup>54</sup>

But Hopper’s repudiation of the committee’s investigation was not absolute. As evidence of the industry’s anticommunist stance, she recommended the film *He Stayed for Breakfast* as a “rib-tickler” that makes “fools out of Communists.” “After ‘Communist’ Melvyn Douglas becomes ‘bourgeois’ enough to fall in love with Loretta Young,” she wrote, “they decide that the ‘land of the free and the home of the brave’ is the only decent place on earth to live—that lobster fishing in Maine is better than singing the ‘Internationale’ on the streets of Paris.”<sup>55</sup> While this was a ringing endorsement of the industry’s anticommunism, it contained a warning to Hollywood’s progressive activists. The general public might dismiss “‘Communist’ Melvyn Douglas” as a reference simply to the character Douglas played onscreen, but Hollywood insiders would have read this very differently.

Actor Melvyn Douglas (as well as his wife actress Helen Gahagan Douglas who entered politics and served California in Congress from 1945 to 1951, but overwhelmingly lost a 1950 Senate campaign noted for its red baiting to Richard Nixon) was one of Hollywood’s most vocal and visible liberal activists and a founder of the MPDC, an organization that Hopper had previously critiqued in her column. In giving the plot synopsis for Douglas’s film, Hopper was also telling her industry readers

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<sup>54</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” August 26 and 29, 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

<sup>55</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” August 13, 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

something about Douglas's own life. His character repudiated communism, and Hopper meant to indicate to her readers within the industry that Douglas himself had followed the same path. Like many Hollywood progressives, Douglas had tolerated the presence of and indeed allied himself with fellow travelers and communists as a member of the "cultural front" in 1930s Hollywood. As Ronald Brownstein has noted, "the communists were so entrenched that it was not possible to develop independent, non-Communist liberal institutions in the film community." Douglas precipitated a splintering of the MPDC in late 1939 because of its failure to support the Roosevelt administration's more pro-active stance on the war in favor of the Communist party line of absolute neutrality. Douglas's December 1939 resignation from the organization led to a confrontation after which most other liberals left the MPDC.<sup>56</sup>

Hopper was referring to Douglas's recent defection from the MPDC in her discussion of *He Stayed for Breakfast*, but Douglas neither was nor ever had been a communist. He was a Democratic party activist and loyalist, but such distinctions mattered not to Hopper. Hollywood progressives were given notice that, if need be, Hopper would not hesitate to use their political activism against them. For now, she was willing to dismiss Dies's charges and focus instead upon all the "things that Hollywood has done to dignify itself": charity work, fine films, guest lecturing at USC, paying considerable taxes.<sup>57</sup> Seven years hence, HUAC would receive a very warm welcome from Hopper and the considerable anticommunist network of which she had become a member.

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<sup>56</sup> Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter*, 54–8, 62–72, quote at 64. On the "cultural front," see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), 3–50.

<sup>57</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," December 29, 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

Parsons took a more oblique yet more openly hostile approach to industry leaders in the midst of the Dies investigation. In August 1940 Parsons broached the “refugee problem” in Hollywood. “Famous refugees are pouring into this country by the boatload ever since Herr Hitler marched into Paris—and right or wrong, mark my words, plenty of Hollywood’s best jobs will go to them,” Parsons cautioned in a discussion that echoed headlines and editorials throughout the Hearst press. Parsons spelled out “Hollywood’s Dilemma” in a column devoted entirely to this issue. She posed this question to her readers: “Should It [the Film Industry] Welcome Refugees or Protect Americans First?” Her commentary at this moment when the industry was being investigated for subversive activities served as a warning to studio executives to take care regarding whom they might hire and whom they might currently employ. The employment of European refugees had become “Hollywood’s Dilemma” because of fears of the leftist political orientation of many refugees from Nazi-controlled Europe and because of fears that these “refugees” might in fact be subversive agents of fascism.<sup>58</sup>

Denials, adverse publicity, and a startling lack of evidence—beyond the unreliable Leech—led Dies to terminate the investigation and return to Washington before the month of August had ended. (Dies and his allies’ unabashed anti-Semitism with regard to the film industry’s leadership played no small part in derailing the investigation.) This abortive attempt to purge communists in the motion picture industry had failed. The committee would stay out of Hollywood for the duration of the war, but would return with a vengeance in 1947. In the dramatically changed political and cultural climate of the postwar world, the committee would have far more devastating

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<sup>58</sup> Parsons, “Famous Refugees Now in East Sought for Hollywood Contracts,” August 5, 1940, scrapbook #26, LPc; Parsons, “Hollywood’s Dilemma—Should It Welcome Refugees or Protect Americans First?” August 11, 1940, scrapbook #26, LPc.

and long-lasting consequences. And Hopper, by this time, was a figure of national importance firmly ensconced in the anticommunist right and ready, able, and willing to wreak much havoc.

But warnings of political subversion in Hollywood were only one component of Hopper and Parsons's columns in August 1940. Another topic concerned production on the long-awaited and eagerly anticipated first feature film of a newcomer to the film colony. The "boy wonder" Orson Welles was hard at work on the closed set of the film *Citizen Kane*.

**"One of the Classic Double Crosses of Hollywood": Parsons, Hopper, and Citizen Kane**

Contrary to virtually all accounts of the 1941 controversy over *Citizen Kane*, Hopper was at the outset a struggling, if well-connected, Hollywood columnist with a relatively low profile. Most sources erroneously characterize Hopper as Parsons's "great rival" at this juncture, but this was not the case. Indeed, it was Hopper's victory over Parsons in the *Citizen Kane* battle that catapulted Hopper to the top of the Hollywood press corps and turned her into Parsons's most formidable foe. Hopper, not Parsons, attended the first media screening of *Citizen Kane* and relayed the news to Hearst—just six weeks before its scheduled premiere—that this film was based, at least in part, on Hearst's life and times in a way that would make his complicated private life public fare. Parsons's humiliation—public and private—was complete: she had spent months praising and promoting an artist who deceived her and then gave the biggest story of the year to a novice reporter who was angling to usurp her status in the Hollywood press corps. As *Variety* reported, "Miss Parsons, incidentally, found herself in a rather embarrassing

position when she discovered the theme of Welles' initial try. She had been loudly drumming for him as a boy wonder, after much of Hollywood had begun to scoff." As director, star, and co-writer Orson Welles remembered, "Louella Parsons . . . had written a wonderful article about this lovely picture I was making. And it was Hedda Hopper . . . who blew the whistle. . . . Imagine what it did to Louella!" Welles, an artist known for his hyperbole and exaggeration whether in service to his art or simply his own purposes, in this instance perfectly captured the significance of the *Kane* controversy for Hopper's career when he opined, "[W]hat a break for her as a newspaperwoman."<sup>59</sup>

Much of the Hollywood establishment was suspicious of and hostile toward Orson Welles when he arrived in Los Angeles in July 1939 to finalize a lucrative contract with RKO. Welles, co-director of the acclaimed Mercury Theater and mastermind behind the 1938 "War of the Worlds" radio broadcast, had scant motion picture experience. Prior to signing his RKO contract, he had directed and acted in a handful of what amounted to student films and had done some film narration. But on the strength of an impressive body of work on the stage and over the airwaves completed before the age of twenty-four, Welles negotiated a contract to serve as writer, director, producer, and star of two films. The newcomer's hubris rankled many in a town noted for out-sized egos, but perhaps most galling to members of the film industry was, as Welles biographer David Thomson has argued, that "a novice had got the right to shoot his script, with his people, and cut it how he liked . . . [an] impossible freedom for . . . other worthy filmmakers who had to be ready to fight for every foot and cent of what they wanted." While many sniped at Welles and the remarkable artistic freedom he had managed to

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<sup>59</sup> "RKO, Despite Hearst's Ire, Announces Huge National Campaign for 'Kane,'" *Variety*, January 22, 1941, p. 63; Orson Welles and Peter Bogdanovich, *This is Orson Welles*, ed. Jonathan Rosenbaum (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 49

wrest from RKO head of production George Schaefer, the dashing, glib Welles made for good copy. Parsons and Hopper both welcomed Welles to Hollywood in their columns and wrote encouragingly of the young man and his prospects in the industry. “When Orson . . . came to Hollywood, I was one of his biggest boosters,” Parsons later acknowledged. Welles had spent part of his childhood in Grand Detour, Illinois, just miles from Parsons’s hometown of Dixon. Parsons suggested she “had known his family” and gave Welles special treatment as her “hometown” protégé. Parsons used this strategy over the years—most notably in her support of Dixon native Ronald Reagan—to augment the sense of community in her column and emulate the role of society columnist on a small-town paper. Parsons’s support of Reagan never flagged. As for Welles, her sense of outrage regarding his subsequent “betrayal” was deepened because of the special relationship she had cultivated that Welles profited from.<sup>60</sup>

Welles developed several projects over the next year that went unproduced due to budgetary and casting conflicts with RKO. He was under pressure to make good on his promise and fulfill his contract when in mid-April 1940 screenwriter Herman J. Mankiewicz delivered the first draft of a script originally titled *American*. Much ink has been spilled over the nature of and degree of collaboration that won Mankiewicz and Welles an Academy Award for best original screenplay as co-writers of *Citizen Kane*. The contribution of each man to the final shooting script has been debated endlessly, but, in the end, this was a true collaboration between two gifted and contentious men.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> David Thomson, *Rosebud: The Story of Orson Welles* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 120; Parsons, *Tell It To Louella*, 131.

<sup>61</sup> Pauline Kael and Peter Bogdanovich famously dueled over the issue of the authorship of *Kane* in the early 1970s, and the matter remains a controversial and highly debated subject as Jonathan Rosenbaum delineates in his editor’s notes in *This is Welles*, 494–503. See also Robert L. Carringer, *The Making of Citizen Kane*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 16–35.

Mankiewicz's personal acquaintance with Hearst and Davies played no small role in the crafting of this script. This talented journalist, playwright, and drama critic left the New York literary world behind in 1926 for a career as a Hollywood scriptwriter. Mankiewicz encouraged and facilitated the exodus west of literary compatriots such as Dorothy Parker and Robert Benchley, known collectively as the "Algonquin to Hollywood group."<sup>62</sup> Screenwriter Charles Lederer was a charter member of the Algonquin to Hollywood group; he was also Marion Davies's beloved and devoted nephew. As Davies's biographer Raymond Guiles has noted, "Everyone close to Marion knew that Charlie was her favorite person after Hearst."<sup>63</sup>

Lederer brought his friends from the East Coast literati, foremost among them the charming and witty Mankiewicz, into the Hearst-Davies social circle. As a favorite and frequent guest at Davies's Santa Monica beach house and at San Simeon, the Hearst estate on California's central coast, Mankiewicz became well-acquainted with Parsons, who relocated to Los Angeles the same year he did. As a result, Mankiewicz received frequent and favorable mentions in Parsons's column for the next decade. Parsons wrote, for example, "One of the few scenario writers in Hollywood who didn't have to unlearn much that he had learned is Herman Mankiewicz. Herman came to Paramount directly from the stage." Mankiewicz also knew Hedda Hopper, who had joined this social circle about a year before he did. A photograph from a 1931 Mayfair Club party captures perfectly the proximity of several of the principal figures who inspired, created, and covered this controversial film. Honoree Marion Davies is seated in the middle of the group, with her arm around Parsons to her immediate left. One seat away from Parsons is

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<sup>62</sup> Pauline Kael, "Raising Kane" in *The Citizen Kane Book*, (New York: Limelight, 1984), 18.

<sup>63</sup> Fred Lawrence Guiles, *Marion Davies* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), 10.

Sara Mankiewicz, Herman's wife. Dr. Harry Martin, Parsons's husband, stands behind Sara with Herman to his immediate right. Hedda Hopper is seated to the far left of Davies. Hearst does not appear in the photo because he scrupulously avoided being publicly photographed with Davies, but his unseen presence looms.<sup>64</sup>

Mankiewicz drew upon his personal experiences in the orbit of Hearst and Davies to create the characters of Charles Foster Kane and Susan Alexander Kane. Other public figures served as sources of inspiration, including Welles himself. Nonetheless, in editing the overly long and complicated original draft, Welles had to jettison a considerable amount of Hearst biographical detail to create a workable script *and* avoid a Hearst lawsuit. Despite Welles's protestations, Hearst and Davies were unquestionably the primary inspiration. Though the parallels were unmistakable, ultimately it was the inaccuracy of the unpleasant, disloyal, and untalented character of Susan Alexander Kane as a stand-in for the charming, loyal, and talented Davies that drove Hearst and—by his mandate and her own inclinations—Parsons to attempt to undermine the film and its creator. As Welles himself later acknowledged, "I thought we were very unfair to Marion Davies and I anticipated trouble from Hearst for that reason." Of course, the campaign waged by Hearst and his allies to keep *Citizen Kane* out of the nation's theaters only drew more attention to the parallels. It also helped to cement the misperception in the popular imagination that the film offered an accurate biographical portrait though as Hearst biographer David Nasaw has rightly observed, "Welles . . . was neither a biographer nor a historian."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> As quoted in Kael, "Raising Kane," 24. See pp. 22–3 for the Mayfair Club photograph.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Orson Welles, "The Battle Over Citizen Kane," *The American Experience*, produced by Thomas Lennon and Michael Epstein, extra on the *Citizen Kane* (1941), Gold Box Set edition DVD; Nasaw, *The Chief*, 574.

Production on *Citizen Kane* officially began on July 30, 1940. Welles ran a closed set and demanded the utmost discretion from his company. As *Newsweek* later reported, “Mystery shrouded the one-man show while it was in production.”<sup>66</sup> But Welles was too savvy to attempt to stonewall the media entirely during the months of production and post-production work. Welles carefully orchestrated visits from the media and worked with the cast and crew to insure that visitors gleaned little or no information about the production.

“The royal summons to the press to be on the set and watch Orson Welles emote went slightly awry,” wrote Parsons in early August about an invitation to the *Kane* set. “Most of us were at the ‘Boom Town’ preview and couldn’t get there in time. I’ll take a rain check from Mr. Welles and drop in and see him some day soon.”<sup>67</sup> Parsons’s recalcitrance in this instance reflected her unwillingness to appear with her fellow reporters at the behest of the director-producer-writer-star. Parsons was accustomed to V.I.P. treatment on the film sets she deigned to visit—scores of “behind-the-scenes” publicity shots documenting Parsons’s on-set visits attest to her favored status. Parsons gloried in her access to productions in progress and came to view it as her due. As a condition of this access, Parsons let her presence be used at times by the studio executives seeking to discipline recalcitrant employees. For example, Jack Warner brought Parsons with him to the closed set of *To Have and Have Not* in 1944 in an attempt to disrupt the burgeoning romance between a very married Humphrey Bogart and his much younger co-star Lauren Bacall. The implied threat of exposure failed in this

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<sup>66</sup> “Hearst vs. Orson Welles,” *Newsweek*, January 20, 1943, p. 62.

<sup>67</sup> Parsons, “Screen World,” August 7, 1940, scrapbook #26, LPc.

instance because director Howard Hawks walked off the set and shut down the production until Warner and Parsons left.<sup>68</sup>

And Hawks was not the first to thwart Parsons. Welles did it most famously when he welcomed her onto the set of *Citizen Kane* in the summer of 1940 and proceeded to provide her with misinformation. She may have ignored Welles's initial "royal summons" to his set, but he did not ignore her.

Parsons visited the set, and the result was a glowing August 25, 1940 profile that appeared in Hearst Sunday newspapers across the nation, titled "Orson Welles Styles Self Fake, the Fake!—Actually He's Genius." The irony of the interview title was lost on Parsons, but not on Welles or the selected few that knew the truth about the film. She asked him point-blank what the film was about, and he replied, "It deals first . . . with a dead man. You know when a man dies there is a great difference of opinion about his character. I have everyone voice his ideas and no two descriptions are alike. I cover a great span of life and the widow of the man is really the heroine." In the most general way, this outline was accurate except that the dead man's ex-wife (not widow) was most assuredly not the heroine. And Welles failed to reveal what real-life figures these characters were largely based upon. Parsons conceded that the film "[s]ounded very complicated . . . but it must be all right." She heaped praise on this "genius" and concluded, "[H]e is a remarkable young man."<sup>69</sup>

Less than a month after this profile ran, publications ranging from *Newsweek* to the Popular Front journal *Friday* began to report that Hearst was the subject of the film. But Parsons continued to support Welles who assured her these reports were untrue. As

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<sup>68</sup> Sperber and Lax, *Bogart*, 261–2.

<sup>69</sup> Parsons, "Orson Welles Styles Self Fake, the Fake!—Actually He's Genius," August 25, 1940, scrapbook #26, LPc.

she later recalled, "I took his word, and so informed the Hearst editors who kept insisting that it did concern Hearst." Parsons may well have been distracted that fall 1940 by a second tour of her stage show, "Louella Parsons's Flying All-Stars," which kept her out of Hollywood and on the road across the nation. But Parsons would not have expected such subterfuge from a Hollywood newcomer, especially one she had taken a special, proprietary interest in. After almost two decades as leader of the Hollywood press corps, she had grown accustomed to gratitude and loyalty from the industry's creative personnel who generally acceded to her demands regardless of private misgivings about and hostility toward Parsons and her work.<sup>70</sup>

Hedda Hopper also championed Welles and provided ample and positive coverage of the production. "Orson will dumbfound his hecklers," Hopper wrote in reference to his detractors within the industry. "His crew not only like him, but think he's going to have a swell picture." She reported on the *Kane* production: "Handsome Joe Cotton...who got his first break with Orson Welles when Orson took him out of the W.P.A. theater, did his first scene with Orson yesterday, made up as a man of 70." At the end of August, Hopper devoted an entire column to Welles and predicted great things for his upcoming film.<sup>71</sup>

Hopper, however, had an important advantage over Parsons with regard to Welles. While Parsons met Welles only after his arrival in Los Angeles, Hopper had known him for several years. They first met in late 1934 when Hopper's actor son Bill secured a walk-on role in a Broadway production of "Romeo and Juliet," which featured Welles. As Hopper remembered, "Welles went out of his way to be nice to Bill. . . . I

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<sup>70</sup> Parsons, *Tell It To Louella*, 131.

<sup>71</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," August 19, 17, and 31 1940, scrapbook #4, HHc.

was a struggling actress and appreciated a stranger taking time out to help my rough recruit of a son. . . . Bill introduced us one night at supper.”<sup>72</sup> Hopper and Welles moved in similar New York stage and radio circles in the second half of the 1930s and had struck up a friendship by the end of the decade.

Scores of telegrams—the earliest dating from 1939—passed between the two and help illustrate the tenor of their relationship. Welles was forever apologizing to Hopper for having missed an engagement of some sort, be it a party or an interview: he played Peck’s *Bad Boy* to Hopper’s vaguely maternal figure. Hopper had a starring role in a February 1940 episode of “Campbell’s Playhouse,” the CBS radio series Welles conceived, hosted, and in which he performed under the auspices of the Mercury Theater group. At the conclusion of this radio adaptation of the play “Dinner at Eight,” Welles interviewed Hopper, whom he described as “a distinguished actress before ever she branched out into her present combination career of acting and columnning.” “I know Hedda that I am making an awful mistake in being polite to you because it is perfectly certain that this will lead to something vile in your column,” Welles joked, “but I am sincerely glad to see you tonight.”<sup>73</sup> In her new career as reporter, Hopper was a valuable contact for the ambitious Welles. And Hopper’s relationship with Welles would prove to be an invaluable asset for her.

Production on *Citizen Kane* wrapped on October 23, 1940. Then Welles began the arduous process of editing the film. The generous terms of his RKO contract meant Welles was able to edit with little interference or studio oversight. Few people had seen the final product prior to its first media screening scheduled for January 3, 1941. Welles

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<sup>72</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 289.

<sup>73</sup> “Campbell Playhouse: Dinner at Eight,” Pt. 2 of 2, CBS radio broadcast, February 18, 1940, R87:0507, Museum of Television and Radio, New York.

hand-picked a few journalists he knew would be receptive to the film: reporters from the Luce publication *Life* and the Cowles publication *Look* were chosen because Welles was certain his film would receive a warmer reception from Hearst's publishing rivals.

Welles also included Douglas Churchill, the Hollywood correspondent for the *New York Times*, from whom he hoped to (and did) receive positive coverage. Hopper learned of this screening in advance and contacted Welles, who had previously promised her an exclusive first look at the film. Welles cabled Hopper to invite her:

Dearest Hedda: I owe you the biggest apology of my life and here it comes. . . Fully realize I have broken a solemn promise that you'd be the first to see Kane. . . Come tonight if you must but it still stinks. . . we need music like Britain needs planes. Love Orson.<sup>74</sup>

Welles had what turned out to be well-founded reservations about including Hopper in the screening, but chose to do so anyway because of their friendship and her ambitions and because she did not work for Hearst. Welles was going to need champions in the Hollywood press corps once word of the contents of the film reached Hearst's camp. Because of the significance of this news story, Hopper was in his debt, which he could only hope would work in his favor.

Hopper had a personal relationship with Hearst and aspired to work for him; hence she was in a difficult position once she saw the film with, as she put it, "two friendships" at stake. "I was appalled," was how Hopper characterized her reaction to the screening. "The film was too well done. An impudent, murderous trick, even for the boy genius, to perpetrate on a newspaper giant."<sup>75</sup> "[B]ecause William Randolph Hearst had always been unfailingly kind" to her, because she did not want to alienate him, and most

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<sup>74</sup> Welles telegram to Hopper, January 3, 1941, Orson Welles folder, HHc.

<sup>75</sup> Hopper, *From under*, 290.

importantly because she knew that Parsons's "sky" would fall "right down around her ears," Hopper quickly informed Hearst of the contents of the film. As Hopper remembered, "I put in a call to Oscar Lawler, a great friend of mine and one of W.R.'s attorneys, to tell him about *Citizen Kane* and what Orson was up to."<sup>76</sup>

Hopper moved rapidly to capitalize upon the service she had done for Hearst. After all, his trusted motion picture editor had failed to uncover the truth about Welles's film. Hopper had proved her worth with the *Kane* revelation. Surely this would help her land her much-needed and much-desired syndication in a New York newspaper. She had asked at least twice before, but she hoped the third time would be the charm regarding syndication in the *New York Daily Mirror*. Only days after Hopper alerted Hearst to the contents of the film through intermediaries, she contacted Hearst himself. She asked once again for syndication in the *Daily Mirror*. Hopper did not go to press with this controversial story for almost two weeks as she waited in vain for Hearst's response.

On January 15, Hopper broke her silence and became one of the first reporters to discuss the brewing controversy. She had clearly lost hope that her report and subsequent silence might mean Hearst syndication and decided to reveal Welles's audacity and Parsons's misstep to the world. Her column began:

Not since the last earthquake has the town been so exercised over anything as it is over Orson Welles' picture, "Citizen Kane." While it was being made word seeped out, under the shroud of secrecy, that it was based on the life of Mr. Hearst. But after the picture was seen by a few reviewers they realized that was an understatement. *Mr. Hearst got wind of it and his reviewer finally got around to seeing it.*

Score one for Hopper. She continued:

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<sup>76</sup> Hopper and Brough, *Whole Truth*, 70.

All kinds of rumors and counterrumors are flying about town: First—that the R.K.O. studio will be ignored editorially by all of his [Hearst's] papers. (That is being done.) Next, that the refugee situation will be looked into. Nor are the private lives to be overlooked. Mind you, I say these are rumors, but they've become so frightening that I understand yesterday most of the leading producers asked to see the picture.<sup>77</sup>

Hopper bracketed her discussion of these “frightening” rumors, with two disclaimers that these might only be rumors, a sign of the dangerous ground on which she knew she was treading. But these rumors were not just rumors: threats were made by Parsons and other Hearst associates that all of Hollywood would feel Hearst's wrath in the form of investigations of foreign nationals employed in the industry and exposés of the seamy side of the industry.

Hopper had herself devoted an entire column to the refugee problem in Hollywood just four days after she attended the *Kane* screening. She began by wondering “in Hollywood's quest for new faces and its rushing to welcome every stranger in our midst, if sometimes it isn't a disadvantage to be an American. . . . [I]n days like these it's like the shoemaker who makes shoes for everybody's children and lets his own go barefoot.” She went on to list several talented U.S.-born or naturalized citizens who were out of work while “some fine German actors” and other recent émigrés—“very good, but . . . European”—seemed over-employed in her opinion. “The point I am trying to make,” she emphasized regarding the émigré actors she listed and “many, many more” she did not, “is that they're all fine actors, getting top salaries. But we have good American actors, too.” This was not a new topic for Hopper—it fell in line with her political beliefs—but her decision to take up the issue when she did reveals the extent to which she hoped to use this situation to her advantage with Hearst. When it

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<sup>77</sup> “Hedda Hopper's Hollywood,” LAT, January 15, 1941.

seemed not be working, she turned around a week later and characterized such a tactic as “frightening.”<sup>78</sup>

In the same column in which she took up the refugee problem, Hopper also mentioned R.K.O. approvingly as the studio that had once employed one of the fine “American” actors who Hollywood seemed to have forgotten. The Hearst press had been instructed to eliminate any and all references to RKO that fateful January so Hopper’s positive commentary on RKO might have suggested tacit approval of Welles and his film. Hopper was walking a fine line; she did not want to incur Hearst’s wrath, but she proved unwilling to voluntarily follow the dictates handed down to the Hearst press unless she became affiliated with the Hearst organization through syndication. And she did not. On January 17, two days after she went to press with the *Kane* story, she finally received a reply to her entreaty for syndication on the *Daily Mirror*. On this occasion, Hearst assistant Joe Willicombe—rather than Hearst himself—responded: “Mr. Hearst did receive your letter regarding the New York Mirror. He says he would like to see you on the Mirror, and has written advocating it.”<sup>79</sup> With this lukewarm reply, Hopper had been turned down for the third and final time.

Meanwhile Parsons did indeed screen the film in mid-January, a film she later judged to be “a cruel dishonest caricature.” Twenty years passed before Parsons publicly discussed these events. She wrote in her 1961 memoir:

Orson pulled one of the classic double crosses of Hollywood. He arranged for Hedda Hopper to see . . . the picture. . . Hedda called Mr. Hearst. As the story was reported to me, she said, ‘Mr. Hearst, I don’t know why Louella hasn’t told you this picture is about you.’ Mr. Hearst thanked her. Then Mr. Hearst called

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<sup>78</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” *LAT*, January 7, 1941.

<sup>79</sup> Willicombe to Hopper, January 17, 1941, William Randolph Hearst folder, HHc.

me and asked that arrangements be made for me and two of his lawyers to see *Citizen Kane*.<sup>80</sup>

Parsons had lost one of the most important stories of her career to a reporter who had once been a friend and a recipient of Parsons's promotional largesse, a reporter determined to use this story to further her career at Parsons's expense. It was a bitter pill to swallow for Hollywood's "first lady."

Once Parsons and the Hearst lawyers had viewed the film, Hearst and his associates planned their counter-attack, in which Parsons was to play a pivotal role. Parsons took three weeks off from her column and other commitments to devote her time to blocking the release of the film. As *Variety* reported with great sarcasm, she "is stated to be so busy on the telephone during the past three weeks she hasn't had time to write her column."<sup>81</sup> Parsons was indeed making many phone calls: she contacted RKO production head George Schaefer and left the following threatening message for him on January 9:

Louella Parsons . . . is asking for Mr. Schaefer's home telephone number and says "it is a matter of life and death to RKO" that she have this number right away. Miss Parsons says RKO is going to have one of "the most beautiful lawsuits" in history if they release "CITIZEN KANE." She says she could only wait 5 minutes for you to return her call.<sup>82</sup>

The threatened lawsuit did not come to pass. RKO lawyers asked for additional cuts to the film to remove all potentially libelous material, and Welles complied. Instead of a lawsuit, the Hearst press banned all RKO ads for two weeks that fateful January. And coverage of RKO-affiliated products and individuals was sharply curtailed in the Hearst-controlled media for some time to come—unless the commentary was negative.

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<sup>80</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> "Welles Has 25% of 'Kane,'" *Variety*, February 5, 1941, 10.

<sup>82</sup> "The Battle Over Citizen Kane," *The American Experience*.

Parsons wrote neither on the subject of *Citizen Kane* nor on the key figures involved in the production in the days, weeks, months, and even years that followed. Welles and Schaefer disappeared from her column. Behind closed doors, she aggressively campaigned to block the release of *Citizen Kane* and to sully the reputations of those involved in its creation. The *Kane* premiere had been scheduled for February 14, 1941 at Radio City Music Hall. Radio City Music Hall was owned by the Rockefeller family, which also had a significant investment in RKO. Parsons personally contacted Nelson Rockefeller, and shortly thereafter the premiere was canceled. Parsons had promised “a total press blackout” of the premiere and the film and was rumored to have made more personal threats to the Rockefeller family in the days before the premiere was canceled; her intervention helped delay the film’s release for nearly three months.<sup>83</sup>

Parsons may have written nothing on the subject, but her peers in the national press wrote extensively on her behind-the-scenes activities as the controversy raged. The *Kane* controversy is notable because the nature of Parsons’s power and the weapons she wielded were laid bare for public inspection in an unprecedented manner. While she had already been the subject of a handful of unflattering media profiles, these articles had a limited shelf life and discussed her methods in general rather than in specific, detailed, and damning terms. In contrast, the *Kane* controversy continued throughout the first half of 1940 and triggered an avalanche of bad press, with Parsons’s methods and activities detailed in publications ranging from *Newsweek* to the *New York Times* to *Variety*. Herein lay another key difference. Never before had Parsons been scrutinized so closely and critically by her peers in the trade press. Parsons had been scrupulous about keeping

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<sup>83</sup> As quoted in Nasaw, *The Chief*, 570. See also Kael, “Raising Kane,” 6–7 on Parsons’s campaign against the film and its director.

her behind-the-scenes machinations out of the public eye, but her behavior in this instance was extreme, and she did not proceed with her customary circumspection. Her peers in the media were unwilling to let her conduct go unreported as they had for so many years. The attempt of Hearst associates, led by Parsons, to snuff out both the film and Welles's career was too outrageous to go unreported upon.

*Variety* identified Parsons "as a sort of official spokesman . . . for her boss" and reported that she had acknowledged Hearst "was going through with a suit to force the picture to be ditched." (Parsons later complained in a letter to Joe Willicombe, "I am getting so fed up with *Variety* quoting me on things I never said.") *The New Republic* decried "the intimidation of all the Hollywood studios . . . through Miss Parsons." Douglas Churchill of the *New York Times*, who had attended the first media screening with Hopper, noted, "Miss Parsons is reported to have telephoned George Schaefer . . . and Will Hays protesting the release of *Citizen Kane*. Representations were then made to Louis B. Mayer of Metro and Harry M. Warner of Warner Brothers, who are interested in two of the nation's largest theater chains." *Newsweek* reported, "the remarkable similarity between *Citizen Kane* and her chief struck the usually overvoluble Miss Parsons completely dumb. But while she said nothing, word quickly got around Hollywood that the publisher had issued an ultimatum: not one word about RKO or its productions was to be printed in any Hearst paper until the studio agreed to shelve the picture entirely."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> "RKO, Despite Hearst's Ire,"; Parsons to Willicombe, January 14, 1941, oversized box, W.R. Hearst correspondence (1977), Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley; "Mr. Hearst Can't Take It," *New Republic*, January 20, 1941, p. 69; Douglas Churchill, "Orson Welles Scares Hollywood," NYT, January 19, 1941; "Hearst v. Welles," *Newsweek*, January 20, 1941, p. 62.

As for Hopper, she kept Welles, his film, and R.K.O. in her column though her tone was often disapproving. Hopper initially predicted, "I'm doubting if the picture will ever be released." She later critiqued the film, which remained in limbo, as "chopped up . . . sensational" and suggested "paying customers will go out of curiosity" because of the "controversy, rather than because it is a great film." Hopper had decided that since Hearst was unwilling to compensate her for her efforts she was going to relentlessly promote *Citizen Kane* and Welles to underscore her triumph and Parsons's defeat. As she posited in mid-January, "[B]efore it's over, there'll be a lot of heads that formerly were accustomed to satin pillows reposing in baskets." Hopper clearly hoped that one of those heads would be Parsons's.<sup>85</sup>

Hopper's predictions regarding the fate of *Citizen Kane* may have been dire, but she continued to provide much-needed publicity. Among the Hollywood columnists and broadcasters, Hopper's commentary on the controversy stood out as the most consistent and forthright, and she came under pressure to curb it. In early February 1940, she broadcast a six-part story of Welles's life on her radio show despite the fact that, as *Variety* reported, Samuel Goldwyn and Louis B. Mayer "entreated her not to go ahead with" this programming. Hopper defied the wishes of industry leaders who were under pressure to make the film go away. She did make a concession, but it fooled nobody. She ran a disclaimer on her Welles's broadcast, which she forced Welles to approve or as Hopper warned him the "story won't begin on Monday." Each broadcast in the six-part series was prefaced with this statement from Hopper: "As I've said on this program and in my column I don't believe "Citizen Kane" will ever be released or that it should be, however, Orson Welles has a most interesting life story." Disclaimer or not, her decision

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<sup>85</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," LAT, January 15, February 2, and January 15, 1941.

to feature Welles was a bid to profit from the controversy. But given the pressure she came under from industry leaders, it was also a courageous act in support of artistic and journalistic freedom. Though her motives might have been conflicted and primarily self-serving, her showcasing of Welles could have damaged her own career. Ultimately this risk would pay off handsomely; Hopper demonstrated to many in the film community the value of an alternative voice in the Hollywood press corps that could challenge Parsons's hegemony.<sup>86</sup>

Hopper did not share with her audience that she was the one to alert Hearst to the contents of the film until she discussed it in her 1952 memoir, published after Hearst's death. When she first broke the story, Hopper distanced herself from the controversy by writing: "It's fun to watch, on the sidelines."<sup>87</sup> She did not, however, have to trumpet her role as one of the first to see and report upon the film; other contemporary sources did so for her. As *Time* magazine reported:

Lolly Parsons nearly fell out of her chair. On the preview screen before her, Orson Welles . . . was playing *Citizen Kane* . . . in a way that reminded Cine-columnist Parsons irresistibly of her boss. . . . The seed of suspicion had been deftly implanted in the Parsons mind a week before. She had not been included among Hollywood's journalistic elite (*her rival Hedda Hopper*, Timesman Douglas Churchill, *Look's* Jim Crow) who saw the initial preview of R.K.O.'s & Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. Now, at her own insistence, she was having a special showing.<sup>88</sup>

Most importantly, *Time* prematurely dubbed Hopper a member of "Hollywood's journalistic elite" and Parsons's "rival," status Hopper actually acquired as a result of this controversy. She received wide coverage in the media and was cast as a major player who had out-scooped Parsons on a major news story. Within the industry, it became

<sup>86</sup> "Welles Has 25% of 'Kane'"; Hopper telegram to Welles, n.d., Welles folder, HHc.

<sup>87</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," *LAT*, January 15, 1941.

<sup>88</sup> "Citizen Welles Raises Kane," *Time*, January 27, 1941.

clear that Hopper was a figure to be reckoned with, a reporter who took chances and would defy the dictates of the film world's leaders.

George Schaefer, the RKO head of production, and Orson Welles were singled out for sustained and hostile treatment in the Hearst newspapers. Schaefer, the man who brought Welles to Hollywood and personally approved the final shooting script and the final cut of the film, found himself cast as a villain in the Hearst papers regarding an unrelated and minor contract dispute at RKO. As for Welles, *The New Yorker* reported: "The Hearst press is under strict orders to ignore Welles, except for a series of articles pointing out that he is a menace to American motherhood, freedom of speech and assembly, and the pursuit of happiness." Welles was branded a communist in the Hearst press and suffered personal and professional harassment. In the wake of the controversy over *Kane*, the FBI opened a file on Welles, a result no doubt of his high profile and the charges of communist sympathizing lodged against him by the Hearst press.<sup>89</sup>

Schaefer and RKO were under great pressure to keep *Citizen Kane* from ever seeing the light of day, and not only from the Hearst organization. As Pauline Kael has remarked, "The whole industry, it was feared, would take the rap for R.K.O.'s indiscretion." Parsons called upon the other studio heads to help in her efforts to keep Welles's film out of the theaters and they responded. She secured the assurances of Mayer and Warner that their affiliated theaters would not show the film. In a missive to Hearst she wrote, "L.B. Mayer, Joseph Schenck, Nicholas Schenk and Jack Warner have all refused to book 'Citizen Kane.'" Mayer, acting on behalf of several major studio heads, reportedly offered to buy all prints of *Citizen Kane* from RKO in order to destroy

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<sup>89</sup> As quoted in Welles and Bogdanovich, *This is Welles*, 85. On the treatment of Schaefer and Welles, see also Carringer, *Making of Citizen Kane*, 115; Nasaw, *The Chief*, 568-73; and Thomson, *Rosebud*, 180-2; 188-92.

them. R.K.O., under the aegis of Schaefer, stood firm and refused to relinquish the film. Welles regarded Schaefer as “an absolute hero” for it was Schaefer who continued to support the film and its creator and prevented RKO from succumbing to the pressure being exerted from all sides.<sup>90</sup>

After much delay, *Citizen Kane* opened in New York City on May 1 to rave reviews. RKO, however, was unable to translate the film’s critical success into box-office success because the studio was unable to secure wide release for the film. RKO owned few theaters and depended upon the major theater chains owned primarily by the other major studios. As promised to Parsons, the major chains refused to book *Citizen Kane* until RKO threatened legal action. Even then, many theaters that were supposed to run the film did not do so. Critics recognized the quality of the film, and *Citizen Kane* was named best film of 1941 by the National Board of Review and the New York Film Critics Circle Award. The film was also nominated for nine Academy Awards, including best picture, director, and actor. Only Welles and Mankiewicz were awarded a shared Oscar for best original screenplay that night.

Welles’s career was irreparably damaged by the *Kane* controversy. Parsons played no small role in inflicting that damage and ever after Welles was mostly banned from her celebrity universe. On occasion, she mentioned him, but only in the most derogatory manner. In her 1944 memoir, Parsons referred directly to Welles only once as “the self-elected genius” and neglected to mention that she had herself declared him a genius to the entire world only months before she set out to destroy his film, his career, his life. And Parsons had this to say about actress Rita Hayworth, who was married to

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<sup>90</sup> Kael, “Raising Kane,” 6; as quoted in Nasaw, *The Chief*, 568; as quoted in Welles and Bogdanovich, *This is Welles*, 87.

Welles when this memoir was published: “[S]he is an unhappy little thing. And the various loves of her life . . . have not made her happier.” When Hayworth and Welles were divorced in 1949, Parsons painted Hayworth as the innocent victim of “the publicity-mad Welles . . . [who] was a show-off, none of those who knew him will deny.” Parsons did not discuss Welles at any length until her 1961 memoir in which she acknowledged the considerable damage she had inflicted, damage she felt “was justified.”

Throughout the years I have been accused of being vindictive, unforgiving and hardhearted. . . . The charge has been made that I used my circulation and close relationship with Mr. Hearst as a weapon. I don’t claim that I haven’t used the power of my circulation. All newspapermen do. But I maintain that I used it only to get news—to do my job—*not as a blackjack*. And I believe I have carried only one grudge for any length of time and that was against Orson Welles. I feel I was justified.

In this remarkable passage, Parsons implicitly conceded that she had used the weapons at her disposal as a “blackjack” in the singular case of Welles who had doubly betrayed her.<sup>91</sup>

Conversely, Hopper remained friendly with Welles for the rest of her life, which is ironic given the leftist political orientation that informed much of his work and made him the darling the Popular Front in the 1930s. But he had, after all, helped her career enormously. In the special case of Welles, she overlooked his politics. Indeed, she reported faithfully on all of his projects as his film career stalled in the wake of *Kane*. His projects frequently made headlines in her column: “Deep as a Welles” reported on his

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<sup>91</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 185, 133; Parsons, “End of Welles Romance Found Rita Bitter,” LAE, June 6, 1949, scrapbook #47, LpC; Parsons, *Tell It*, 131. Emphasis mine.

version of MacBeth being filmed in Rome and she also announced that “Orson Welles to Do Three African Films.”<sup>92</sup>

*In the Wake of Kane*

In the wake of the *Citizen Kane* controversy, Hopper began to be featured in the national media as a worthy rival to Parsons. Parsons was only too well aware of Hopper’s meteoric rise and once remarked, “She’s trying to do in two years what took me thirty and I resent some of the things she says about me.” While RKO was still struggling to secure wide theatrical release for the film, a profile of Hopper appeared in a July 1941 issue of *Life*. The article did not address the *Kane* controversy directly but did suggest that Hopper “has the distinction of scoring an occasional bull’s-eye in a field where the shooting is notoriously wild.” This profile illustrated Hopper’s growing power and influence, both literally and figuratively. The photo essay commemorated Hopper’s move into “swankier Beverly Hills quarters” where her neighbors included Ronald Colman and Cary Grant, as befitted “one of the top gossip purveyors of her day.” Her movers included “her Hollywood friends” Rosalind Russell, Robert Stack, Eddie Albert, and new neighbor Cary Grant. The article also served notice—in no uncertain terms—that Parsons no longer had a monopoly on Hollywood gossip. In telling the story of Hopper’s career, the punch line was that “[h]er popularity grew until it challenged even Hearst’s gushy Louella Parsons.”<sup>93</sup>

Parsons, however, was not vanquished by the *Kane* controversy. The same month Hopper was profiled in *Life*, a profile of Parsons appeared in *Liberty* magazine. The

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<sup>92</sup> “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” April 15, 1948, scrapbook #15, HHc; “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” June 3, 1949, scrapbook #16, HHc.

<sup>93</sup> Dickson Hartwell, “End of a Beautiful Feud,” *Collier’s*, June 5, 1948, p. 23; “Life Goes to A Hollywood House Moving,” *Life*, July 14, 1941, pp. 82–3.

article began by acknowledging the considerable attention—and not all negative if this generally kindly profile was any indication—it had drawn to Parsons:

Since the late alleged all-out war between Citizen Hearst and Citizen Welles over *Citizen Kane* . . . the name of Citizen Louella Parsons, Hollywood's first columnist, has become almost as well known to us movie fans as those of the cinema cuties about whose lives and loves she daily tells the world.<sup>94</sup>

Parsons also took action on other fronts. In December 1941 the Hollywood Women's Press Club (HWPC)—an organization that Parsons co-founded and in which her daughter, cousin, and longtime assistant figured prominently—raised its profile in the industry. The HWPC presented its first annual Golden and Sour Apple awards: the golden apple went to the actor and actress deemed most cooperative while the sour apple went to the least cooperative twosome. This timing was not coincidental. After her humiliation over *Kane* and Hopper's rising prominence, the HWPC suddenly began to dole out "awards" that targeted recalcitrant celebrities and rewarded those who cooperated with the press. Orson Welles was never awarded a Sour Apple, in keeping with Parsons's policy to shut him out of the celebrity universe as constructed by her. But Parsons now had another weapon to use against those who displeased her. While not well-known to the general public, the Hollywood press corps and the film industry paid careful attention to these awards. The Christmas party at which they were presented was generally a star-studded event, with the winners of the Golden Apple often in attendance. Indeed "many of the uncoops lived to become coops," like Humphrey Bogart, recipient of a 1949 sour apple, who actively campaigned to capture the favor of the HWPC.<sup>95</sup> The awards raised the HWPC's profile in the industry and demonstrated the power of this

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<sup>94</sup> Frederick Lewis, "Queen Louella: The Private Life," *Liberty*, July 19, 1941, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> "The New Improved Revised History of the HWPC," p. 42, folder 2-f.106 1962 Membership Roster, HWPCc.

segment of the Hollywood press corps, allied with Parsons. Hopper, not surprisingly, was never a member of the HWPC.

Parsons also sought to burnish her public profile in the wake of *Kane*. On August 26, 1941, “Louella Parsons’s Day” was held in her hometown of Dixon, Illinois, to great media fanfare. Hearst newsreels covered this demonstration of Parsons’s stature in the industry and announced, “Hollywood moves to Illinois to help celebrate the homecoming of the first lady of movieland, Dixon’s own Louella Parsons.” Ann Rutherford and Bob Hope were among those who traveled to Dixon to pay tribute to the woman “who has helped so many ambitious youngsters scale the heights of Hollywood.”<sup>96</sup> One of the “youngsters” attending was, of course, Ronald Reagan, also of Dixon, a Parsons’s protégé who never failed her or incurred her wrath as had Welles.

But some of those stars confronted a scheduling conflict, as reported by *Time*. Actors scheduled to attend an American Legion convention in Milwaukee at Hopper’s request were also invited to attend “Louella Parsons Day,” to be held on the same day. This was the first major public statement of Hollywood’s new dilemma: how to keep both women satisfied and convinced that they were receiving preferential treatment. The “feud” had officially begun: “Aware that either gossip could mess up a career with a few syndicated twists of the wrist, cinema folk were frantic. As they dined off their nails, they knew only one thing: this was a new kind of party—the headache came first.”<sup>97</sup>

This scheduling conflict provides a perfect illustration of a critical disparity in Parsons and Hopper’s styles and the uses to which they chose to put their power. Parsons called upon industry figures to honor her celebrity and spread stardust in her humble,

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<sup>96</sup> Hearst newsreel footage, Walter Winchell, Louella Parsons, VA5370M, VHS, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles California.

<sup>97</sup> “Double Date,” *Time*, September 22, 1941, 55.

midwestern hometown. Such events had become standard procedure in the Hollywood publicity machine, a way of reaching out directly to grassroots supporters in small-town America and generating publicity. Hopper, on the other hand, invited Hollywood luminaries to attend a quasi-political event, in which neither she nor they were ostensibly the main event. Conservative political rhetoric was the main course at this midwestern American Legion convention. Like Parsons, Hopper was reaching out to middle America, and she could express her political convictions and promote herself simultaneously. Hopper was helping to build a conservative, Republican political faction in Hollywood. She was also determined to demonstrate that many citizens of Hollywood supported “traditional” American values—that it was not simply a hotbed of liberal dilettantes. Parsons’s efforts were pure self-promotion: publicity for the sake of publicity. Hopper had a political agenda and cause and used her position and influence to further it. Yet Hopper’s political orientation and activities helped advance her career: ultimately her political and professional interests were inextricably intertwined and mutually beneficial.

In May 1942, Hopper signed on with the Chicago Tribune-New York [Daily] News Syndicate—“a contract that nearly tripled her readers.” Syndication in twenty-seven newspapers gave her circulation of about six million. Most importantly her column began to appear in the *Daily News*, giving her the New York outlet she had so long desired. Parsons’s circulation at the time was estimated to be somewhere between 15 and 17 million in about two hundred newspapers, and as *Time* noted, “the old queen . . . is not exactly dead.” Parsons still had an advantage in terms of newspaper circulation—an advantage she retained until the 1960s—but Hopper now appeared in three major

metropolitan dailies—the *New York Daily News*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Los Angeles Times*—making her a journalist to be reckoned with.<sup>98</sup>

Parsons may have retained an advantage in print, but Hopper's acting training served her well in radio and film work. Following the example set by Parsons, Hopper translated her column into other media and proved to be more prolific and consistently successful. In 1942, for example, Hopper hosted a thrice-weekly CBS radio broadcast; had a supporting role in the Paramount feature film, *Reap the Wild Wind*; and narrated the final four of six film shorts for Paramount, entitled, of course, "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood." (The first two Paramount shorts were filmed and released in 1941.) These shorts represented a filmic version of the column and covered premieres, birthday parties, celebrity vacations, and industry war efforts as World War II raged. "Here I am at Pickfair, which we call the 'White House of Hollywood,'" reported Hopper from a USO benefit and fashion show featured in her final Paramount short. Pickfair, the fabled Beverly Hills estate built by actors Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. in 1919 as the film colony in Hollywood rose to national prominence, was turned over to the USO, as Hopper informed American filmgoers, every Wednesday for the benefit of soldiers who dined and swam and had "lunch with some of Hollywood's loveliest girls."<sup>99</sup>

As Hopper's profile rose, Parsons confronted a vastly changed working environment. For years, "choice studio stories went first, automatically, to Lolly; actors phoned her first and eloped afterwards lest she sideswipe them ever after." Parsons's silence, rather than negative commentary, was the weapon she had once wielded most

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<sup>98</sup> "Hedda Makes Hay," 51–2. On their syndication, see also "Lolly of Hollywood," *Newsweek*, January 4, 1943, pp. 61–2.

<sup>99</sup> "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," No. 6, Paramount, 1942, 35mm, UCLA Film and Television Archive, Los Angeles, California.

effectively. As Hopper remarked, “Stars were terrified of her. If they crossed her, they were given the silent treatment: no mention of their names in her column.”<sup>100</sup>

But with Hopper’s emergence this would change. As one reporter noted, “Miss Hopper’s growing power was cause for jubilation among the press agents. . . . [T]hey were no longer so dependent on one columnist.”<sup>101</sup> Not just press agents, but the talent agencies, studios, and the creative personnel themselves now had another source to turn to tell their side of the story, if Parsons was not sympathetic or had frozen them out of her column and broadcast. When relationships went sour—whether a marriage or a working partnership between actor and studio—the injured parties began to seek a champion in either Parsons or Hopper. For example, when Humphrey Bogart and his actress wife Mayo Methot separated in December 1944, Bogart turned to Parsons while Methot turned to Hopper.<sup>102</sup>

Locked in combat, these two women became even more famous together than they would have alone. The feud was a popular trope used by many performers of the period as a public relations tool. Winchell used mock feuds with other columnists and entertainers to great effect in his career; first with fellow columnist Mark Hellinger and then with bandleader and radio personality Ben Bernie. Bernie built a career out of being Winchell’s sparring partner. From magazine headlines—“‘I STARTED THE FEUD’ Says Winchell ‘I STARTED THE FEUD’ Says Bernie”—to two feature films, these men parlayed their feud into public renown and considerable financial remuneration.<sup>103</sup> Other

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<sup>100</sup> “Hedda Makes Hay,” p. 52; Hopper and Brough, *Whole Truth*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> Hartwell, “End of the Feud,” 22–3.

<sup>102</sup> Sperber and Lax, *Bogart*, 283–4.

<sup>103</sup> Gladys Hall, “‘I STARTED THE FEUD’ Says Winchell ‘I STARTED THE FEUD’ Says Bernie,” *Radio Affairs*, March 10, 1937, Folder 499: Walter Winchell, Gladys Hall Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

entertainers followed suit including Jack Benny and Fred Allen and Bob Hope and Bing Crosby; there was money to be made and careers to be advanced in such fictional accounts of the behind-the-scenes rivalries between entertainers.<sup>104</sup>

Real animosity, however, existed between Parsons and Hopper. Their feud was not scripted in the manner of these other collaborations. Among the chief beneficiaries and promoters of the feud were the press agents who had “cause for jubilation” with Hopper’s rise to prominence. “[W]ith Hopper packing a wallop almost as potent, they were no longer so dependent on one columnist. To make the most of the rivalry the boys cried, ‘Feud!’ and played it for all it was worth,” chronicled one magazine on the occasion of Parsons and Hopper’s “reconciliation” staged in 1948—one of the few such incidents in the history of their competition on which Parsons and Hopper knowingly collaborated. Tellingly, the “[c]hief mourners . . . were 300 or so studio and free-lance press agents who for a decade had played Hopper and Parsons against each other in a grab for space involving newspapers with about 40,000,000 readers and umpteen million radio listeners.”<sup>105</sup>

Their battle for supremacy in the Hollywood press corps meant stories that Parsons might once have ignored or given short shrift, especially the truly scandalous ones that made the front-page headlines, might find their way into Hopper’s column. Their contest led to increasing disclosure and the overt politicization of all of the syndicated Hollywood columns as their peers had no choice but to follow suit to remain competitive. It also expanded the parameters of their columns vis-à-vis the private lives of their subjects. Competition bred controversy.

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<sup>104</sup> On Winchell-Bernie feud and the origins of the Hollywood feud, see Gabler, *Winchell*, 127–8; 224–8.

<sup>105</sup> Hartwell, “End of the Feud,” 22–3.

Charlie Chaplin was among the first to feel its sting. For years, Charlie Chaplin had benefited from his long association with Louella Parsons. They had known each other since their Essanay days in the 1910s. She spent years praising Chaplin in her column with statements such as “Charlie Chaplin is the most popular man in the world.”<sup>106</sup> She generally overlooked or excused his complicated private life. Parsons did tweak Chaplin for his “intellectualism” and “taking himself too seriously,” but ultimately she was willing to defend him and give him the benefit of the doubt for he was Hollywood “royalty.”<sup>107</sup> Hopper acknowledged his genius, but loathed his Popular Front politicking. Hopper and Chaplin’s political differences tipped the scales when Joan Barry, an aspiring young actress, went to Hopper in the spring of 1943 with the story of her mistreatment at the hands of Chaplin and his associates.

In June 1941, Chaplin signed Barry, an unknown and untried young actress, to star in his next film, and they became romantically involved for the next year.<sup>108</sup> Throughout his career, Chaplin had “discovered” a host of young, unknown actresses to serve as leading ladies on- and off-screen. The twenty-one-year-old Barry was no exception. Chaplin’s predilection for combining business and pleasure was well known in Hollywood and had incited scandal and headlines before, a fact Parsons and Hopper knew well. In May 1942, Hopper wrote a column directed at “just one girl in Hollywood . . . the lucky girl chosen by Chaplin to play the top feminine role in ‘Shadow and Substance,’” an actress Hopper did not name, but who was in fact Barry. Hopper warned

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<sup>106</sup> Louella O. Parsons, “Seen on the Screen,” CRH, n.d., scrapbook #1, LPc.

<sup>107</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 43, 87.

<sup>108</sup> Two different spelling of this actress’s name appear throughout the literature: Berry and Barry. Born Mary Louise Gribble, she changed her name to Joan and took her stepfather’s surname Berry as a schoolgirl. Chaplin changed her last name to Barry when he put her under contract so Joan Barry will be used throughout for consistency. On Berry’s name, see Joyce Milton, *Tramp: The Life of Charlie Chaplin* (New York: Harper Collins, 1986), 388–9; 391.

her not to accept this “luscious package . . . labeled fame” because Chaplin would use her and then discard her. “[Y]ou’ll be somebody” and then “nobody again,” Hopper wrote.<sup>109</sup>

When Chaplin became involved with seventeen-year-old Oona O’Neill, daughter of renowned playwright Eugene O’Neill and writer Agnes Boulton, in the fall of 1942, he tried to end the relationship with the mentally unbalanced Barry. Barry continued to pursue and harass him. On January 1, 1943, Chaplin associates had Barry arrested on vagrancy charges. She was released under the condition that she leave Los Angeles, which she did a few days later. In late April 1943, a now-pregnant Barry returned to Los Angeles to confront Chaplin whom she claimed had fathered the child. (A paternity test would later reveal that Chaplin was not the father.) Chaplin, however, wanted nothing to do with her. Barry then contacted Hopper who promised her assistance. But Barry returned once again to Chaplin’s home and when she refused to leave the grounds, she was arrested and jailed.

Shortly thereafter, Hopper (in conjunction with *New York Daily News* and *Variety* columnist Florabel Muir) began a relentless campaign against Chaplin because of his treatment of Barry and also because she did not approve of his pro-Soviet, Popular Front political activism. Hopper’s exposure of the sordid details of Chaplin’s private life made many in Hollywood nervous, but once the story hit the media, headlines followed. On June 3, Barry filed a paternity suit against Chaplin, which resulted in much condemnation in the media and not just from Hopper.

In a defensive move, Chaplin and O’Neill were married less than three weeks after the suit was filed. Chaplin had consulted with his old friend Harry Crocker

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<sup>109</sup> As quoted in Milton, *Tramp*, 396.

regarding his predicament, and Crocker, a Hearst intimate and *Los Angeles Examiner* columnist, helped Chaplin plan the wedding and avoid the media, with the notable exception of Parsons. As Crocker remembered, “I . . . informed Louella O. Parsons, my columnist confrere on the Examiner, that Charlie was desirous of giving her the story exclusively.”<sup>110</sup> As Parsons later wrote, “I [had] . . . the faces, dates, and place of the wedding while the competition [i.e. Hopper] came scraggling behind with bare surmises.” Parsons’s exclusive, granted to her because Chaplin knew she would give the new couple her blessing in the face of an avalanche of bad press, further antagonized Hopper, who continued to excoriate Chaplin in her column. “A reporter who lets his personal views get in the way of a news story just isn’t worthy of his profession,” Parsons concluded in her 1944 memoir about Hopper’s treatment of Chaplin.<sup>111</sup> Parsons knew that Chaplin’s political orientation had fueled Hopper’s attack on him. Hopper claimed to be motivated only by her desire to expose Chaplin’s sexual and professional exploitation of Barry. But such exploitation was sadly the fate of many young actresses in Hollywood, exploitation to which Hopper (and Parsons) had all too often turned a blind eye. Hopper’s “purity” crusade was highly selective, targeting only Chaplin. Of course, Parsons and many denizens of Hollywood watched this case closely for fear of what might ensue with charges of police corruption and white slavery in the headlines surrounding the Chaplin-Barry situation.

The media coverage prompted an investigation by the Los Angeles District Attorney’s office. Meanwhile Chaplin’s political activism (for the opening of a second U.S. front in World War II in support of the Soviet Union) had already drawn the

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<sup>110</sup> Crocker, “That’s Hollywood,” Chapter 16, p. 21, folder 7, Harry Crocker collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>111</sup> Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 129, 127.

attention of the U.S. Justice Department. In the end, Chaplin was charged in federal court with violating the Mann Act for the alleged interstate transportation of Barry for immoral purposes and with violating Barry's civil rights by having her forcibly removed from Los Angeles in early 1943. Chaplin was acquitted in April 1944, but still had to fight a protracted paternity case. Though blood tests had confirmed in February 1944 that Chaplin was not the father of Barry's child, such evidence was not binding under California law. The court eventually ruled in favor of Barry and her child. Chaplin's personal and professional reputations were in tatters. The adversarial relationship between Parsons and Hopper had helped spark this media firestorm. Their feud had taken on a life of its own and the collateral damage would be serious—particularly within the polarized political and cultural context of Cold War Hollywood.

*Time* and *Life* had been among the first publications to announce the feud to the nation and devoted considerable copy to it over the next quarter century. "Prettier, wittier, more kindly by instinct, Hedda is infinitely more liked by the movie colony than her ruthless rival," proclaimed *Life* in 1941. At this juncture, the commentary on Parsons in Luce publications became uniformly critical and mean-spirited. For the rest of her career, her intellect, personal appearance, and career would be subject to sarcastic and cutting commentary in the pages of *Time* and *Life*. Luce writers coined the moniker of "Lollipop" Parsons and excoriated Parsons—particularly her appearance—to Hopper's advantage. "Until the ascendancy of Hedda Hopper there was the unique phenomenon of a great American industry cringing and genuflecting before the redundant figure of Louella 'Lollipop' Parsons," reported *Life*. Parsons was well aware of the venom directed at her from the Luce publications. "It is not pleasant to have fun poked at your

appearance in national magazines,” she wrote in 1944. “[A]fter reading a description of myself in a Luce publication I feel like something out of a horror movie.”<sup>112</sup>

The Luce attacks on Parsons—who was perhaps the most visible and unquestionably the most devoted of Hearst reporters—were also an attack by the Luce media empire on the rival Hearst empire. As the Hearst corporation struggled to recover from the verge of bankruptcy in the late 1930s and 1940s, the Luce media was in ascendance. In fact, a subplot of *Citizen Kane* brilliantly dramatized “Hearstian journalism giving way to the new Luce empire.” *Citizen Kane* opens with a mock newsreel “News on the March”—a skilled parody of the Luce-produced “March of Time” newsreels—that announces the death of media magnate Charles Foster Kane and explores his life and times. “The great yellow journalist himself lived to be history . . . [and] outlived his power to make it,” concludes the narrator of the newsreel. The Rawlston organization that produces the newsreel and instigates the investigation into Kane’s final word is an obvious stand-in for the Luce corporation.<sup>113</sup>

Rawlston reporter Thompson, an anonymous character given no first name or personality and almost faceless since he was largely shot from behind, represented the bureaucratic and collective style of Luce journalism, which scorned by-lines and celebrity status for its reporters. Ironically for an organization that rejected celebrity status for its own reporters, the Luce publications played a pivotal role in championing the individual as an important lens through which to view and interpret complex events for a mass audience. This focus on the individual—for it was the individual who appeared most

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<sup>112</sup> “Life Goes to A Hollywood House Moving,” 83; Wickware, “Hedda Hopper,” 63; Parsons, *Gay Illiterate*, 146.

<sup>113</sup> On the Hearst v. Luce subplot see Kael, “Raising Kane,” 55–9, quote at 56–7; *Citizen Kane* (1941), Gold Box Set edition DVD.

often on the covers of *Time* and *Life*—contributed mightily to the culture of celebrity and celebrity journalist so often derided in these magazines. Indeed, Hedda Hopper would be profiled in a July 1947 *Time* cover story—Parsons never graced the cover—that proclaimed her the “self-appointed judge and censor of all that goes on in Hollywood.”<sup>114</sup> This article appeared as another HUAC investigation of Hollywood was brewing in 1947. Hopper was by then part of an anticommunist elite in the film industry that would provide invaluable assistance to HUAC this time around. And in Cold War Hollywood, this “self-appointed judge and censor” would find many a dangerous story to print.

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<sup>114</sup> “The Gossipist,” 60.

#### Chapter 4: “Our Smoggish Red Glare”: Silencing Liberal Dissent in Cold War Hollywood, 1947

In January 1947, a *Saturday Evening Post* profile of Hedda Hopper declared her “an autocrat of the Hollywood gossip exchange whose power is, at times, literally frightening.” By 1947, Hopper’s syndication had grown to 110 newspapers, with readership estimated to be about 22.8 million. In addition to her print audience, she also had a weekly radio show that further enhanced her reach. Exhibit A in the case of Hopper’s at times alarming power was her coverage of the 1943 Joan Barry-Charlie Chaplin affair and subsequent paternity suit: “Hollywood begged Hopper to quash the story. Miss Hopper let the movie colony squirm for a week, then released [it] . . . as a warning to others involved in dubious relationships.”<sup>1</sup>

Hopper’s 1943 attack on Chaplin operated not just on a moral level but also on a political level, a fact that those on the Hollywood left knew only too well. By 1947, Hopper had become a high-profile Republican party supporter and activist, a development discussed at some length in her *Saturday Evening Post* profile.

Miss Hopper’s boundless energy, which both amuses and exhausts her friends, has taken her on a number of excursions into politics. . . . Globally, she doesn’t go very far beyond the conviction that something is wrong. . . . Domestically, Miss Hopper is a rabid Republican and attends all national conventions.

This report also suggested that her alliance with the Republican party was an uneasy one:

The Republicans are pleased to ally themselves with Miss Hopper, but she occasionally unnerves the steadier members with her unorthodox moves. . . . In . . . 1944, Hedda Hopper told the nation that the Republicans attending the convention in Chicago reminded her of polar bears. While she undoubtedly

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<sup>1</sup> Collie Small, “Gossip is Her Business,” *Saturday Evening Post*, January 11, 1947, p. 15. For Hopper’s syndication, see Small, “Gossip is Her Business,” 14; “The Gossipist,” *Time*, July 28, 1947, p. 60.

meant that the Republicans in Chicago were warm, cuddly Republicans, she failed to amplify the statement, and the image she created was indeed a bleak one.

This statement of her “rabid Republican” politics came at the close of an article that highlighted her “inaccuracies” and “forgetfulness” as well as her “fearsome authority,” an ominous brew. Hopper herself played up these contradictions—simultaneously embracing and delegitimizing her own power—in her dance with the media to keep her critics off-balance and maintain her place in the Hollywood press corps. But, as this profile made clear, her political agenda and allies had become too considerable to be ignored. The infusion of her political agenda into her column and broadcast lent a more biting tone to her work than that of most of her peers, including Parsons, which most likely increased her audience as readers and listeners wondered from day to day who might receive a scolding from Hopper. Though this quality made her a riskier gamble as an employee with the attendant controversy and possible legal woes she might incur, it also promised to attract a larger audience and greater profits for employers. Thus Hopper’s political rhetoric not only provided her with powerful allies, it also drew like-minded readers and employers into her orbit and also attracted an audience of those who did not share her political beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

In 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) once again trained its sights on the film industry. This time the results were devastating. As the domestic battle to contain communism heated up, Hopper was a member of the informal yet influential network of anticommunist activists, which included journalists, publishers, politicians, actors, and powerful figures from all walks of life. They capitalized upon the geopolitical realignments of the postwar era and the very real danger posed by Soviet

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<sup>2</sup> Small, “Gossip is Her Business,” 58.

aggression to attack their enemies and promote their political agenda. Hopper was one of a multitude of journalists, including political columnists Westbrook Pegler and Drew Pearson, who espoused a hard-line, Republican anticommunism and assisted HUAC's attempts to build a case against the film industry. But as one of the two most powerful journalists in the Hollywood press corps, Hopper was in a particularly advantageous position as HUAC trained its sights on the film industry. She played a decisive role in discrediting and demoralizing principled liberal dissent in Hollywood and contributed to a climate of opinion that led to the establishment of the blacklist. Hopper's vociferous attacks overwhelmed more moderate voices, including that of Louella Parsons, her chief rival in the Hollywood press corps. Parsons's subtle, initial critique of HUAC was largely ineffectual, and in the wake of the 1947 hearings, she would be forced to intensify her anticommunist rhetoric and reconcile herself to a new political order in Hollywood.

### *Hopper, Hoover, and the Alliance*

Director Edward Dmytryk, one of the Hollywood Ten and a former Communist party member, aptly contextualized the events of 1947: "The confrontation with the Hollywood rightists, led by C.B. De Mille, John Wayne, *Hedda Hopper*, Sam Wood, Robert Montgomery, Adolphe Menjou, and a number of less vocal personalities, had been brewing for some time, and we [the Hollywood left] had been looking forward to it." These "Hollywood rightists" were member of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI or Alliance), a group established in 1944 by anti-Roosevelt, anticommunist Republican conservatives in the film industry that initially attracted about 1500 members. In addition to those listed by Dmytryk, actors Ward Bond, Gary Cooper, Ward Bond, and Robert Taylor; directors King Vidor and Clarence

Brown; and writers Rupert Hughes and James McGuinness were among the most prominent of Alliance members. The MPAPAI mission statement read in part: “In our special field of motion pictures, we resent the growing impression that this industry is made up of and dominated by, Communists, radicals and crack-pots. . . . As members of the motion picture industry, we must face and accept an especial responsibility. Motion pictures are inescapably one of the world’s great forces for influencing public thought and opinion, both at home and abroad. In this fact lies solemn obligation.” This organization felt obliged to expose and expel the communists in its midst. Its definition of communism was broad and imprecise, encompassing fellow travelers and liberals alike. The MPAPAI sought “to cooperate with other organizations whose ideals conform with ours whensoever their problems and ours are common.” Led by president and MGM director Sam Wood, the group quickly made contact with allies in the public and private sector, including the American Legion and the National Chamber of Commerce.<sup>3</sup>

The MPAPAI claimed that it would “take no part in politics as an organization”—a claim that was quickly jettisoned as the group sought out like-minded Congressional allies. Indeed, just a month into its existence the group petitioned Dixiecrat senator Robert R. Reynolds (D-North Carolina) for an investigation of communism in Hollywood. When HUAC turned its attention back to Hollywood in the summer of 1945, the Alliance—desperate for allies and credibility in an overwhelmingly Rooseveltian town—was prepared to help HUAC make a case for communist subversion in the film

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Dymtryk, *It's a Hell of a Life and Not a Bad Living* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 93; Motion Picture Alliance membership form, n.d., Motion Picture Alliance 1944-1955 folder, HHc; Motion Picture Alliance statement of policy, n.d., Motion Picture Alliance 1944-1955 folder, HHc. On the MPAPAI, see Ronald Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter: The Hollywood-Washington Connection* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 87–92; Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930–1960* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 209–15; John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting 1-Movies* (1956; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 10–13; and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 127.

industry. HUAC capitalized upon the willingness of the MPAPAI adherents to share their resources and information and eventually to testify against fellow members of the film industry. Indeed, the Alliance played a critical role in the success of HUAC's 1947 investigation of Hollywood.<sup>4</sup>

The Alliance's funding was derived largely from solicitations to members—many of whom had the means to make generous contributions to the group's coffers—and to the general public. Its expenses were minimal since the group shared the facilities and resources of already established anticommunist organizations such as the American Legion and the Catholic War Veterans for promotional purposes and speaking tours. The Alliance drew considerable grassroots support as its high-profile members often took to the road to spread their message. The MPAPAI did, however, lack support from industry leaders. Walt Disney was the only studio head to join the group. While others may have privately endorsed and been sympathetic to the Alliance in its earliest years, no studio executives joined the organization or publicly endorsed its program because they all stood in opposition to the Alliance's insistence on the need for federal intervention in the functioning of the industry. The Alliance stance, as articulated by Hopper was: “[I]f our producers stopped hiring Commies and fellow travelers, there would be very little need for . . . Washington” to investigate.<sup>5</sup>

Hopper gained from the MPAPAI an ideological home and a focus for her considerable political energy. She toured extensively on behalf of the Alliance and also

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<sup>4</sup> Motion Picture Alliance statement of policy, n.d., Motion Picture Alliance 1944–1955 folder, HHc. On the MPAPAI petition to Reynolds, see Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 212.

<sup>5</sup> Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 17, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

served on its finance committee in 1948 and as a vice president in 1949 and 1950.<sup>6</sup> Her column and weekly broadcast served as a powerful tool for the dissemination of MPAPAI propaganda. Hopper's column was rife with news about her political allies inside and outside the industry, with a particular focus on the activities—creative, personal, and political—of MPAPAI members. For these reasons, she must be considered among its most valuable and powerful members. Other members certainly worked to promote the MPAPAI and its political agenda. For example, MPAPAI member John Wayne produced and starred in the 1952 film *Big Jim McLain*, the story of two HUAC investigators who uncover and expose a Communist party spy ring in the then-territory of Hawaii. But Hopper, who *Life* magazine dubbed “perhaps the most influential female in that area called Hollywood” in 1944, had a multi-media platform that reached millions of people on a daily basis.<sup>7</sup>

The Alliance, including Hopper, allied itself with right-wing politicians and officials, including FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Journalists knew that Hoover received daily clippings of news articles pertaining to himself and his agency. Coverage, both positive and negative, often elicited a response from Hoover or one of his intermediaries. Hopper had long cultivated a relationship with Hoover by including frequent favorable mentions of him in her column, notices that often implied a personal acquaintance and working relationship though none existed prior to the summer of 1946.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Motion Picture Alliance internal memoranda, 1948 and 1949, Motion Picture Alliance 1944–1955 folder, HHc.

<sup>7</sup> Francis Sill Wickware, “Hedda Hopper,” *Life*, November 20, 1944, p. 63.

<sup>8</sup> On Hoover and the media, see, for example, Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover's FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1983), and *Secrecy and Power: The Life of J. Edgar Hoover* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

In mid-1946, Hoover reached out to Hopper, who had emerged as a worthwhile and valuable ally because of the potent combination of her political orientation, Alliance membership, and professional stature. By August 1946, Hopper was on a first-name basis with Hoover and on his list of special correspondents. She had become, like Walter Winchell before her, one of the “favored gossip columnists” with whom Hoover exchanged “information about alleged personal misconduct” and much, much more. That summer Hoover wrote to Hopper: “I just wanted to write this personal note to tell you again how much I enjoyed seeing you and talking with you. Also I should like to convey my special thanks for your reference to me in one of your recent columns. I can’t tell you how deeply grateful I am for your words of faith.” In the fall, he wrote again to thank Hopper for her report on his “remarks before the Annual Convention of the American Legion” and sent her “the full text” of his address. Hopper had acquired an important ally as the battle over communist subversion in Hollywood grew more heated.<sup>9</sup>

### **HUAC Comes Back to Hollywood**

In 1940, HUAC’s investigation of the film world had come to naught; this would not be the case seven years later. HUAC’s ability to succeed in 1947 Hollywood was rooted in a host of external and internal factors. The rise of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. as superpowers locked in ideological and military combat reinvigorated and legitimized anticommunist activism in early Cold War America. U.S. foreign policy became focused on the containment of communism—the guiding principle of the Truman Doctrine (first articulated to the nation and the world in a March 1947 speech), which formally

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<sup>9</sup> Athan G. Theoharis and John Stuart Cox, *The Boss: J. Edgar Hoover and the Great American Inquisition* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 110; Hoover to Hopper, August 10, 1946, J. Edgar Hoover file, HHc; Hoover to Hopper, October 16, 1946, Hedda Hopper FBI file 94-37177 (in author’s possession under FOIA). On Hoover and Winchell’s working relationship, see Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 197–202.

established the United States' new role as a world superpower and peacekeeper. The containment of communism increasingly became a priority on the domestic front, thereby offering HUAC and its allies a new legitimacy.

Hollywood had been polarized into political camps, left and right, since the rise of the Popular and cultural fronts in the 1930s. These camps had become particularly entrenched and embittered as a result of the struggle over jurisdiction between the conservative International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the left-wing Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) unions, which led to a wave of protracted and bitter strikes from 1945 to 1947. These labor struggles were also a harbinger of changing political allegiances as exemplified by the decisive shift to the right of many former New Deal Democrats, like Screen Actors Guild (SAG) president Ronald Reagan. This development mirrored prevailing national political trends.<sup>10</sup>

A politically polarized, postwar U.S. film industry was also nearing the end of a long legal struggle with the Justice Department. From 1938 to 1948, industry leaders were consumed with litigation and appeals of an anti-trust suit brought against the five major studios. In 1948, the Supreme Court ruled in the *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al* decision to break up the monopolies that were the major studios with divestiture of their theater chains. This case, which put the final nail in the coffin of the studio system, was nearing resolution as HUAC set its sights on Hollywood. At the same

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<sup>10</sup> On the political polarization and union strife in Hollywood, see Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 180–95; and Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s*, vol. 6 of *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), 303–7. On the Popular and cultural fronts in Hollywood, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996). Garry Wills marks 1947 as the decisive year in which Reagan, a former New Deal Democrat, embraced the political philosophy and worldview of conservative Republicanism though he did not change his voter registration to Republican until 1962. Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (New York: Penguin, 1988), 306.

time, already beleaguered executives also had to contend with falling profits in the postwar period linked to shrinking foreign markets and the rise of a formidable contender in the entertainment market: television. For all of these reasons, HUAC had in its sights a newly vulnerable target.<sup>11</sup>

HUAC was reinvigorated by the new political imperatives of the postwar world—imperatives that also forced a realignment of politics on the local level, including Hollywood. The committee confronted a postwar movie industry weakened by political infighting and considerable financial and legal woes. HUAC turned its attention to the film industry beginning in the summer of 1945 though without any substantive results until after the 1946 mid-term Congressional elections in which the Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress. John Parnell Thomas (R-New Jersey) assumed chairmanship of HUAC and stepped up the anti-Hollywood invective. In the spring of 1947, Thomas gained a valuable ally when J. Edgar Hoover publicly broke ranks with the Truman administration. In a March 26, 1947 appearance before HUAC, Hoover endorsed its program and charged that the Truman administration had imperiled national security by failing to take seriously the anticommunist threat sooner. With the very public support of one of the most powerful and respected leaders in the Justice Department, HUAC was ready to take action.<sup>12</sup>

Hedda Hopper had for many years acted as a willing chronicler of Hoover's activities and an advocate of his work, but by that spring of 1947, her perception of their relationship had changed: she now saw herself as Hoover's colleague and peer in the

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<sup>11</sup> On the anti-trust case and other problems facing the film industry, see, for example, Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 272–9; Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 323–3.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 215–18.

renewed effort to purge communists from the film industry and from the nation at large. In April 1947, Hoover sent Hopper an advance copy of his soon-to-be-published book, *The Story of the FBI*. In a letter thanking him for the book, Hopper wrote to “My Dear Edgar”:

I loved what you said about Commies in the Motion Picture Industry. But I would like it even more if you could *name names* and print more facts. Who’s keeping that truth from the American public? Is that one of the jobs Mr. Eric Johnston was paid to do? I’d like to run every one of those rats out of the country and start with Charlie Chaplin. In no other country in the world would he have been allowed to do what he’s done. And now he’s finished another picture, and Miss Mary Pickford is back in NY helping him sell it.<sup>13</sup>

This diatribe, though clearly designed to curry Hoover’s favor, accurately reflected Hopper’s beliefs. She believed communists had run amuck in Hollywood and needed to be stopped. She believed industry leaders had shirked their duties and needed to be taught a lesson. Eric Johnston—who had succeeded Will Hays as president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) in 1945 at which time the organization changed its name to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA)—came under attack as spokesperson for the collective interests of the major studios for this reason. And Hopper never missed an opportunity to attack Chaplin and anyone she considered a Chaplin supporter—even Pickford, a film world legend with a spotless political record against whom Hopper bore no grudge. “It’s about time *we* stood up to be counted,” she exhorted Hoover. “We” referred not just to Hoover and her, but the nation’s anticommunist vanguard whose ranks were swelling as a HUAC investigation of the film industry loomed.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hopper to Hoover, April 7, 1947, Hopper FBI file. Emphasis mine.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

That same month, Hopper corresponded with Darryl Zanuck, head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation. Zanuck was a Republican who joined with Alliance members in supporting Wendell Wilkie's unsuccessful 1940 presidential campaign and failed 1944 bid for the Republican nomination. Hopper (as well as Parsons) frequently suggested projects to the studio heads, and Zanuck thanked Hopper for her recommendation regarding a soon-to-be-published book. Zanuck also told Hopper of the "hundreds" of letter he was receiving regarding a forthcoming film dealing with the exposure of a major communist spy ring. Zanuck wrote of letters "denouncing me as a war monger and for daring to attack the activities of Soviet spies in America. Some of them are quite violent. Of course, I expected all of this when I announced production plans." The film was *The Iron Curtain* (1948), though in the finished product the locale had been changed from the United States to Canada. Here is an instance of a studio head currying Hopper's favor even as her invective grew more heated. She was not an individual to be ignored in the tense political climate brewing in Hollywood.<sup>15</sup>

In May 1947, HUAC chairman Thomas traveled to Los Angeles to conduct closed hearings with fourteen witnesses, many of them Alliance members including actor Adolphe Menjou, screenwriter and sometime studio employee Lela Rogers (mother of actress Ginger Rogers), James McGuiness, screenwriter Howard Emmitt Rogers, Rupert Hughes, and Robert Taylor. These MPAPAI members, along with other witnesses, testified to communist infiltration of the film industry and named suspected subversives. Jack Warner was the only major studio executive who agreed to appear before HUAC that spring. His testimony, in which he named the names of communists who had

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<sup>15</sup> Zanuck to Hopper, April 21, 1947, Darryl Zanuck folder, HHc. On Zanuck's political affiliations and activities, see Brownstein, *The Power and the Glitter*, 90-1.

worked for his studio, undermined the credibility of the major studios. Publicly, industry leaders claimed to welcome HUAC's investigation because they had nothing to hide, but privately they were determined to avoid formal hearings in Washington and sought to short-circuit the investigation. MPAA president Eric Johnston had proposed, as the *New York Times* reported a few months later, "an agreement . . . not to employ 'proven' Communists in Hollywood" that spring, but industry leaders had voted it down and maintained the public stance that communists had neither infiltrated the industry nor affected its output. Throughout the summer a team of HUAC investigators, led by a former FBI agent, gathered information and compiled lists of suspected communists in the industry.<sup>16</sup>

There is no evidence that Hopper testified before HUAC in 1947 or in the years that followed, despite occasional press reports that suggested she might be called.<sup>17</sup> But Hopper contributed in other ways. Her April 1947 request that Hoover "name names" reflected her own desire to do so. Four months later, Hopper requested names and facts from Hoover. Hopper was scheduled to appear as a guest panelist on a early September 1947 broadcast of "America's Town Meeting of the Air" to debate "Is There Really a Threat of Communism in Hollywood?" on the affirmative side. She contacted Hoover in August and asked:

Would you give me some facts to hurl back at the angry mob in the audience who is going to ask me very embarrassing questions? Naturally, I won't be able to accuse certain stars of being registered Communists, as even those who are deny it, always have and always will. But you're so wise and have so many facts at

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<sup>16</sup> "Film Writer Faces Contempt Action," NYT, October 28, 1947.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in April 1951 the *Hollywood Citizen-News* reported, "Hedda Hopper has been mentioned as a witness likely to be subpoenaed to testify before" HUAC, but *Variety* reported in September that HUAC "has no intention of calling columnist Hedda Hopper during its current session." "A Valiant Fighter," *Hollywood Citizen-News*, April 26, 1951; "Hedda Won't Testify at Commie Hearings," *Variety*, September 24, 1951, HH bio files.

your finger tips that I feel that I can call upon your friendship for help. I know you're just as anxious to rid the country of our enemies as I am. If you had your way, I feel sure you'd name names, which is the only way we'll ever get rid of them. Some day they've got to stand up and be counted. Your information will be confidential. I will not use your name, unless you give me permission. In that case, I'd be very proud to say, "Mr. J. Edgar Hoover, who is my choice for President, tells me so and so."<sup>18</sup>

Hoover complied with her request and wrote, "It is a pleasure to send you the attached memoranda . . . [and] a number of articles dealing with this . . . subject. . . . I will be listening to the program on the night when you appear and will follow it with keen interest." Bureau personnel compiled a considerable dossier with articles from the *New York Times*, the *Daily Worker*, the *Washington Daily News*, and *Newsweek*; excerpts from the Tenney Committee (the California legislature's HUAC) and federal HUAC proceedings; text of several Hoover speeches; and information from Bureau files. The packet included Bureau transcriptions and distillations of commentary in the *Daily Worker* in which it was reported that playwright/author Lillian Hellmann "enjoys great popularity in Russia," and that Charlie Chaplin, a favorite target of Hopper and Hoover's, was "a warm friend of the Soviet Union since 1917."<sup>19</sup>

Though armed with much propaganda, Hopper was dropped from the broadcast in late August. Her power and influence was such that few in Hollywood were willing to debate on the negative side. As one trade industry journal reported "with Hedda Hopper set to take the affirmative . . . [the] show's producers are having a tough time lining up . . . more Hollywood names to fill out teams. . . . [N]o star yet approached wants to oppose

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<sup>18</sup> Hopper to Hoover, August 7, 1947, Hopper FBI file.

<sup>19</sup> Hoover to Hopper, August 25, 1947, Hopper FBI file; FBI memoranda, "Communists' Theatrical Criticism" and "Comments on Charlie Chaplin in the Communist Press," August 25, 1947, Hopper FBI file.

Hedda Hopper.” Nonetheless Hopper now had a store of information at her fingertips that she could and would deploy in the many other forums available to her.<sup>20</sup>

That summer Hopper graced the cover of *Time* magazine and was the subject of a four-page profile, which dissected the considerable and disturbing power of “this terror of the tycoons, this gorgon of gossip.” The profile did not specifically address the preliminary May HUAC hearings, the Alliance, the political cloud hanging over Hollywood, or Hopper’s role in all of this. The message was coded but clear to film industry insiders, if not the general public. Hopper, the “self-appointed judge and censor of all that goes on in Hollywood,” was now weighing in on issues of great significance not only to the film industry but also to the entire nation. “Hedda’s chit-chat can materially affect the outcome of schemes involving millions of dollars,” *Time* charged. The subtext here was that her “chit-chat” regarding the communist menace in the film industry could have consequences that extended far beyond bank balances. While “one source of Hedda’s power” was her willingness to provide positive publicity, *Time* reported, “[T]he hand that drops the balm is also armed with claws. And Hedda’s claws have grown long and sharp since she discovered her powers,” powers that now extended into the realm of national politics.

Parsons was featured in the article as Hopper’s “rival in revelation”: “Hopper and . . . Parsons are two of the mightiest publicity powers on earth,” *Time* declared, “and even their whispers can reduce the \$250,000-a-year padishahs of pictures to masses of

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<sup>20</sup> Unsourced newspaper clipping, n.d., Hopper FBI file. On August 27, *The Hollywood Reporter* confirmed that Hopper had been dropped from the broadcast and replaced with the Alliance duo of James R. McGuinness and Adolph Menjou who would debate against Screen Writers Guild president Emmett Lavery and actor/politician Albert Dekker, who served in California legislature 1944 to 1946 as the Democratic Assemblyman from the 57th District that included Hollywood. *Hollywood Reporter*, August 27, 1947, p. 2.

quivering jelly. For a few words from Hedda . . . or . . . Lolly . . . can make or break a director or an actor, cool or clinch a deal.” But the focus was on Hopper because she was judged to be the more ruthless of this duo that dominated the Hollywood press corps, the unwritten subtext being her anticommunist invective and activism: “Hedda has some wicked weapons and knows how to use them. She can print what she does about Hollywood people because she knows still fancier stuff that the mails would not carry.” While Parsons wielded the same weapons, this report clearly indicated that she was not going to use them against the industry at this difficult moment, but the same could not be said for Hopper. Hopper’s reckless disregard of journalistic conventions and canons—in contrast to Parsons—was highlighted: “When Louella has a story, she knows when it is dangerous and will check it. But Hedda will plunge in and print it, and go away in complete innocence that she has done anything wrong in being wrong.” The article closed with a discussion of Hopper’s plans for “a barnstorming tour of the U.S. . . . ‘to mingle with the crowd’”—a tour that no doubt included visits to American Legion halls to proclaim her views on the communist menace in Hollywood. This report declared that “gossip . . . is big business,” and the concentration of such power in the hands of an ideologue like Hopper was chilling indeed as *Time* broadly implied.<sup>21</sup>

Hopper corresponded with Robert McCormick, who was also the subject of a *Time* cover story in mid-1947—both chosen no doubt because of their prominence in the national media and willingness to use it to promote their shared, anticommunist political agenda. McCormick was editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, head of the powerful newspaper syndicate that distributed Hopper’s column as well as her personal friend and political ally. Neither Hopper nor McCormick were pleased with their *Time*

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<sup>21</sup> “The Gossipist,” 61, 60, 61, 62, 64, 60.

profiles. McCormick wrote Hopper in August 1947, "As to TIME, I am not sure whether it is written just to appeal to the malicious in people. Perhaps it as started as a blackmailing sheet, like TOWN TOPICS, and having been profitable, has kept the profitable style." Earlier that spring, McCormick had visited Hollywood, "a land he . . . regarded . . . with suspicion," with Hopper as his tour guide as she "defly steered him through luncheons, afternoons at the studios, cocktail parties, dinners, a premiere." She used his visit to demonstrate to the industry her powerful anticommunist allies among the nation's media elite. For this visit, she showed McCormick the "right-thinkers" in the film industry and "steered him away from Hollywood leftists like Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles," but the implication was that she could show McCormick, who had become her personal friend as well as employer, the other side, if need be.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Hearings Begin**

After months of investigation, rumors, and behind-the-scenes maneuvering, HUAC was ready to take action. On September 21, 1947, HUAC chairman Thomas released the names of forty-three members of the film community subpoenaed to testify before the committee.<sup>23</sup> Of this number, almost half were considered uncooperative since they were under suspicion for suspected communist activity and came to be called "unfriendly" witnesses. These men were primarily writers and directors—a relatively low-profile group when it came to public recognition, which included screenwriters Alvah Bessie,

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<sup>22</sup> McCormick to Hopper, August 9, 1947, Robert McCormick folder, HHc; "Visiting Fireman," *Look*, April 7, 1947, p. 93.

<sup>23</sup> The number of those subpoenaed varies from 40 to 43 in both the primary and secondary sources. *Variety* provides the most accurate tally with a list of 43 names though its headline erroneously reported "41 Subpoenaed." The composition of the witness list changed slightly with some names added and some deleted before the hearings began. The hearings were suspended on October 30 before all those subpoenaed had been called to testify. Some of those subpoenaed were not called until the hearings resumed in March 1951. "41 Subpoenaed by House for Red Hearing Oct. 20," *Variety*, September 22, 1947, p. 9.

Howard Koch, Ring Lardner, Jr., Adrian Scott, and Dalton Trumbo.<sup>24</sup> Over 30 percent of those subpoenaed were considered cooperative or “friendly” witnesses, most because of their Alliance membership, previous testimony in the May hearings, or because of their willingness to acknowledge a communist presence in Hollywood. This contingent included Alliance members and actors Gary Cooper, Adolph Menjou, Robert Montgomery, and Robert Taylor and studio head Walt Disney. Screen Actors Guild president Ronald Reagan was also a friendly witness. The remaining 20 percent were considered “neutral” and potentially cooperative witnesses because of their high-ranking positions within the industry: studio heads Louis B. Mayer of MGM, Dore Schary of RKO, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers as well as Eric Johnston, president of the MPAA and the Association of Motion Picture Producers (AMPP) were among this faction slated to testify. In addition to providing the witness list, Thomas also announced that the hearings, which had been scheduled to begin on September 29 in Washington D.C., had been postponed until October 20, a delay calculated to generate maximum media attention given the simultaneous release of the star-studded subpoena list.<sup>25</sup>

In the month between the announcement of the subpoenas and the beginning of formal hearings in Washington, D.C., many organizations registered their objections to the coming hearings, from the left-wing Americans for Democratic Action to the conservative MPAA and AMPP. The MPAA and AMPP’s objections were carefully

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<sup>24</sup> The nineteen “unfriendly” witnesses called to testify before HUAC were: writers Alvah Bessie, Bertolt Brecht, Lester Cole, Richard Collins, Gordon Kahn, Howard Koch, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Waldo Salt, Adrian Scott, Dalton Trumbo; directors Herbert Biberman, Edward Dmytryk, Irving Pichel; director/writers Lewis Milestone and Robert Rossen; and actor Larry Parks. Of the 19 unfriendlies, Brecht testified he was never a member of the Communist Party and fled to Europe shortly thereafter. The hearings were adjourned before 8 of the unfriendlies (Collins, Kahn, Koch, Milestone, Parks, Pichel, Rossen, and Salt) testified. The remaining ten would become the “Hollywood Ten.”

<sup>25</sup> “House Group Defers Hollywood Inquiry,” NYT, September 21, 1947.

calibrated: these two trade groups—comprised of the studios' leading executives—embraced the coming hearings as an opportunity to “expose ugly rumors, innuendoes and reckless accusations” unleashed by the probe. At this juncture, many in Hollywood were alarmed by a witness list filled with Alliance members, many of whom had already proven their willingness to name names and assist HUAC in the preliminary May hearings.<sup>26</sup>

Even more troubling was the MPAA and AMPP's decision not to defend the witnesses under suspicion of communist affiliation. Though the MPAA and AMPP continued to criticize HUAC's methods, MPAA and AMPP president Eric Johnston, rightly characterized as “the principal spokesman for the motion picture makers,” wrote a widely publicized letter to Chairman Parnell, in the wake of the issuance of the subpoenas. He acknowledged that “as elsewhere in America,” there were most likely communists and fellow travelers in Hollywood. He continued:

We neither shield nor defend them. We want to see them exposed. . . . We have no responsibility for the political and economic views of any individual. We are responsible for what goes on the screen. We watch that carefully. If Communists have attempted to inject their propaganda into our pictures they have failed miserably. We will never permit them to succeed.

Johnston made it clear that the studios were not going to take a stand against HUAC to protect those under suspicion; the uncooperative witnesses would be sacrificed if need be. The revised strategy of industry leaders was to prove that the final product was free of communist propaganda rather than prove that the industry was free of communists. This

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<sup>26</sup> “Movies Pledge Aid in Inquiry on Reds,” NYT, September 30, 1947.

strategic shift indicated that industry leaders were in retreat and might begin to reconsider their June rejection of Johnston's blacklist proposal.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. press was galvanized by the coming spectacle and played no small role in legitimizing the work of HUAC in early Cold War America. William Hearst and Robert McCormick, two of the most influential newspaper publishers in the nation (the former was Hopper's longtime personal friend and the latter was the head of her newspaper syndicate), set editorial policy to promote anticommunist activities and initiatives long before the postwar period. Hopper's home paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, was hardly less restrained as was McCormick's *Chicago Tribune*. The *New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, and *Washington Post* were among the papers that questioned the activities of HUAC, but speculation was rife in the media regarding the coming hearings, and much of it was negative.<sup>28</sup>

A new organization arose to protest the coming hearings. Screenwriter Philip Dunne and directors John Huston and William Wyler formed the Committee for the First Amendment (CFA). In the words of CFA co-founder Dunne, the group "was an informal ad hoc professional group of people in and out of the movie world," organized to protest "the threat of a blacklist, the threat of censorship, official inquiry under threat of contempt into any citizen's legal political beliefs and affiliations, and the indiscriminate

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. On the film industry leaders' unwillingness to protect and defend the unfriendly witnesses, see, for example, Neil Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 365–70

<sup>28</sup> On Hearst and McCormick, see Jim Tuck, *McCarthyism and New York's Hearst Press: A Study of Roles in the Witchhunt* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), esp. 6, 20. As David Nasaw has written, beginning in November 1934, the Hearst newspapers, under express orders from Hearst himself, began "a witch-hunt for Communists that would continue almost unabated for the next twenty years." David Nasaw, *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 503. On the media and the Cold War, see also James Aronson, *The Press and the Cold War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

trial and conviction by headline of hundreds of persons deprived of any legal opportunity to defend themselves.”<sup>29</sup>

When the hearings began on Monday, October 20, the CFA had only thirty-five members, was unknown outside entertainment industry circles, and had prepared a low-key protest. On the second day of the hearings, an ad appeared in the Hollywood trade papers, *Daily Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter*, in which the CFA announced:

We are . . . disgusted and outraged by the continuing attempt of the House Committee on Un-American Activities to smear the Motion Picture Industry. We hold that these hearings are morally wrong because: Any investigation into the political beliefs of the individual is contrary to the basic principles of our democracy; Any attempt to curb freedom of expression and to set arbitrary standards of Americanism is in itself disloyal to both the spirit and the letter of our Constitution.

This petition solicited both members and financial support. Throughout its brief existence, CFA membership and funding derived mainly from actors, writers, directors and others *dependent* upon the studios for their livelihoods; no studio executives took part in its protests. Yet the CFA had star power even at this embryonic stage: Henry Fonda, Ava Gardner, Katherine Hepburn, Gregory Peck, and Billy Wilder were among the petition’s signers.<sup>30</sup>

The CFA also had support from the New York theater world, with Leonard Bernstein, Agnes de Mille, and George S. Kaufman among the signatories of a petition generated on the East Coast in support of the CFA.<sup>31</sup> If Hollywood fell victim to HUAC, the theater and other performing arts would be vulnerable and likely become future

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<sup>29</sup> Philip Dunne, *Take Two: A Life in Movies and Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980), 196. On the CFA, see Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 275–77, 279–93; and Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 3–9.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Variety*, October 21, 1947, back page ad.

<sup>31</sup> “Hollywood Communists ‘Militant,’ But Small in Number, Stars Testify,” NYT, October 24, 1947.

targets of anticommunist probes. And their concerns would prove to be well founded. Screenwriter-turned-film critic John Charles, a friendly witness, testified at the October hearings that “Broadway is practically dominated by Communists.”<sup>32</sup> HUAC did not address these charges and remained focused on the film industry, but other anticommunist activists would take up these charges in the coming months and years.

A CFA group attended the first week of hearings and voiced their opposition to the inquiry “on the grounds that it ‘stifled’ the ‘free spirit of creativeness’ and violated the constitutional right of free expression by investigating individual political beliefs.” The presence of CFA representatives at the hearings during the first week has gone largely unremarked upon in the scholarship. This failure to acknowledge the low-profile CFA protest in the hearing’s opening week is due in part to the scant media coverage it received.<sup>33</sup>

The CFA’s single press conference and ads in trade journals paled in comparison with the testimony of stars such as Gary Cooper, Robert Montgomery, George Murphy, Robert Taylor, and Ronald Reagan; the sensational testimony of Adolph Menjou, Sam Wood, and other Alliance members; and the befuddled testimony of studio heads Jack Warner and Louis B. Mayer. Reagan, then president of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), testified that his union had “a very militant, very small [Communist] minority, well-organized and well disciplined,” that had, however, proven to be unsuccessful “in dominating Guild policy.” Alliance member Adolph Menjou characterized Hollywood as “one of the main centers of Communist activity in America.” Perhaps most damaging was the testimony of studio heads Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner, each of whom

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<sup>32</sup> “Menjou Testifies Communists Taint the Industry,” *NYT*, October 22, 1947.

<sup>33</sup> “Hollywood Communists ‘Militant,’” *NYT*. See also “First Amendment Group Plans Backfire of Quiz,” *Variety*, October 24, 1947, p. 11.

insisted that the industry had been vigilant about rooting out communists, but refused to be more specific. Mayer intoned, "I am proud of our success in circumventing them." Their double-speak left onlookers mostly mystified. Mayer said, "Communism to me is so completely opposed to the principles of democratic government that I welcome the opportunity provided by this committee to be of any service possible to bring out the true facts concerning reported infiltration of un-American ideology into motion pictures." Primarily, their testimony legitimized HUAC's efforts and as reported in the *New York Times* "personified the industry testifying against itself in an effort to prove its orthodoxy."<sup>34</sup>

At the close of the first week of testimony, Hopper triumphantly reported, "If the un-American activities investigation in Hollywood does nothing more than reveal the names of actors, writers, and directors who have Commie inclinations, it will have cleared up a great deal of our smoggish Red glare." Hopper, however, knew that with allegations of communism being made, there would be serious ramifications. She reported favorably upon the testimony of friendly witness and Alliance president Sam Wood. She was thrilled at the Alliance's success before the committee; three years of hard work on the part of the Alliance to incite federal intervention had finally paid off. In the same column, Hopper also questioned the precise whereabouts of an actor who she wrongly informed readers was supposed to be "sailing down to Washington—by request." She clearly felt invulnerable, and her worst was yet to come when she trained her sights on the CFA.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.; "Menjou Testifies Communists Taint the Industry"; copy of Mayer's HUAC testimony, n.d., Louis B. Mayer folder, HHc; "Hollywood Split by Hearings," NYT, October 26, 1947.

<sup>35</sup> Hedda Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," October 25, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

The developments in Washington that so delighted Hopper galvanized liberals and moderates alike, and the CFA emerged as the primary vehicle for protest. By the close of the first week of the Hollywood hearings, CFA membership had quadrupled to almost 140.<sup>36</sup> The procession of studio heads, actors, and others who testified in the hearing's first week made it clear that the nineteen unfriendly witnesses were being set up, as CFA co-founder John Huston argued, "like lambs being led to slaughter." What Dunne termed "the ugly events in Washington" persuaded the group "to mount as broad a defense as possible, enlisting moderates and conservatives who might not support the men [called as unfriendly witnesses] and their positions, but would support their rights." The group reconceived its initially subdued and low-key strategy for action and a whole galaxy of stars—both in front of and behind the camera—joined the CFA. The CFA's plan was "to battle the committee for top headlines out of Washington each day."<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, a quickly planned barrage of protests placed the CFA firmly in the national media spotlight. "Hollywood Fights Back," a CFA-sponsored radio broadcast, was aired on both coasts on the afternoon of Sunday, October 26. An impressive roster of stars as well as politicians, journalists, and other concerned citizens aired their grievances and warned the nation of the dangers of HUAC. Collective statements of support came from a group of Swedish actors and directors and the Los Angeles Newspaper Guild, among others. Participants included Judy Garland, Gene Kelly, Burt Lancaster, Myrna Loy, Gregory Peck, and Frank Sinatra, all of whom voiced their concerns in no uncertain terms. Garland asked the audience: "Before every free conscience in America is subpoenaed, please speak up! . . . Let Congress know what you

<sup>36</sup> CFA ad, *Daily Variety*, October 24, 1947, p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 132; Dunne, *Take Two*, 197; "First Amendment Group Plans Backfire of Quiz," *Daily Variety*, October 24, 1947, p. 11.

think of its un-American committee. Tell them how much you resent the way Mr. Thomas is kicking the daylights out of the Bill of Rights!” Publisher Bennett Cerf argued that if Hollywood was “bullied” into censorship according to the committee’s guidelines then “the publishers of books, magazines, and newspapers will most certainly be next on the agenda.” Frank Sinatra presciently asked, “If you make a pitch on a nationwide radio network for a square deal for the underdog, will they call you a Commie?” The answer to this question would turn out to be yes.<sup>38</sup>

As this radio show aired, a CFA delegation was headed to D.C. This trip to Washington was carefully orchestrated—much like a publicity junket for a film—to guarantee maximum media exposure. Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Danny Kaye, and Gene Kelly were among the celebrities who made the trip. En route to Washington, the twenty-six-member delegation appeared at well-attended press conferences in Kansas City, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh. Upon their Sunday evening arrival in Washington, the CFA group spoke to the media and headlines followed: “Stars Fly to Fight Inquiry into Films.” A throng of reporters and photographers accompanied the Hollywood contingent the next morning on their trip to Capitol Hill. A dramatic photo of the group posed on the Mall with the dome of the Capitol building as their backdrop appeared in papers throughout the nation later that day. The star-studded CFA delegation proceeded to Congressional chambers that Monday morning and, the first witness of the day was called.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted in Gordon Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial: The Story of the 10 Who Were Indicted* (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 215, 218, 219–20.

<sup>39</sup> “Stars Fly to Fight Inquiry into Films,” NYT, October 27, 1947. In addition to actor/director Huston and writer Dunne, the following were members of the CFA delegation that flew to Washington: actors Lauren Bacall, Humphrey Bogart, Geraldine Brooks, Richard Conte, June Havoc, Sterling Hayden, Paul Henreid, Marsha Hunt, Danny Kaye, Gene Kelly, Evelyn Keyes, Shepperd Strudwick, and Jane Wyatt; writers

From there on in, the hearings became a free-for-all. Screenwriter John Howard Lawson was the first witness called. He was also the first to testify of the nineteen men under suspicion of communist activity and affiliation. It immediately became clear that their legal strategy would fail. Beginning with Lawson, these witnesses refused to answer whether or not they had ever been members of the Communist party under the First Amendment's right to freedom of speech and assembly. In doing so, they hoped to expose HUAC's abuse of civil liberties and challenge the legitimacy of the hearings. HUAC chairman Thomas refused to allow Lawson or any of the other unfriendly witnesses to read prepared statements explaining their refusal to answer questions. Larsons's testimony degenerated into a shouting match, as did the testimony of most of the ten other men called that week before HUAC. He became the first of ten unfriendly witnesses to be cited for contempt of Congress because of their refusal to answer the committee's questions over the next four days, a group of men who came to be known as the "Hollywood Ten."

"Before this spectacle, the attitude of the press had been extremely sympathetic," co-founder Huston remembered of the Monday morning in which the CFA contingent marched into the hearing chambers just before the "spectacle" that was John Howard Lawson's testimony unfolded. "Now it changed."<sup>40</sup> Perhaps more accurately, unsympathetic members of the press had largely ignored the group until this juncture. Hopper, while certainly aware of the group, made no mention of the CFA and publicized it in no way until the group altered its strategy, made headlines, and forced a reckoning. In retelling the story of the CFA in her 1963 memoir, Hopper claimed: "On their

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Robert Ardery, Melvin Frank, Sheridan Gibney, and Arthur Kober; producers Jules Buck, David Hopkins, Ernest Pascal, Robert Presnell, and Joseph Siström; composer Ira Gershwin; and musician Larry Adler.

<sup>40</sup> Huston, *An Open Book*, 133.

sorrowful way home from Washington, Bogey, Betty [Bacall], John Huston, and Evelyn Keyes [members of the CFA Washington delegation] limped into my living room. I poured a drink or two, and we got to talking. They'd been had and they knew it. I wanted to know from Bogey how they could have let themselves be suckered in." This fabrication compressed the sequence of events and in doing so erased the central role Hopper played in demoralizing and discrediting the CFA. In her revisionist view, its members concluded they had been "suckered in" of their own free will. In truth, most were eventually forced to disavow the group because of the role Hopper and other members of the press played in casting the CFA as a Communist-front organization.<sup>41</sup>

Hopper was by no means the only journalist to support HUAC and criticize the CFA. The list of pro-HUAC journalists was considerable, among them political columnists Westbrook Pegler, Victor Reisel, and George Sokolsky to name just a few. But her stature in the Hollywood press corps gave her commentary a weight unmatched by these political columnists. As *Time* had just months prior argued, "[A] few words from Hedda . . . can make or break a director or an actor, cool or clinch a deal." And Hopper was not just a powerful columnist but also a member of the highly organized and well-connected Hollywood anticommunist elite. During and after the hearings, Hopper targeted the CFA, excoriated the Hollywood Ten, championed the Alliance, helped HUAC prove its case, and demanded industry leaders take action to rectify the situation.<sup>42</sup>

Hopper began her assault on the CFA with a blind notice two days after the star-studded delegation arrived in Washington. Hopper reported: "Some *fellow travelers*,

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<sup>41</sup> Hedda Hopper and James Brough, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 275.

<sup>42</sup> "The Gossipist," 60.

who were left here and won't get a chance to testify in the Washington investigation, got together at a famous director's home last Saturday to listen in on an open wire from their pals in the East. They were informed of all plans, attorneys' advice and methods of attack." Hopper was referring to a CFA meeting though only Hollywood insiders could have known to what exactly she was referring. This is a prime example of how the gossip columnists often wrote for two separate audiences. In this instance, her general readership probably interpreted this as yet another vague example and warning of communist activity in Hollywood. Industry figures, on the other hand, understood that Hopper was ready to go on the offensive about the CFA. She and other columnists often wrote in code to their industry audience, with the implied threat of uncoding information for the entire world to read.<sup>43</sup>

Hopper was prepared to decode the story and began to do so the following day.

Hopper began her assault on the CFA in earnest by naming names:

Those big stars—headed by Gene Kelly, Humphrey Bogart, Paul Henreid, Charles Boyer, Sterling Hayden and Judy Garland—who protested the Un-American Activities Investigation in Washington, D.C. . . . wanted to know how the people feel about it. Well, here's one answer from Milwaukee, Wis., which came to my desk by telegram. . . . "[W]e cannot and will not attend a movie in which these people play or which they write."

Hopper devoted over half her column to this reader's telegram, which supported HUAC's work and advised the film industry to "[r]emove the Communists from Hollywood" or risk losing the patronage of "plain American citizens." Hopper could not have phrased it better than this "reader" who asked: "Why are they [CFA supporters] so emphatically

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<sup>43</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," October 28, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

against this investigation into un-American activities if they are not involved in it? Why? What have they to fear?"<sup>44</sup>

Despite the rather desperate turn that the hearings had taken and the ensuing negative publicity, the CFA delegation remained in D.C. for the first three days of unfriendly testimony courting the media and challenging the legitimacy of HUAC. The following day, Thursday, October 30, the hearings were terminated though eight of the unfriendly witnesses had yet to testify. Chairman Thomas's explanation for what he characterized as a postponement of the hearings (they would not resume again until 1951) was that further investigation was required. In truth, HUAC's hostile treatment of the unfriendly witnesses contrasted sharply with the warm reception and considerable latitude given to the friendly witnesses from the first week of the hearings. Thomas's decision was based on the increasingly negative press the hearings were receiving and the rising tide of dissent as epitomized by the rise of the CFA. According to Philip Dunne, the CFA "had provided a solid core of opposition around which the respectable press could rally, along with an impressive array of the nation's intellectual leaders, thereby forcing Congressman Thomas to call off the hearings abruptly with . . . prospective victims still unquestioned."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the CFA enjoyed its most dramatic growth and greatest popularity during the second week of the hearings. By the suspension of the hearings on October 30, the CFA had more than 330 members, including some of Hollywood's biggest stars, and had captured the national headlines with an array of

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<sup>44</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," October 29, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

<sup>45</sup> Dunne, *Take Two*, 204.

celebrity-laden protests, including ads and another radio broadcast scheduled to air on November 2.<sup>46</sup>

### *The Aftermath*

Overall, media coverage of the hearings was mixed. The anticommunist Hearst, McCormick, and Patterson papers were overwhelmingly pro-HUAC in their coverage. William Randolph Hearst weighed in on the situation with a front-page editorial carried in all his papers on November 5, in which he charged that the film industry “reeks with Communism” and “THE FAILURE AND REFUSAL of the motion picture industry to refrain from the employment of Communist writers, actors, directors and producers leaves the Congress with no other recourse than to impose a system of FEDERAL CENSORSHIP.”<sup>47</sup> A Gallup poll from November 1947 revealed that public opinion of HUAC—pro and con—was evenly divided; 37 percent approved of HUAC, 36 percent disapproved, and 27 percent had no opinion. Regarding the Hollywood Ten, 47 percent believed they should be punished in some way, 39 percent believed they should not, and 14 percent had no opinion. These results illustrated that public opinion was sharply and evenly divided on the subject.<sup>48</sup> Readers of Hopper’s column, however, would have believed that virtually the entire nation was firmly behind HUAC.

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<sup>46</sup> CFA ad, *Daily Variety*, October 28, 1947, p. 13; “The News of the Radio,” NYT, October 31, 1947.

<sup>47</sup> “Film Censorship is Only Recourse,” NYJA, November 5, 1947. This was not the first time Hearst called for federal censorship of the film industry though it was his strongest statement to date on the subject. When Hearst made red-baiting and red-hunting a primary editorial objective in his news empire in November 1934, the “communist menace” in Hollywood came under attack and became a staple in the Hearst press for the next two decades or so. Nasaw, *The Chief*, 502–3, 588–9.

<sup>48</sup> Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*, 177–8.

Hopper very effectively used readers' letters to express her own anticommunist stance and displeasure with the CFA protestors.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the CFA, Hopper exploited audience response to further her political agenda. Her use of readers' letters to express her own opinions and political viewpoint was a clever strategy that simultaneously protected her from libel lawsuits and demonstrated public support of HUAC. For general readers who shared her political views, Hopper was a champion who reiterated and reinforced their beliefs. Hopper's redbaiting was unlikely to change the minds of those questioning or opposed to HUAC's work; rather her voice was part of a chorus that only confirmed their worst fears. Perhaps among those who were apolitical or indifferent to politics, Hopper might have won some converts to the anticommunist right since she was charging that mass entertainment was infected with communist propaganda. Film was part of the fabric of everyday life; the communist menace in the local theater had an immediacy and relevance that might inspire a sense of fear, dread, and impending doom that communist infiltration in the halls of power might not.

Hopper brilliantly undermined the Committee for the First Amendment. She never referred to it by its proper name, choosing not to grant it the legitimacy of a full-blown organization with support from politicians and others outside the entertainment world. Instead she referred to the CFA derisively as a "group of theatrical people" or "those big stars." The perception of the group as over-paid dilettantes who were puppets of more sinister forces, meddling in serious political affairs that were none of their concern was Hopper's doing. According to her, suspected communists in Hollywood were a group of over-privileged wealthy professionals, with "their initials embroidered on

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<sup>49</sup> I did not find copies of the anti-CFA readers' letters Hopper excerpted in her column in her collected papers, but I did find many anti-CFA letters not excerpted in her column as well as countless reader letters on a variety of topics over the years.

their sweat shirts in pearls and diamonds.” She tapped into the animus many in the public felt (and feel) toward entertainment figures who use their celebrity to promote a political agenda. Hopper depicted their alleged subversion as particularly pernicious given the manner in which they profited from a political and economic system they were depicted as seeking to overthrow: “These people are directly injuring where it hurts most—the finances of their employers, who overpay all of them. If the stars want to get out and holler and whoop, that is their right, but they should get out of the entertainment world.” She used their privilege against them to dismiss and discredit the CFA’s entire mission.<sup>50</sup>

Hopper highlighted not only the public’s disapproval of the CFA, but its willingness to act on it through boycotts. One reader declared: “Remove the Communists from Hollywood and we will be only too happy to return to our favorite entertainment—the movies.” The CFA was composed of actors and other creative personnel dependent upon the goodwill of audience to maintain their livelihoods so Hopper’s characterization of public reaction was troubling. More troubling still was the prospect of how their employers might respond to these threats of lost revenue.<sup>51</sup>

Hopper was able, in the closed “world” of her column, to construct a reality that supported an anticommunist worldview and suggest that there was little or no opposition to HUAC in the general public. She did share with her readers that “Hollywood is calling me bad names” for her discussion of the general public’s displeasure with the CFA. This only reinforced the perception that there was corruption and subversion in Hollywood that needed to be excised, as HUAC avowedly was trying to do. She also printed an

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<sup>50</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 29, October 24, and November 1, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

<sup>51</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 29, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

excerpt from what she claimed was the “only” reader’s letter she had received supportive of the CFA and critical of HUAC (and Hopper). This angry reader told Hopper: “If you will pardon the expression, I think you are un-American, Miss Hopper. I refuse to take it lying down when anyone attempts to impose an iron curtain around my mind.” It is hard to imagine, given the voluminous correspondence Hopper received on a daily basis, that this was the case. And her treatment of this “lone” dissent suggested what might happen to those who dared to disagree with her. Hopper included the full name and city of residence of this reader. She, however, maintained the anonymity of most authors of pro-HUAC missives, including all those that appeared in the same column with the dissenting letter.<sup>52</sup>

Some readers contacted her and pointed out this discrepancy: readers were seldom identified by name and the inclusion of an address was even more unusual in excerpts.

Hopper chose to address the issue in her column and wrote:

A few days ago, I included excerpts from letters anent the Washington investigation in the column. Up to that time, I had received only one protest, and thought it proper to give the writer the privilege of objecting under his own name. I did. The remainder of the statements were all unanimous in agreement, so I listed the cities from which they came.

But Hopper listed the dissenter’s city of origin as well, a fact she does not mention. Her “logic” for not using the names of those who agreed with her in that same column made little sense. And she continued with a chilling sentence in which she once again named the dissenter as well as one of the readers who criticized her treatment of his letter.

But I have received criticism, especially a heated telegram from Mrs. Sam Matz, for using only Mr. Levine’s name. However I have had no protest from Mr. Levine. Evidently, when he has something to say, he doesn’t care who knows it. That is what I call having the courage of one’s convictions, whether or not I agree with his viewpoint.

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<sup>52</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 6, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

Hopper claimed she wanted to be fair and tell all sides of the story, but casting these two readers as the bulk of the opposition and identifying both by name was an aggressive and threatening act. And one for which she was publicly unrepentant. She claimed to respect Levine for his dissent. Perhaps she truly did, but her naming of names echoed too closely the events that had just unfolded in the hearing room in Washington to be an entirely innocent act on her part.<sup>53</sup>

Hopper named this private citizen even as she was also targeting for public censure some of the most high profile actors and actresses in the CFA; this strategy proved very effective in undermining the organization. Privately, Hopper wrote to newspaper publisher Robert McCormick, “A lot of our best players made you-know-what out of themselves when they went to Washington to protest against the Thomas investigation. The producers . . . hope the public will forgive the misguided stars, who went back to vilify the representatives of our nation.” Publicly her anger at these “players” was only slightly more modulated: her goal was to force them to disavow the CFA or suffer the consequences.<sup>54</sup>

Humphrey Bogart was among those singled out by Hopper as being among the “big stars . . . who protested . . . in Washington, D.C.” She repeatedly emphasized Bogart’s supposed leadership of the CFA: “Humphrey Bogart . . . led a group of actors to Washington, D.C. to protest” HUAC. Indeed Bogart was cast as a leader of the CFA in much of the media coverage of the event because he was the most popular performer and half of one of Hollywood’s most glamorous couples (with his actress wife Lauren Bacall)

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<sup>53</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 12, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

<sup>54</sup> Hopper to McCormick, December 17, 1947, Robert McCormick folder, HHc.

in the group that went to Washington. (He also participated in both of the CFA national radio broadcasts.) Though CFA co-founders Huston and Dunne were the official spokesmen for the Washington delegation, the media trained its cameras and microphones upon Bogart and Bacall. The CFA organizers hoped to capitalize upon Bogart's standing as one of the film industry's most popular and critically acclaimed leading men as well as the glamour of his much-younger actress wife to generate goodwill and legitimacy for the group. Initially this strategy seemed to work as Bogart and Bacall's presence and commentary drew significant media attention. But this tactic also made the pair a central target for critics of the CFA. Hearst's *New York Daily Mirror*, for example, ran a front-page photo with Bogart and Bacall in the foreground as the CFA made its way to the hearing room in D.C. with a caption that read in part: "Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart lead . . . other Hollywoodites . . . to protest committee's 'unfairness.'" While Bacall drew much media attention and some criticism, it was Bogart who bore the brunt of the ill will and became the primary target of critics because of his gender, age, and higher status in the entertainment industry. Hopper focused her invective on Bogart; Bacall was banished from the column for the time being. Hopper, like others, believed that if Bogart was neutralized, Bacall, as the "junior" partner in the relationship would follow suit, and they would be proven right.<sup>55</sup>

Hopper invited criticism from her readers and printed some of it. "Those gee-gaws, led by Hero Humphrey Bogart into Washington are not for me," wrote one angry reader. Another claimed: "I wouldn't see one of Bogie's pictures if he stuck his smoking rod into my ribs." Hopper also added her own commentary as in: "Bogart . . . must have

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<sup>55</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," October 29, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc; Hedda Hopper, "Hollywood," *New York Daily News*, November 3, 1947; *New York Daily Mirror*, October 28, 1947.

forgotten his badge. When he entertains people in his home, he always wears a button on his lapel which reads: ‘No causes, religion, or politics discussed here.’”<sup>56</sup>

Hopper also targeted Judy Garland as a CFA “troublemaker.” Garland was not a member of the Washington delegation, but she was the final speaker on the first CFA radio broadcast, “Hollywood Fights Back.” She implored listeners, “[P]lease speak up! Say your piece. Write your Congressman a letter [protesting HUAC].” Hopper used Garland’s own words against her: words Garland would soon regret. One reader concluded a long diatribe against the CFA by asking Hopper to “convey our sentiments to Judy Garland and the others who want to know how we feel.” Hopper, however, conveyed these sentiments not just to Garland but also to the entire industry and to her considerable readership by publishing the letter in her column. A couple also wrote Hopper: “We are complying with the invitation offered through your news column. Help Judy get her twisted ideas straightened out.” They also enclosed a letter addressed to Garland, which they asked Hopper to forward to her.

Dear Miss Garland:

Hedda Hopper, through her news column, says, that you and certain others would like to know what the people think of your actions in up-holding un-American activities by the Communists in our country. . . . A bit of advice. To regain your position as a film star, and restore the love and affection of those who held you in high esteem, make an honest confession to the world.<sup>57</sup>

Presumably Hopper forwarded this letter and others to Garland. This combined with Hopper’s decision to highlight Garland’s involvement with the CFA precipitated a November 12 phone conversation between Hopper and the panicked actress. Throughout

<sup>56</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 29, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc; Hedda Hopper, “Hollywood,” *New York Daily News*, November 3, 1947.

<sup>57</sup> As quoted in Kahn, *Hollywood on Trial*, 215; Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 29, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc; Mr. and Mrs. W.N. Morris to Hopper, November 6, 1947, Judy Garland file, HHc;

the conversation, Garland's tone was alternately frantic and conciliatory. Hopper asked Garland why she performed on the show. Garland replied, "[T]he people in Washington had done some things I just didn't think were right. . . . I'm surprised at the repercussions. Everybody's calling me a Communist. And you know I'm not a Communist." Hopper questioned Garland about CFA members and explicitly asked her, "Do you think Paul Henreid is a Communist?" Garland did not answer this question, but grew increasingly distressed as Hopper warned her that others performers affiliated with the CFA were suffering at the box office. Garland assured Hopper that she didn't "want anything to do with Communism, especially now when our country is in such a --." Hopper ominously cut her off to advise: "That's the last thing you ever want, my girl."<sup>58</sup>

Garland's intent in contacting Hopper was obvious. She told Hopper: "I just want to get myself cleared." In late 1947, Garland's life was in disarray. She had a long history of health problems, largely stemming from a host of addictions, which increasingly compromised her career. Despite her considerable problems, MGM, her longtime studio, kept her working at a breakneck pace. As a result, Garland often disrupted the production schedule of her films. Shortly before her participation in the CFA broadcast, Garland had been hospitalized yet again. At this point in time, Garland's problems, while well known in Hollywood, were largely kept out of the national press. The maintenance of her public image depended upon the willingness of the columnists to obfuscate or ignore events in her increasingly turbulent life. Hopper had done so for years, but Garland's involvement with the CFA threatened the status quo. As Hopper's close friend screenwriter Frances Marion remembered, Hopper "loved Judy Garland . . .

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<sup>58</sup> transcript of Hopper/Garland phone conversation, November 12, 1947, Judy Garland file, HHc.

but became a mother cat lashing out at her kittens whenever . . . [Garland] strayed.” Garland was vulnerable and contacted Hopper directly to make amends.<sup>59</sup>

Hopper had placed Garland under suspicion and held her up to criticism from her fans. After Garland’s mea culpa by phone, Hopper decided to help her. Less than a week after their conversation, Hopper reported the first of several innocuous and positive anecdotes that would appear over the next few weeks about Garland. Easter Parade, the film project Garland was then working on was discussed, as was an interaction with singer/actress Dinah Shore that celebrated Garland’s real-life role as mother. Garland’s earlier work was cited in a column extolling the virtues of “the pictures of yesteryear.” These references to Garland are significant since Bogart and other CFA participants named by Hopper rarely appeared in her column in the weeks during and after the hearings except in reference to their CFA misadventures. Garland, on the other hand, asked for clearance from Hopper and received it.<sup>60</sup>

HUAC’s intent was to prove not only that communists had infiltrated the film industry, but that in so doing they had inserted propaganda into films and thereby undermined “the American way of life.” The film industry was particularly vulnerable to such charges in the postwar period due to its wartime work producing documentaries and feature films in support of the war effort. When the United States entered the war, the

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<sup>59</sup> transcript of Hopper/Garland phone conversation, November 12, 1947, Judy Garland file, HHc; Frances Marion, *Off With Their Heads! A Serio-Comic Tale of Hollywood* (New York: MacMillan, 1972), 313–14. On Garland’s 1947 hospitalization, see David Shipman, *Judy Garland: The Secret Life of an American Legend* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 211–12.

<sup>60</sup> On Hopper’s positive commentary on Garland, see Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 18, 19, and 21 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc. Garland became increasingly incapacitated in the late 1940s, which led to the dramatic termination of her MGM contract in 1950. This development received considerable attention in the press, including Hopper’s column and Hopper received a tremendous amount of mail—pro and con—from readers on the subject. Garland’s loss of her contract was due to her increasingly erratic behavior in the workplace and a dramatically changed political and economic climate in blacklist Hollywood.

industry embraced, as never before, the notion that film content could influence public opinion and the course of world events. This position helped to legitimize Hollywood's patriotism and mobilization for World War II; it also helped to justify the continued production of commercial films at peacetime levels with peacetime level profits while many other industries saw profits fall in the conversion to wartime production. The industry's wartime embrace of the transformative power of the medium thus lent legitimacy to HUAC's postwar charge that U.S. films contained communist propaganda.<sup>61</sup>

In the end, HUAC had little success in proving this point. Despite its frequent headline-grabbing charges and the dire warnings of friendly witnesses, the committee was forced to rely chiefly upon three films released in 1943 as gestures of goodwill and support for the Soviet Union, then the United States' most important World War II ally: *Mission to Moscow*, *North Star*, and *Song of Russia*. Parsons noted this important distinction when reflecting upon the lack of anticommunist features produced by Hollywood. She argued, "Russia became our ally and it was thought best to soft pedal it." Hopper and her MPAPAI colleagues, however, refused to acknowledge the complexity of the situation. Friendly witness and MPAPAI member Adolphe Menjou, for example, identified by name only *Mission to Moscow* and *North Star* as films that "carried communist propaganda" though he was forced to admit that both films had failed at the box office. Menjou, however, went on to argue, "[R]ed propaganda was not so obvious. . . . It was much more subtle, . . . evident in brief sequences" in an untold

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<sup>61</sup> On wartime Hollywood, see Sklar, *Movie-Made America*, 249–52, 256.

number of films. He was not able to offer any specific films to support this line of reasoning; nor were many others.<sup>62</sup>

Hopper, however, took up this challenge to expose specific films containing communist propaganda. Her decision to do so in the forum of her daily column—as opposed to in her private life or in an Alliance-sponsored speaking engagement—cast a chill throughout the industry. She wrote that “one reason . . . theater business is so bad” is due to the “propaganda” in films and the problem-oriented nature of films, which were not entertaining audiences if falling box office receipts were any indication. She offered the film *So Well Remembered* (1947) as proof of how “Hollywood is capable of inserting lefty propaganda in its films.” “If there were a command performance in Moscow, I don’t believe the boys would find a picture . . . more to their liking,” Hopper wrote. Hopper conceded that there was “not a single mention of communism in the film,” but considered the fact capitalism was “represented as decaying, corrupt, perverted, unfeeling” as evidence enough. She concluded, “[S]uch pictures are paving the way for the reds to take over our country.” Hopper did not mention that Edward Dymtryk, one of the Hollywood Ten, was the film’s director though her industry audience knew this fact all too well. She also failed to mention that this film was set in, filmed, and produced in England, with some imported U.S. talent and a limited U.S. release by RKO. As a British import, this film did not technically fall under the purview of HUAC. Nonetheless,

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<sup>62</sup> “Louella Parsons, “Who’s to Afford the Upkeep of Historic U.S. Films?” NYJA, November 3, 1947; “Menjou Testifies Communists Taint the Film Industry,” NYT, October 22, 1947. Paul Buhle and Dave Wagner have recently demonstrated the impact of leftist political thought onscreen in the 1930s and 1940s with the kind of subtle and sympathetic analysis entirely lacking in the arguments made by HUAC and its allies in the fall of 1947 and beyond. Buhle and Wagner, *Radical Hollywood: The Untold Story Behind America’s Favorite Movies* (New York: New Press, 2002).

Hopper was determined to shape the news as she saw fit and discard any details that might get in the way of her argument.<sup>63</sup>

Hopper's charges about the dissemination of leftist propaganda in films are ironic in light of her constant use of her column as a platform to disseminate her political views and support her allies. Her syndicated column was a powerful pulpit for propaganda—much more so than a single British import with a limited U.S. release. In the fall of 1947, her column read like a veritable who's who of the MPAPAI. Hopper traveled around the nation speaking under the auspices of the Alliance, as did many of the group's members. She discussed these speaking engagements in her column, including a trip taken to the town of Puente, California in the wake of the Hollywood hearings. Hopper, along with actor Adophe Menjou and Congressman (and HUAC member) Richard Nixon, spoke "at the invitation of Post No. 75 of the American Legion" on "un-Americanism." Hopper cautioned, "Too many of us here in Hollywood have forgotten towns like it [Puente] exist." She also reported upon director Cecil B. de Mille's promotional junket for his film *Unconquered*, which offered an opportunity for this MPAPAI member to mix business and politics. Hopper reported upon de Mille's "thrill" upon speaking to "sharp, clean, and right-thinking" schoolchildren and how de Mille had to try to explain to these children why the CFA members "who make fortunes . . . would go to Washington" to protest HUAC.<sup>64</sup>

In their efforts to clear up the "smoggish Red glare" in Hollywood, Hopper and her anticommunist allies stopped just short of calling for federal regulation of the industry. Throughout its history, Hollywood insiders, whatever their political affiliations,

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<sup>63</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," November 21 and October 30, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc. On the production and release of *So Well Remembered*, see Dmytryk, *It's a Hell of a Life*, 79–88.

<sup>64</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," November 14 and 12, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

had maintained an almost unanimous consensus on the need for self-regulation and opposition to governmental censorship. The threat of external regulation had long allied industry members across the political spectrum. Anticommunist conservatives had finally succeeded in their demands for governmental investigation of the industry; the next logical step seemed to be government-imposed censorship. But even the most rabid anticommunists, including Hopper, backed off from this final step. Hopper addressed the issue of federal censorship in her discussion of the October HUAC testimony of former Alliance president Sam Wood. According to Hopper, Wood “warned the committee that it would be impossible to fight Communists by seeking control of Hollywood thru censorship. . . . ‘Then the Communists would go to town and get their stooges in positions of censorship.’” This argument against federal censorship was, quite simply, ludicrous, but Wood, Hopper, and their anticommunist allies (ultimately rightly) believed the hearings and the public fall-out would force industry leaders to take pre-emptive action to avert further federal intervention.<sup>65</sup>

In the fall of 1947, Parsons rarely mentioned the Hollywood hearings directly in her column, in sharp contrast to Hopper. In a report on a dinner held by actress Merle Oberon, Parsons mentioned that the after-dinner conversation included discussion of “the big show in Washington, which is being put on by the House Committee on Un-American Activities.” This mocking characterization was an attempt to dismiss the importance of the hearings, but Parsons did not develop a sustained critique of the hearings. Parsons remained mostly silent on the subject of the unfriendly witnesses, with the notable exception of actor Larry Parks. The weekend before the unfriendly witnesses began to testify, Parsons led off her column with a lament regarding Parks. A sequel to

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<sup>65</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” October 25, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

*The Jolson Story* (1946), for which Parks had received an Academy Award nomination in the title role, was being planned. Parsons opined, “Larry Parks will be conspicuous by his absence. What a shame that Larry got himself mixed up with this inquiry in Washington and is named in the investigation. This would have been the right picture for him to put him back where he started—on top.” Her sympathies clearly lay with the HUAC’s critics and those placed under a cloud of suspicion, but she tried to steer a moderate course through this political morass and please both sides.<sup>66</sup>

Parsons recognized the threat federal investigation and hearings posed to the industry. Because of this, she was not above redbaiting, if necessary, to assuage extremists like Hopper and achieve the larger goal of protecting the industry. She could also be characterized as one of those Hearst employees who occasionally inserted anticommunist rhetoric in her work because it had become unofficial company policy to do so. Still, at this time, her rhetoric was generally vague, and she did not name names. Her primary concern during the 1947 hearings was to help avert federal intervention in and regulation of the film industry by any means necessary. Parsons’s vacillation was characteristic of many in Hollywood at this time who allowed more strident voices to carry the day.<sup>67</sup>

Parsons’s discussion of censorship at key moments during the fall of 1947 served as veiled warnings about the HUAC hearings and what they could mean for the industry, a rhetorical strategy she had first developed in the early 1920s when a spate of high-profile scandals had rocked Hollywood. The day after the subpoenas were issued in September 1947, Parsons led off her column with a plea “to oust [an] arbitrary film

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<sup>66</sup> Parsons, “Movies: News of West Coast Studios,” *NYJA*, October 22 and 25, 1947.

<sup>67</sup> On Parsons’s anticommunist rhetoric as a Hearst employee, see Jim Tuck, *McCarthyism and New York’s Hearst Press*, 32–3.

censor” in Memphis. The Hollywood press corps—including Hopper—frequently criticized Lloyd Binford, chairman of the Memphis municipal censorship board for his race-driven decisions. Binford frequently demanded the excision of African American characters in films, including the removal of all of Lena Horne’s scenes in the 1947 musical *Till the Clouds Roll By*. He banned films that could not be edited in such a manner without hopelessly compromising the narrative; the prominent supporting role of African American actor and comedian Eddie Robinson in *Brewster’s Millions* (1945) led to just such a ban in Memphis. Parsons asked: “How long are we going to put up with such silliness? What has Lena Horne, or any of Binford’s other victims ever done? Wake up, Memphis, and ban Binford!” Parsons’s decision to lead with this subject on this particular day was no coincidence. With the announcement of the subpoenas, Congressional hearings were inevitable, once again raising the specter of federal censorship. She was warning her readers about the dangers posed if outsiders were able to dictate and censor film content in accordance with their political views, as in this example of the ideology of segregation as practiced in the Jim Crow South being imposed on the screen.<sup>68</sup>

On the mid-October day the Hollywood hearings began, Parsons again returned to the subject of Binford. Binford had demanded the rewrite of a Paulette Goddard comedy, *Hazard* (1948) “to eliminate the character of Jerry, a lovable Negro school teacher.” The film’s writer and its star were both opposed to Binford’s demands, but the production had been postponed to address his concerns. According to Parsons, “someone in New York is

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<sup>68</sup> Parsons, “Memphis Urged to Oust Arbitrary Film Censor,” NYJA, September 22, 1947. Parsons’s criticism of Binford is also notable because it provides some insight into Parsons’s views on contemporary race relations. Parsons did not critique the limited range and stereotypical nature of film roles available to African Americans, but she did protect their right to work in the industry.

afraid of Binford. When, I ask again, is this industry going to stop this man from attempting to run our whole motion picture business?" A few days later, Parsons reported that the character of Jerry had indeed been written out of the *Hazard* script. The producer denied that Binford's objections had precipitated the rewrite; Parsons was skeptical: "Apparently, the change of character has been made, but who did it, I don't know." Parsons was unwilling to take a public stand against HUAC; instead she used the *Hazard* episode to warn of censorship and the dangers that loomed when those in authority refused to stand up for their beliefs and allowed themselves to be bullied out of fear. This commentary about fear in the executive offices was as close as Parsons came to a critique of industry leaders and their accommodation to HUAC.<sup>69</sup>

Parsons then received a favorable notice in the *Daily Worker* regarding her attacks on Binford. The *Daily Worker* reported: "The banning of *Curley* [1947], in Memphis, because it shows intermingling of white and Negro children, has started a campaign that has even some of Hollywood's least advanced thinkers joining in. Even the *Hollywood Reporter*, Hearst's Louella Parsons and the Johnston office have joined . . . in fighting the ban." Parsons, however, had a clipping service—FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover was not the only public figure who had begun to track coverage of himself in the media—and knew about this article. The following day she led off her column with a discussion of a new Twentieth Century-Fox project. She assured her readers: "'Call Me Mister' has been bought by Darryl Zanuck. . . . But let me make myself clear—the pink tinge so many people thought was indicated in this Broadway musical will be completely absent in the movie." The political climate was such in Hollywood that Parsons felt compelled to

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<sup>69</sup> Parsons, "Movies: News of West Coast Studios," NYJA, October 23, 1947.

trumpet her anticommunist credentials as well as those of the industry in the wake of positive commentary in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>70</sup>

Parsons did not directly discuss the CFA as an organization, but she did offer support to individual members through frequent, positive, and innocuous coverage. Indeed it was no accident that Parsons used a Paulette Goddard film to make her anti-censorship case. Goddard and her actor husband Burgess Meredith were among the 35 founding members of the CFA. As the CFA emerged as the primary vehicle of protest, Parsons told her readers about a dinner party that consisted of CFA co-founder John Huston and his actress wife Evelyn Keyes and their friends, neighbors, and fellow CFAers Meredith and Goddard. These two couples cropped up frequently in Parsons's column over the next few weeks. Parsons made no mention of the CFA, but her support was implied and obvious to industry insiders who could read between the lines. Frank Sinatra and Gene Kelly were other CFA members who also received favorable notices in Parsons's column.<sup>71</sup>

Parsons reserved her greatest support for Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall once they emerged as CFA "leaders" as a result of the Washington trip. Parsons provided ample and positive coverage of Bogart and Bacall's activities during this period in sharp contrast to Hopper, who offered only negative commentary tied to the protests. "Lauren Bacall to Act in Film Sans Bogart" read the headline in Parsons's column in mid-October with regard to a possible new film project for Bacall. "Bogie and Baby have received a belated wedding gift in the shape of an acre of land on Louis Bromfield's farm in Ohio,"

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<sup>70</sup> *Daily Worker*, October 26, 1947, scrapbook #40, LPc; Parsons, "'Call Me Mister' Picture to Use Only Ex-GI's," NYJA, October 27, 1947.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Parsons, "Movies: News of West Coast Studios," NYJA, October 20, 22, 23, 25 and November 11, 18, 19, and 25, 1947.

Parsons wrote on the Monday morning in which Bogart and Bacall marched into the Congressional hearings chambers as part of the CFA delegation. Parsons's only explicit reference to Bogart's CFA exploits came when she reported: "Bogie tells me he is not talking politics any more, and I am glad." This gentle rebuke was as close as Parsons came to criticism of Bogart's CFA membership.<sup>72</sup>

Parsons, however, also wrote glowingly of MPAPAI members and others who had testified before HUAC as friendly witnesses. Ronald Reagan, Walt Disney, Robert Taylor, and Robert Montgomery, the latter of whom she referred to variously as "a popular witness" before HUAC and a "solid citizen," all appeared frequently in her column during and after the hearings. "Robert Montgomery gets applause every time his picture 'Ride the Pink Horse' is shown on the screen," wrote Parsons. "That's because he was a popular witness at the Washington investigation of the Un-American Activities Committee." She struggled mightily to keep all political factions in her celebrity universe and provide the appearance of harmony in a politically torn industry though a close reading of her columns in this period reveals that she offered more substantial support to the embattled CFA and its allies.<sup>73</sup>

Unlike Hopper who argued that the "Commie menace" was in the industry's midst and that Hollywood's leaders must "clean . . . house of that element," Parsons remained overwhelmingly supportive of the studios and tried to undermine HUAC's charges of communist subversion. Parsons applauded industry leaders for making anticommunist films. She reported upon various projects with such themes in the

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<sup>72</sup> Parsons, "Movies: News of West Coast Studios," NYJA, October 22, 27, and 17, 1947.

<sup>73</sup> Parsons, "Movies: News of West Coast Studios," NYJA, November 7 and October 21 1947. On Parsons's positive coverage of other Alliance members, see, for example, Parsons, "Movies: News of West Coast Studios," NYJA, October 25 and November 5 and December 2 and 12, 1947.

planning stages at Twentieth-Century Fox, MGM, and Warner Brothers. She noted that “the hottest undercover bidding going on in Hollywood” was for the film rights to a “sensational expose on communistic activities in this country.” She reminded her readers, “With last week’s Washington investigation . . . in the limelight, there’s a mad scramble for anti-Communistic themes.” She tempered this potential criticism by arguing that once the film industry had avoided critiques of communism while the Soviet Union was a U.S. ally, but this imperative had changed in the postwar world and Hollywood was following suit.<sup>74</sup>

While Parsons presented the studios in the best possible light, Hopper declared war on industry leaders. Before, during, and after the hearings, Hopper challenged studio executives to act decisively and rid the industry of communists. “Seven years ago,” Hopper reported, “I warned some of our producers that the time would come when they would be blamed for hiring Red sympathizers. Yet I have heard only two producers declare they would not hire Commies. They will change their minds when such action starts hurting at the box office.” Hopper reported on turmoil in the executive offices and jobs that might be lost at the highest levels “as a result of the un-American activities investigation.” She pointed out the manner in which the industry leaders’ collective stance, as articulated by MPAA and AMPP president Eric Johnston, kept changing over the course of 1947 in response to HUAC. Hopper was certainly justified in this respect as industry leaders had failed to take a definitive stance; rather they kept changing course as the political winds blew. She announced in late November 1947: “Eric Johnston has reversed himself a third time.” From an unwillingness to even acknowledge a communist

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<sup>74</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 18, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc; Parsons, “Movies: News of West Coast Studios,” NYJA, November 3, 1947.

presence in Hollywood in March, Johnston was preparing to announce that the studios would “discharge or suspend without compensation” the Hollywood Ten and “will not knowingly employ a Communist.” Certainly other members of the Hollywood press corps critiqued the ambivalence of industry leaders. *Daily* and *Weekly Variety*, for example, both charged “the management end of the picture business” with “a confused and diffused straddling of the issue.” Hopper’s invective, however, was far more damning and persistent.<sup>75</sup>

In one remarkable statement, Hopper went so far as to name the men who truly controlled the major studios from New York and she demanded that they take decisive action. Her challenge was unprecedented in the realm of Hollywood journalism.

[W]e must clean our own house of that element which has shaken the faith of theater audiences. The responsibility for doing that lies directly at the doors of Harry Warner, Nick Schenck, Peter Rathvon, Barney Balaban, Spyros Skouras. *These are the men—and not our Hollywood producers—who control this industry. They hire the Hollywood leaders, who in turn build the organizations which turn our pictures. . . . not until we have had a thorough house cleaning will the confidence of the American public be restored.*<sup>76</sup>

In naming the chief financial officers of the Big Five studios and laying bare the true nature of the studio power structure for her readers, Hopper was taking a real gamble with her career. These men’s names were not well known to the ticket-buying public; nor were they meant to be. The men who ran the film production centers in Hollywood—men such as Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner—were the executives who played the role of celebrity and appeared in the columns and at the glittering functions. They were widely portrayed as being at the pinnacle of power in the film world’s hierarchy. While

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<sup>75</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 6, 12, and 22, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc; “Movies to Oust Ten Cited for Contempt of Congress,” NYT, November 26, 1947; “House in Order,” *Daily Variety*, December 5, 1947, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 18, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc. Emphasis mine.

they unquestionably wielded much power, ultimate control did not reside with them, as Hopper reported. Filmmaking was a business, but a business dedicated to glamour, fantasy, and escape. In the construction of the glamorous image of Hollywood, the obfuscation of the precise nature of the studio hierarchy and the men who resided at the very top was part of Hopper's job. Her decision to expose the actual truth behind the image, in this instance, potentially imperiled her own place in the hierarchy. Hopper was able to use damaging information she possessed (and mostly suppressed) to intimidate individual studio employees, as in the case of Garland, but it is difficult to imagine she could do so with the very powerful men she had collectively impugned in her column. Hopper's decision to mount this challenge illustrates her sense of invulnerability at this time rooted in her Alliance affiliation and relationship with Hoover, McCormick, and other powerful anticommunist activists.

Two days after Hopper issued this challenge, she announced that industry leaders were planning to meet. She characterized their proposed meeting as an effort "to take the heat off themselves and certain actors." She knew that they had to take some action, but her stance remained hostile and provocative to keep the pressure on for a blacklist.<sup>77</sup>

### *The Waldorf Statement*

In the month after the hearings were terminated, Hollywood was rife with rumor and speculation regarding how industry leaders might respond. The establishment of a blacklist figured prominently in such discussions. Reports of mass firings were rampant. Hopper added fuel to the fire with reports of "wholesale firings" at an unnamed studio as well as an erroneous November 21 report that that MGM had fired 600 employees and "[t]he same thing is happening all over town." This figure was wildly exaggerated since

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<sup>77</sup> Hopper, "Looking at Hollywood," November 20, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

the Hollywood Ten were the only employees who would be fired in 1947 and this had not yet come to pass. Hopper was anticipating events and in doing so, helping to normalize such actions. She was not the only one.<sup>78</sup>

Hearst political columnist Westbrook Pegler advocated a blacklist in the weeks after the Hollywood hearings: “Just drop them, one by one, over a year or two until they are all gone, and the change will not be noticeable.” Pegler also charged that industry leaders already ran a blacklist of sorts based on “personal revenge.” “Many individuals . . . have suddenly run into their iron curtain of economic persecution inflicted for the most obscure reasons.” Pegler raised an important point. While the blacklist that was begun in the wake of the 1947 HUAC hearings was unprecedented in scope, the film industry was no stranger to blacklisting.<sup>79</sup>

The major studios had long operated an informal blacklist to keep recalcitrant employees in line. This pre-1947 blacklisting was not based on undesirable political affiliations; rather it was based on controlling the labor force and managing labor costs. As Neal Gabler argues in his history of Hollywood’s mid-twentieth-century leadership, “Studio heads could be bitter rivals, scheming to gain advantage of one another, but there was a certain honor among them, even if it was bred out of self-interest. Balking stars and insolent directors would find themselves on a blacklist.” Employees who challenged the terms of their contracts—for example to request salary increases or the freedom to choose their own projects—generally had little success in playing one studio off the other. Employees who challenged the studio system generally found themselves unemployed until their dispute was resolved. In some cases, studio employees might find

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<sup>78</sup> Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” November 21, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

<sup>79</sup> Pegler, “As Pegler Sees It,” NYJA, November 18, 1947.

themselves “permanently” unemployed in the industry if they refused to compromise and toe the studio line. Conversely, the morals clause in the standard studio contracts provided executives with legal cover to get rid of unwanted employees for a variety of reasons. By the late 1940s, studio personnel had begun to successfully challenge the considerable constraints of the standard contract for greater control and autonomy though the battle was far from over.<sup>80</sup>

The gossip columnists often adjudicated such disputes in the court of public opinion. While it might be assumed that Parsons and Hopper would fall firmly on the side of management in such cases, this would be a perception rooted in a simplistic understanding of these columnists as “puppets” of the studios. Myriad factors determined where their sympathies might lie and how they might write the story, including their current attitudes toward both the employee and studio in question and the nature of the dispute. They also maintained their own blacklists for individuals who angered them for a whole host of reasons: for failing to provide information about their personal lives such as births, deaths, marriages, and divorces; for giving a competitor an exclusive; or for acting in a manner which displeased them. Exclusion from their columns and the Hollywood community they policed in their columns and broadcasts could be just as damaging as negative commentary. The kind of blacklist under consideration in the fall of 1947, however, was unprecedented in origin and scope and threatened to violate basic political, civil, and artistic freedoms.

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<sup>80</sup> Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own*, 175. In 1944, the California Superior Court decided in favor of actress Olivia de Havilland in her landmark case against Warner Brothers. The studio had extended de Havilland's 7-year contract to compensate for time lost due to disputes over film projects, and she sued. The court declared this practice illegal and emboldened actors and actresses to challenge the terms of the standard 7-year contract. This case, combined with the 1948 Paramount decree that broke up the major studios due to restraint of trade, greatly empowered the talent in their battles for independence and autonomy. On the de Havilland case, see Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System* (Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 112; and Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 208.

HUAC won an important victory when the House of Representatives approved the Hollywood Ten's contempt citations in an overwhelming vote on November 24. As the House met, the MPAA, AMPP, and Society of Independent Motion Picture Producers also were meeting behind closed doors at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City to determine the fate of the Ten and set policy regarding the employment of alleged communists in the industry. On November 25, Eric Johnston released a statement that came to be known as the Waldorf statement. The studios announced plans to fire the Hollywood Ten, the studio employees who had refused to answer HUAC's questions the previous month. The headlines read, "Movies to Oust Ten Cited for Contempt of Congress, Movie Companies Also Vote to Refuse Jobs to Communists." The industry's major and minor producers pledged to "discharge or suspend without compensation" the Hollywood Ten, "not knowingly employ a Communist," and "eliminate any subversives" in the industry. This was the beginning of the blacklist though studio executives and others including the columnists refused to acknowledge and name it as such.<sup>81</sup>

Parsons traveled to New York to cover the meeting. She anticipated and widely publicized the producers' decision. She announced, "The boys with Communistic ideas are going to find very hard sledding from now on in Hollywood. . . . [A]ny writer or director known to have a card or to be involved with the Communists in any way, will sit out his contract. New contracts, of course, will not be made with these pink-tinted gents and ladies." She charged that "[t]hese Soviet-minded Hollywoodians . . . should be forced to live in Russia." But her condemnation was qualified. She cautioned that

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<sup>81</sup> "Movies to Oust Ten Cited for Contempt of Congress," NYT, November 26, 1947; Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 445. The studios' November 1947 Waldorf statement, issued to appease fears of anti-Communist subversion, should not be confused with the 1949 pro-Soviet Waldorf Peace Conference, co-organized by Lillian Hellman, that challenged the anti-Communist status quo and became yet another activity that might bring an individual before HUAC for questioning and justify placement on a blacklist.

“producers must be sure . . . that the innocent do not suffer with the guilty. Sometimes a man or woman is labeled Communist when he is not, and is just called that because some malicious person has given him the name.” Parsons was well aware of the dangers posed to the industry and difficulty of ascertaining “guilt.” No doubt she counted the ideologically driven Hopper as one of the afore-mentioned “malicious” name-callers.<sup>82</sup>

Parsons assured her readers that industry leaders would “purge the screen of all Communistic influence” and make it clear to these ‘Reds’ that there is no place in the American picture industry for anyone not 100 per cent American.” She also publicized an attack upon herself, Darryl Zanuck, and Louis B. Mayer in the Moscow Literary Guild. Parsons proclaimed: “I feel complimented that this Russian group blasted me and others who are doing all in our power to fight every phase of communism.” She felt the need to burnish her anticommunist credentials (as well as those of the major studios) and her compulsion to do so illustrates the level of fear and tension in the film community.<sup>83</sup>

In the wake of the Waldorf statement, Parsons also felt compelled to publicly chastise the CFA and its allies, in part because of the support she had offered during the crisis, but that did not mean she withdrew all implicit support. She took Paulette Goddard and “many others”—i.e., CFA members and their allies—to task for their political activism. Parsons reported, “Paulette does a lot of spouting, but she and many other stars who have talked politics rather freely, have ceased their public discussions and very sensibly, since too much talking from any actor makes for enemies.” She also carried a blind item about an actress, presumably a CFA member, “who has been far too conspicuous spouting off her ‘liberal’ ideas” and as a result lost a house she had planned

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<sup>82</sup> Parsons, “Film Producers Crack Down on Pro-Reds in Hollywood; No More Contracts,” LAE, November 20, 1947, scrapbook #39, LPc.

<sup>83</sup> Parsons, “Movies: News of West Coast Studios,” NYJA, November 22 and December 11, 1947.

to purchase because its owner did not want it going to “a woman who has so little appreciation for our American way of living.” Yet even as she wrote this critical commentary, she continued to provide prominent and positive publicity for many high-profile CFA members. For example, she wrote, “Evelyn Keyes and John Huston are . . . scouting locations for John’s next picture, “Key Largo.” Bogart and Bacall would star in this 1948 film, but first Bogart had to clear his name and his wife’s name.<sup>84</sup>

For over a month, Bogart had withstood Hopper’s potshots (and those of other columnists though Hopper’s commentary was most damning) as well as pressure from his studio head Jack Warner and his agent to renounce the CFA. Bogart and producer Mark Hellinger were trying to form an independent production company in late 1947, but negotiations with producer David O. Selznick, a potential financial backer, stalled after the Washington trip. This development jeopardized Bogart’s long-desired bid for freedom from Warner Brothers and placed him in an untenable position. Despite these alarming developments, Bogart continued to defend the CFA.

Bogart had his champions amongst the columnists. Parsons was determined to keep Bogart and his wife Lauren Bacall firmly within the Hollywood mainstream and counter Hopper’s invective. She reported upon her interactions with them in New York City where she had traveled to cover the conclave of industry leaders that produced the Waldorf statement. She shared with her readers, “Bogey and Baby gave me a lift in their car,” a not-so-subtle sign of her solidarity with them as pressure mounted for Bogart to renounce the CFA. The day the Waldorf Statement was released, Parsons discussed an evening spent with Bogart and Bacall at the Stork Club in New York. Her seemingly

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<sup>84</sup> Parsons, “Movies: News of West Coast Studios,” NYJA, December 2 and 11, 1947; Parsons, “Film Producers Crack Down on Pro-Reds in Hollywood; No More Contracts.”

innocuous report read: “Mrs. Humphrey Bogart, in a fluffy dress, one of the few I have ever seen ‘Baby’ wear, was at the Stork with Bogey. . . . Baby told me she had bought her dress in Brooklyn.” Ed Sullivan, the Broadway columnist for the *New York Daily News* (in which Hopper’s syndicated column also appeared), proclaimed: “‘Humphrey Bogart, Jimmy Cagney and Frederic March were not and never have been sympathetic to the Communist Party,’ assured Martin Dies in the original [1940] Hollywood probe of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. . . . In the recent inquiry, the FBI was NOT asked to investigate Bogart. . . . Period.” Behind the scenes, Sullivan was pressuring Bogart to renounce his involvement in the CFA because of the damage it could do to his career, but publicly Sullivan remained supportive of Bogart.<sup>85</sup>

On the eve of the Waldorf statement, the Hearst press characterized the CFA as “vigilantes . . . [who] became embarrassingly unglued, however, under expert and slightly hostile questioning by an experienced Washington press and finally didn’t seem to know quite what they were after.” Once the producers’ policy decision was announced, the pressure on Bogart, alleged leader of these so-called “vigilantes,” to renounce the CFA grew. And he finally capitulated.<sup>86</sup>

On December 3, Bogart released a statement to the press in which he reiterated in every possible manner that he was neither a communist nor a fellow traveler. Hopper and others (including political columnist George Sokolsky, who went on to become “a kind of ‘poppe’ of the [blacklist] clearance process” in the early 1950s) had succeeded in forcing a

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<sup>85</sup> Parsons, “Movies: News of West Coast Studios,” NYJA, November 18 and 25, 1947; Ed Sullivan, “Little Old New York,” *New York Daily News*, November 26, 1947. On Bogart travails and Bogart and Sullivan’s relationship, see Lauren Bacall, *By Myself* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 163–64; Jeffrey Myers, *Bogart: A Life in Hollywood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 206–11; A.M. Sperber and Eric Lax, *Bogart* (New York: Morrow, 1997), 386–403.

<sup>86</sup> “Film Chiefs to Map Red Drive,” NYJA, November 24, 1947.

retraction.<sup>87</sup> “My recent trip to Washington, where I appeared with a group of motion picture people, *has become the subject of such confused and erroneous interpretations* that I feel the situation should be clarified,” Bogart’s statement began. He further asserted:

I am not a Communist.  
 I am not a Communist sympathizer.  
 I detest Communism just as any other decent American does.  
 My name will not be found on any Communist front organization as a sponsor for anything Communistic.  
 I went to Washington because I thought fellow Americans were being deprived of their constitutional rights, and for that reason alone.  
 That trip was ill-advised, even foolish, I am very ready to admit. At the time it seemed like the thing to do.  
 I have absolutely no use for Communism nor for any one who serves that philosophy.  
 I am an American.  
 And very likely, like a good many of the rest of you, sometimes a foolish and impetuous American.  
 Humphrey Bogart<sup>88</sup>

Sokolsky re-printed Bogart’s statement in its entirety in his column and cast it as a vindication of HUAC and a repudiation of the CFA, as did many others. Yet Sokolsky was not entirely satisfied with Bogart’s statement and demanded that the actor “[t]ell us who suggested and organized the trip.”<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Bogart’s statement could be interpreted many different ways, depending upon the political views and opinions of the reader. Bogart did not explicitly name the CFA in his statement; he focused exclusively on the Washington trip as a misguided venture. In his categorical denunciation of communism and denial of any personal affiliation, Bogart implicitly defended the CFA since his name could be found on its membership roll. He made no mention of the radio broadcasts in

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<sup>87</sup> Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 246. On Sokolsky’s role as arbiter of clearance letters, see also, Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 127–131; and Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 152–55.

<sup>88</sup> As quoted in Navasky, *Naming Names*, 153.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

which he took part. In retrospect, most of Bogart's CFA associates did not judge him too harshly for his retraction, which was reiterated in a March 1948 *Photoplay* article, "I'm No Communist."<sup>90</sup> Philip Dunne remembered that Bogart "understandably gave way to ferocious pressure—an assessment that was right on the mark when one of the film industry's major stars was forced to enact such a ritual of public humiliation."<sup>91</sup> Bogart and Huston collaborated on *Key Largo* in 1948, a sign that their personal and working relationship survived the controversy. Nonetheless, Bogart's disavowal was a clear victory for Hopper, HUAC, and the forces of anticommunist activism.

Hopper responded to Bogart's retraction with silence. Her attacks on Bogart stopped, but she did not offer public vindication, as did Parsons, Winchell, and others. Hopper's silence also contrasted sharply with Parsons's frequent discussion of and fraternizing with Bogart. This was a recurring motif in Hopper and Parsons's professional rivalry: an individual in favor with one was ignored by the other. In this instance, however, the stakes were much higher; at jeopardy was not just Bogart's status within the industry but his freedom to pursue his art and avoid prosecution and jail time. Yet Hopper refused to acknowledge Bogart's mea culpa. Certainly she could have used this turn of events as an illustration of her own power and the "rightness" of her cause. Perhaps she found his statement too conditional and ambiguous. Perhaps it was just not that important in her eyes since the CFA had already been rendered defunct, first by the House vote in favor of the Hollywood Ten's contempt citations and the following day by the issuance of the Waldorf Statement. Bogart's retraction over a week later was another blow to an already devastated organization. Since the CFA had already been neutralized,

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<sup>90</sup> Myers, *Bogart*, 212.

<sup>91</sup> Dunne, *Take Two*, 202.

why provide it with any more publicity? Bogart was not mentioned in her column—favorably or not—for some time after these events, a sure sign of her continued displeasure. Not discussing Bogart's retraction left her critical commentary on Bogart as her last word on the subject for some time.

Walter Winchell did not address the issue until more than two weeks after Bogart's retraction. Winchell intoned: "Bogart made that sensible statement after Chi. fans bluntly convinced him he had made a terrible boner . . . because of that coast-to-coast flight to help commy card-carriers. The latter 'used' the H'wood doaps." In this statement, Winchell discussed the CFA for the first and last time and dismissed its members as communist dupes. He had had little positive to say about the Hollywood hearings, which he considered a ridiculous distraction from the real dangers posed by the communist threat at home and abroad. Winchell shared his views with his readers: "Isn't it typical of Congress? They're more worried about the Reds in Hollywood than the ones in Moscow."<sup>92</sup>

Bogart's public renunciation kept him off the "shadow" blacklist or graylist that developed in the wake of the Waldorf statement. And most of Hollywood was no longer fighting back. In the wake of the Waldorf Statement and Bogart's retraction, the CFA lost its momentum and most of its supporters. In January 1948, CFA co-founders Dunne and Wyler folded what remained of the organization into the newly created Committee of One Thousand formed "to work for the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee." This group, led by Harvard astronomer Dr. Harlow Shapley, was comprised mainly of liberals from outside the entertainment world, with Albert Einstein, Helen

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<sup>92</sup> Winchell, "Walter Winchell in New York," *New York Daily Mirror*, December 18, and October 28, 1947.

Keller, and Rexford Tugwell among its high-profile supporters. Only a handful of CFA members—Deanna Durbin and Frederic March among them—continued their activism under the aegis of the Committee of One Thousand.<sup>93</sup>

While the Hollywood Ten were the only individuals explicitly banned from the industry between the suspension of the hearings in October 1947 and their resumption in March 1951, many more struggled to clear their names and find work in the intervening years. Bogart's retraction served as a warning to all who had been involved in the CFA that repudiation was necessary. As the graylist grew to encompass family, friends, and associates of the unfriendly witnesses as well as other outspoken Hollywood radicals and liberals, membership in the CFA became grounds for inclusion. For example, actress Marsha Hunt, another member of the CFA Washington delegation, struggled with limited success for the next decade to find work in film and television. In 1951 Hunt issued a statement reminiscent of Bogart's in which she declared that she had never been a member of the communist party, but it failed to mollify prospective employers. At least 21 CFA members were eventually gray- or blacklisted. Many more were forced to disavow the group to avoid such a fate. The CFA was listed by the U.S. Justice Department as a communist front on its list of "subversive" organizations, and many former members would be forced to testify before HUAC between 1951 and 1954.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> "Seeks Aid to Draft Communism Curbs," NYT, January 19, 1948. On the Committee of One Thousand, see David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 497; and Ceplair and Englund, *Inquisition in Hollywood*, 290.

<sup>94</sup> On Hunt, see Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 149–55. Ann Revere, a 1944 Academy Award winner for best supporting actress, was one of Hollywood's busiest character actresses up until she signed the CFA petition. Thereafter she had trouble finding work, with only five parts over the next four years, and her agent found studios unwilling to hire her. After her 1951 testimony before HUAC in which she refused to answer the committee's questions, Revere did not again perform in a motion picture until 1970. Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 79–80.

The HUAC hearings resumed in the spring of 1951 and were held sporadically through 1954; during this time the blacklist grew to include hundreds of employees in the film industry, with estimates generally ranging between 200 and 300. Anticommunist activists in early Cold War America also targeted the other entertainment industries. Though the theater, radio, and television industries were not the subject of formal HUAC hearings, they were subject to policing by what Victor Navasky has termed “free-lance blacklisters,” which included the Alliance and the American Legion. Publications such as the *American Legion Magazine* and *Red Channels* regularly provided lists of suspected communists in the entertainment industries.<sup>95</sup>

The film industry was not the first to be successfully targeted by HUAC in the postwar period, but the Hollywood hearings provided a new level of publicity, legitimacy, and momentum for HUAC’s work. As Ellen Schrecker has argued: “the Hollywood hearings were . . . crucial for consolidating the committee’s power. . . . Not only did the contempt proceedings that emerged from them define permissible behavior for future witnesses and make it impossible for them to rely on the First Amendment, but by precipitating the blacklist, the hearings established the pattern of economic sanctions that was so central to the committee’s success and that of the rest of the anticommunist crusade.” In the years between the fall of 1947 and March 1951 when HUAC’s hearings on Hollywood resumed, many actors and other creative personnel were forced to flee the United States to find work and avoid prosecution.<sup>96</sup>

Hopper had played a pivotal role in HUAC’s success in Hollywood and the establishment of the blacklist. She would continue to actively work to both add and

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<sup>95</sup> Navasky, *Naming Names*, 85–96, quote at 85. On the organizations and publications dedicated to blacklisting, see also Powers, *Not Without Honor*, 245–49.

<sup>96</sup> Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 319.

delete names from the various lists that circulated for the next decade. Parsons may have created the persona of Hollywood gossip columnist and honed the tools for success, but Hopper took it to a new level. She harnessed the now considerable cultural capital of the gossip reporter to a political agenda and then succeeded beyond her wildest dreams. Parsons did not invite this calamity into her neighborhood, but once the blacklist was in place she struggled to adapt to a dramatically changed working environment. In blacklist Hollywood, the job description of the gossip columnist now included ferreting out political affiliations and forced into print a range of subjects that had previously been off-limits.

The collateral damage was significant. In 1949, one of Hollywood's brightest stars, an actress who was in no way considered a communist or a communist sympathizer, ran afoul of a Hollywood press corps and Hollywood publicity machine out of control in the wake of the blacklist and the collapse of the studio system after the 1948 *Paramount* decree. She came to be painted "Red" and condemned in the U.S. Congress because of her choice in a new mate. The story of Ingrid Bergman's rise, fall, and resurrection illustrates the intended and unintended consequences of the politicization of the Hollywood gossip column.

**Chapter 5: “Le’affaire Stromboli”: The Bergman-Rossellini Scandal in Cold War America, 1949–1950**

On March 20, 1949, Academy-Award-winning actress Ingrid Bergman, one of Hollywood’s biggest critical and box office successes, left her husband Petter Lindstrom and ten-year-old daughter Pia behind in Beverly Hills, California, to film a feature on the remote Italian island of Stromboli with Italian director Roberto Rossellini. Bergman would neither work in the American film industry for almost seven years nor return to the United States for nearly eight years because of the controversy incited by her subsequent romance with the also-married Rossellini. Bergman’s most grievous “sin” was the son, conceived with Rossellini, that she gave birth to in February 1950 before her Mexican divorce from Lindstrom was final.<sup>1</sup>

Louella Parsons’s decision to go to press with the news “Bergman Baby Due in Four Months” represented a dramatic departure from her standard practices, as she well knew. “I realized that if I wrote the story . . .,” Parsons remembered, “the repercussions could well destroy me [and] . . . only do her [Bergman] harm.”<sup>2</sup> So why did Parsons,

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<sup>1</sup> Other scholars have examined the Bergman-Rossellini scandal, most notably, James Damico, “Ingrid from Lorraine to Stromboli: Analyzing the Public’s Perception of a Film Star” in *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television*, ed. Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 240–53; and Adrienne McLean, “The Cinderella Princess and the Instrument of Evil: Revisiting Two Postwar Hollywood Scandals,” in *Headline Hollywood: A Century of Film Scandal*, ed., McLean and David A. Cook (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 163–89. Damico contends that Bergman’s private travails subverted her public image and led to a sense of betrayal by her audience that accounted for the magnitude of the scandal. McLean argues that the betrayal of Bergman’s image, as posited by Damico, is not ample explanation for this scandal. McLean argues that a whole host of factors contributed to the manner in which this scandal unfolded. Building upon McLean’s findings, this chapter will explore the wider significance of the scandal, particularly with regard to changes in journalism, the U.S. film industry, and the Cold War context. On the Bergman-Rossellini scandal, see also Erik Hedling, “European Echoes of Hollywood Scandal: the Reception of Ingrid Bergman in 1950s Sweden” in *Headline Hollywood*.

<sup>2</sup> Louella Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, Sons, 1961), 74.

who had been in the business of endless titillation while absolutely and willingly suppressing truly salacious details about the private lives of industry figures for more than thirty years, choose to expose one of Hollywood's most popular and bankable actresses to international condemnation? To answer this question requires unpacking a host of complex and interrelated issues that must be framed within the context of Cold War politics: the politicization of the entertainment press in blacklist Hollywood and the collapse of the studio system in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al* (1948), which resulted in the further destabilization of the Hollywood publicity machine.

With the geopolitical realignments of the post-World War II era, fears of communist infiltration in U.S. government, industry, and society ran high and made the containment of communism one of the most important news stories of the period. The media both reported upon and reflected this very real (and well-documented) climate of fear and suspicion. The drive to expose communist infiltrators and other subversives altered the manner in which journalism was practiced in the United States—in part by providing legal and political sanction for media intrusion into the private lives of U.S. citizens. Determination of and exposure of an individual's communist affiliation often required the exposure of details of private lives that had previously gone unreported (or at least only obliquely alluded to) due to fears of libel suits as well as professional standards regarding personal privacy.<sup>3</sup>

These changing professional standards can be seen in the work of the Hollywood press corps. The 1947 HUAC investigation of Hollywood resulted in the blacklist and

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<sup>3</sup> On the changing meanings and parameters of privacy in Cold War America, see, for example, Deborah Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

jail time for the Hollywood Ten. It also resulted in a transformation of the professional standards and ethics of the Hollywood press corps. For Hedda Hopper this linkage of political investigation and entertainment reporting was the culmination of years of work. Others, like Parsons, willingly or not, were drawn into this explicitly political discourse.

The Hollywood columnists, with Hopper at the forefront, were able to capitalize upon the new political imperative of anticommunism to broaden their fields of inquiry. Hopper, Parsons, and their peers in the entertainment press played a critical role in reporting on and exposing communist affiliations or the lack thereof in the film industry and thereby policing the industry's blacklist. As Victor Navasky has argued: "The real war correspondents were the gossip columnists . . . for scribes such as . . . Hedda Hopper, the line between name-dropping and name-naming was so thin that they ended up as adjuncts of the blacklist process, doing the sorting out that made the job of the monthly and annual blacklist compilers so much easier."<sup>4</sup> Exposure of communist activities and plots generated headlines and sold the product—whether newspapers, magazines, books, or radio broadcasts. It also granted a new legitimacy to the kind of journalism practiced by Parsons and Hopper. The naming of names—which had been at the center of the gossip columnist's work from the beginning—took on a new importance in the postwar world. These changing standards regarding "what news was fit to print" were then applied to stories, such as Bergman's, which were not primarily or even secondarily about communism. That this intrusion extended into the lives of those who were not security risks, as in the case of Bergman, was an unintended consequence with serious ramifications.

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<sup>4</sup> Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 152.

Indeed Bergman and Rossellini made headlines, not because of their political affiliations, but due to their celebrated status, their personal relationship, and its ramifications. This was not initially a story of suspected communist activity on the part of any of the principals involved. It is, however, a story that might have unfolded in a very different manner if the rules governing the type of personal information that could be revealed in the press about individuals had not been altered in Cold War America. The specter of communism, however, was woven into it from the start and would only grow more pronounced.

Even with the significant changes in journalism prompted by both the fear and reality of communist subversion in early Cold War America, the Bergman-Rossellini scandal still might have played out differently had the film industry not also been in the midst of massive institutional and economic reorganization. The Supreme Court decision in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al* (1948) declared the five major studios in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act and eventually forced divestiture of their theater chains. In other words, the Hollywood studio system, which had been in place since the mid-1920s, was being dismantled. Divestiture—combined with a precipitous drop in revenue due to shrinking foreign markets and declining theater attendance because of competition from television and changing consumption patterns of the American public—meant the industry shifted from mass production by self-contained studios to a more ad hoc system in which the major studios increasingly funded and distributed the output of independent production companies. Increasingly, marketing strategies were

geared to a “short-term film-by-film” mindset, which would have devastating consequences in the case of Bergman.<sup>5</sup>

In the story of the collapse of the studio system, the impact on the Hollywood press corps is seldom addressed in more than a passing manner. As the self-contained studio system collapsed in the postwar period, the long-standing hierarchy regarding the flow and clearance of information, with the major studios in a position of ultimate power, began to crumble as well. As independent production companies, talent agencies, and the performers themselves stepped into the vacuum of power left by the eroding influence of the studios, potential sources of information proliferated.<sup>6</sup> The Bergman-Rossellini collaboration on *Stromboli* exemplifies all of these postwar trends in the U.S. film industry. An immense and once tightly controlled press corps had to confront rapidly changing circumstances regarding sources and flow of information. The old system was breaking down but it was unclear what would replace it. The Bergman-Rossellini scandal was a product of this transitional period, when journalists were scrambling to determine which sources to rely upon and what news to report. This news story offers an opportunity to explore how the shift from “old” to “new” Hollywood affected the journalists who covered this beat and the nature of the stories they told. This scandal illustrates how the confluence of national political unrest and economic and institutional

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<sup>5</sup> Janet Steiger, “The package-unit system: unit management after 1955,” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, ed. David Bordwell, Staiger, and Kristin Thompson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 330. On the collapse of the studio system, see also Tino Balio, “Retrenchment, Reappraisal, and Reorganization,” in *The American Film Industry*, rev. ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 401–25; and Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Random House, 1975), 272–6, 279–82.

<sup>6</sup> On the shift in the balance of power from the studios to the talent and their agents, see, for example, Connie Bruck, *When Hollywood Had a King: The Reign of Lew Wasserman, Who Leveraged Talent into Power and Influence* (New York: Random House, 2003).

turmoil in the film industry resulted in a landmark story regarding media exposure of the private lives of public figures.

### A Star is Reborn in the United States

Producer David O. Selznick brought Bergman, already leading light of the Swedish screen, to Hollywood in 1939.<sup>7</sup> Bergman quickly became a star in the U.S. film industry. Placed under a five-year contract, Bergman became, like thousands before her in Hollywood, a commodity to be groomed and promoted.<sup>8</sup> Selznick personally crafted Bergman's image from the outset. Before she had completed her first Hollywood film, Selznick had settled upon "a grand angle of approach to her publicity." As he wrote his publicity director, the focus must be on Bergman's "fresh and pure personality and appearance" so that "her natural sweetness and consideration and conscientiousness become something of a legend."<sup>9</sup> The public's perception of Bergman the private citizen—formed by countless interviews and profiles on the radio and in both the mainstream press and the specialty fan and movie magazines—was deliberately and inextricably intertwined with her memorable on-screen roles as a pure and often saintly

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<sup>7</sup> Though Selznick International was not a major studio, it "was within the mainstream of the American film industry" as one of several, successful independent production companies that created films distributed by the major studios, and operated on the same principles and with a similar product as the self-contained studios. Staiger, "The Labor Force, Financing and the Mode of Production" in *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 318.

<sup>8</sup> Bergman's contract with Selznick—a five-year commitment for one or two films per year—was far more flexible than those of most film actors. Under the standard seven-year option contract, a minimum or maximum number of films per year was not specified. Performers were paid for working a forty-week year and had to perform in the films specified by the studio or risk suspension. This could lead to non-stop work or conversely to a lack of work. The studios also had the option to terminate contracts at six-month and then yearly intervals while performers did not. If the studio was unwilling to release an actor from a contract, he or she faced suspension and it was unlikely another studio would hire them. On Bergman's contract terms, see Laurence Leamer, *As Time Goes By: The Life of Ingrid Bergman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 40–1. On the standard option contract, see Ronald L. Davis, *The Glamour Factory: Inside Hollywood's Big Studio System* (Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1993), 105; and Cathy Klaprat, "The Star as Market Strategy: Bette Davis in Another Light," in *American Film Industry*, 375–6.

<sup>9</sup> *Memo from David O. Selznick*, ed. Rudy Behlmer (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 144–5.

figure. The roles she played, such as a lusty barmaid in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1941) and a party girl of questionable virtue in *Notorious* (1946), that subverted this persona were publicized as marked departures and only added to the luster of Bergman's wholesome image.<sup>10</sup> An idealized domestic life as a doctor's wife and young mother was also used to these promotional ends. As Hopper proclaimed in a 1947 column, "Ingrid Bergman's the toast of New York both in her play and popularity. It couldn't happen to a nicer person."<sup>11</sup> Hopper's commentary reflected the general tenor of Hollywood press corps coverage of Bergman for a decade.

While under contract with Selznick International from 1939 to 1945, Bergman rose to stardom in films such as *Casablanca* (1942), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943), and *Gaslight* (1944): she received the first of her three Academy Awards for the latter film. Yet Bergman felt constrained and frustrated by her lack of control of her image and career. She was unquestionably a valuable commodity, but her demands and desires could be accommodated only in so far as they promoted Selznick International's well-being. Her frustrations mirrored those of other contract players and other creative personnel within the studio system.

While at Selznick, her image was secure if out of her personal control. Selznick International provided journalists with access to Bergman and with an endless stream of press material, which were turned into free and positive publicity in the form of reviews,

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<sup>10</sup> On Bergman's image, see Damico, "Ingrid from Lorraine to Stromboli," 249; and McLean, "The Cinderella Princess," 165. Bergman described the star system in this manner: "In Hollywood you got yourself one role and played it forever. That's what the audience wants to see, they said, the same performance, the familiar face." Her withering assessment was not so far off the mark though the operation of the star system was more sophisticated than she allowed. A major Hollywood producer such as Selznick was skilled in the practice of offcasting, or having stars take on roles that subverted their persona. Offcasting offered audiences variety and allowed stars to demonstrate their dramatic range in an effort to maintain box office success. Ingrid Bergman and Alan Burgess, *Ingrid Bergman: My Story* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1980), 95. On offcasting, see Klapat, "The Star as Market Strategy," 372-5.

<sup>11</sup>"Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," January 3, 1947, scrapbook #13, HHc.

interviews, and gossip. Parsons, Hopper, and the rest of the Hollywood press corps generally operated within certain parameters to promote and preserve the fictive personas created by the studio publicity departments. By the mid-1940s, however, this system was being undermined by the decision of many stars to reject long-term contracts and turn to freelance, independent production to assert greater control over their careers and images. Also Hopper's considerable success in breaking the rules and repeatedly defying studio dictates—as in her 1941 Welles broadcast, 1943 attack on Chaplin, and 1947 challenge to studio executives—helped pave the way for a more independent Hollywood press corps. All of these factors would wreak considerable havoc on the smooth functioning of the Hollywood publicity machine and result in scandal that could not be contained as Bergman would soon learn.

When Bergman's contract expired with Selznick International in December 1945, she did not re-sign. Instead she joined a growing number of actors and actresses who were choosing creative and financial independence. She formed her own production company and became a partner in another, entertained offers from other independents, and performed on the Broadway stage. As an independent contractor, Bergman negotiated not only her salary, but also a share of the profits.<sup>12</sup>

With this freedom and potential financial gain came risk. Bergman enjoyed tremendous success on Broadway in the play "Joan of Lorraine," for which she received a Tony Award in 1947, but her film career stalled. *Notorious*, her final film with

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<sup>12</sup> In early 1947, Bergman formed her own production company, En Corporation; she was vice president while her husband, Petter Lindstrom, served as secretary-treasurer. This company most likely was formed solely for tax purposes, since it never produced any films. Joseph Steele, *Ingrid Bergman: An Intimate Portrait* (New York: Popular Library, 1960), 105–6; Donald Spoto, *Notorious: The Life of Ingrid Bergman* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 224. For her first three independent films, Bergman earned her salary as lead actress and stood to gain 25, 5, and 30 percent respectively of these films' net profits. Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 126, 142, 155; Spoto, *Notorious*, 208, 229, 223–4.

Selznick was released in August 1946. Nearly two years passed before *Arch of Triumph*, her first independent feature, was released in April 1948 to negative reviews and disappointing box office returns. In the interim, Bergman's Broadway show was adapted for the screen. *Joan of Arc* was filmed in Hollywood in the fall of 1947 as the HUAC hearings unfolded. Bergman was under no suspicion but it is likely she would have regarded the proceedings and their aftermath with trepidation. Though she attributed her desire "to get out of the back lot" to her troubled marriage and her dissatisfaction with her first two independent features, the timing suggests that she also wanted to leave blacklist Hollywood behind—a desire of many in the U.S. film industry at this time.<sup>13</sup> Also, the European film industry was beginning to recover from the economic deprivation, artistic repression, and overall dislocation of the war years and saw the emergence of neorealism and other important artistic movements in this period. During the war years, Bergman had become a star in the United States and now she had the opportunity to return to the European scene on her own terms. Leaving the Hollywood back lot behind would, however, also place her at odds with the Hollywood press corps, which would have devastating consequences.

The acclaimed work of Italian director Roberto Rossellini caught Bergman's attention. Rossellini's innovative films *Open City* (1945) and *Paisan* (1946) made him a leader in the neorealist film movement, which emphasized location shooting, improvisation, and the use of nonprofessional actors. Rossellini gained "international renown," as reported in the *New York Times*, in the second half of the 1940s as his work went into worldwide release. In addition to critical acclaim, *Open City* and *Paisan* did well at the U.S. box office. *Open City* was considered "one of the most fabulous foreign

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<sup>13</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 175.

film successes on record, with a box-office gross in the United States alone of close to \$5,000,000, according to available estimates.” Hollywood—including Bergman and her former boss David Selznick—began to take notice.<sup>14</sup>

Rossellini welcomed these overtures from Hollywood for the funding opportunities, but he intended to continue to work on his own terms: in Italy, without a completed script, using a combination of professional actors and non-actors. While such issues derailed Rossellini’s negotiations with Selznick, Samuel Goldwyn, and other U.S. film industry figures, Bergman was undeterred.<sup>15</sup> In April 1948, Bergman contacted Rossellini to suggest they collaborate. Five months later, she and her husband Petter Lindstrom (who was also her manager) met with Rossellini in Paris.

In January 1949, Rossellini arrived in Los Angeles to help Bergman secure a production and distribution deal for their upcoming project. His reputation as a charismatic and dynamic figure preceded him and his arrival in Hollywood caused a stir in the gossip columns. “Roberto Rossellini gets in Hollywood Friday and Ingrid Bergman is setting aside the complete weekend to play hostess to the Italian director and huddle with him about a movie,” Parsons reported.<sup>16</sup> Hopper weighed in, “Robert Rossellini, the great Italian director, arrived here Tuesday for one week. Then Ingrid Bergman accompanies him to Italy for their picture together.”<sup>17</sup> During the course of Rossellini’s six-week stay in the United States, rumors began circulating in the

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<sup>14</sup> “The Personal Story of Roberto Rossellini,” NYT, January 23, 1949.

<sup>15</sup> On Rossellini’s negotiations with Hollywood, see Tag Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 255–65.

<sup>16</sup> Parsons column, LAE, January 20, 1949, scrapbook #45, LPc.

<sup>17</sup> “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, January 25, 1949, scrapbook #16, HHc. Hopper’s report was premature since the purpose of Rossellini’s visit was to secure funding, without which there would be no film. Here is yet another example of how these columnists performed a critical role in the functioning of the film industry by promoting projects of favored individuals and making projects that were still very much on paper appear to be a reality.

Hollywood community about the nature of Rossellini and Bergman's relationship, though no reports appeared in the press. Given the frequency of actress-director "collaborations" off-screen, such rumors were fairly standard fare and, often as not, baseless. At this juncture, nobody in the Hollywood press corps, Parsons and Hopper included, were willing to sully the reputation of Bergman, who was one of the industry's major stars. Rossellini and Bergman shopped the project around and quickly secured funding from Howard Hughes, who had recently acquired RKO Studios.<sup>18</sup> Rossellini returned to Italy to begin preparations for the production. His new leading lady would join him a few weeks later.

Hughes and RKO would prove to be a disastrous choice for Bergman and Rossellini. While Bergman and Rossellini were formalizing their collaboration throughout 1948 and into early 1949, the studio system had been dealt a major blow, and maverick entrepreneur and film producer Howard Hughes had helped deliver it. After nearly a decade of litigation, the Supreme Court ruled in May 1948 that the "Big Five" studios—MGM, Paramount Pictures, RKO, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Brothers—were in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. The *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., et al* (1948) recommended the separation of exhibition from production and distribution: in other words, the five major studios had to sell their theater chains. The Supreme Court, however, remanded the final decision regarding divestiture to a lower court in its May decision. The major studios were emboldened and ready to continue the long-running legal battle.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Under the terms of their contract, Bergman's En Corporation was to receive 40 percent of the film's net profits while Rossellini received 20 percent. Steele, *Ingrid Bergman*, 157.

<sup>19</sup> On the antitrust suit and *Paramount* decree, see, for example, Thomas Schatz, "The Antitrust Campaign and the *Paramount* Decree," in Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s*, vol. 6

The same month, however, that the Supreme Court handed down this decision, Hughes purchased the financially troubled RKO Studios. RKO had been put up for sale because of the looming threat of divestiture coupled with the fall-out from the HUAC hearings and the inroads television had begun to make on box office receipts. Its purchase by Hughes at this critical juncture alarmed industry leaders. Among many other business concerns, Hughes had entered the film industry as an independent producer in 1925. He had repeatedly clashed with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) as well as the Production Code Administration (PCA), the industry's internal censorship board, over the often-salacious content of both his films and film advertising, including a long-running battle over the film *The Outlaw* in the 1940s. In the case of *The Outlaw*, Hughes was forced to censor some of the more explicit sexual content to win wide release of the film in 1943, but used this controversy to sell the film as "the picture that couldn't be stopped." He continued to court controversy by re-releasing the film in 1946 with a non-PCA-approved ad campaign that asked: "How Would You Like to Tussle with Russell?" (a far-from-subtle reference to the film's buxom leading lady, actress Jane Russell), which precipitated more legal action. Given Hughes's history of challenges to the Hollywood establishment and efforts to undermine the power of the major studios as well as his penchant for using controversy and scandal to market his films, industry leaders feared what Hughes would do at the helm of a major studio.<sup>20</sup>

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of *History of the American Cinema*, ed. Charles Harpole (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1997), 323–8.

<sup>20</sup> Albert Gerber, *Bashful Millionaire: The Story of Howard Hughes* (New York: Lyle Stuart, Inc., 1967), 140–50, 184–94, quote at 191. On Hughes and Hollywood, see also Richard Hack, *Howard Hughes: The Private Diaries, Memos, and Letters: The Definitive Biography of the First American Billionaire* (Beverly Hills: New Millenium Press, 2001), 59, 62–71, 73–89, 125–139, 179–95.

Their fears were justified. Many had believed that Hughes had purchased RKO primarily to use its theaters to re-release *The Outlaw* and to present the backlog of Hughes film productions that had not yet been released in theaters. This theory was proven wrong just a few months into the Hughes administration. The other major studios were prepared to fight the threat of divestiture in the wake of the Supreme Court decision, but not Hughes. RKO was the first of the major studios to comply with the Supreme Court decision and sell off its theater holdings in November 1948. This premature move seriously compromised the legal battle still raging and no doubt influenced the decisive July 1949 ruling of the lower court in favor of divestiture, which sealed the fates of the major studios. Hughes had begun to break all the rules, including such a risky financial investment as a neo-realist art film starring Bergman. His penchant for sensational publicity stunts would culminate in Congressional condemnation of Bergman, Rossellini, and the entire film industry.<sup>21</sup>

On March 20, 1949, Ingrid Bergman said goodbye to her husband and daughter and left for Italy to begin production on the Italian island of Stromboli. Less than a week after her departure, *Life* magazine ran an ad for U.S. savings bonds featuring an image of Ingrid Bergman as the heroic Joan of Arc (from her film of the same title) with this copy: “**Modern women**, too, must often pick up the banners . . . in *their* struggle for the security and well-being of their family.”<sup>22</sup> Here was the perfect marriage of actress and subject matter: Bergman, a Swedish actress playing a Frenchwoman, had been transformed, by the marvels of the marketing world, into the archetypal modern American woman. As an icon of noble womanhood, she had a long way to fall.

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<sup>21</sup> On Hughes, RKO, and the consent decree, see Betty Lasky, *RKO: The Biggest Little Major of Them All* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 204–6; 216–8; and Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 326–7.

<sup>22</sup> *Life*, March 28, 1949, p. 117.

### A New Romance

On April 13, New York society reporter Igor Cassini (who wrote under the pseudonym Cholly Knickerbocker) reported on the front page of the *New York Journal-American* and all the Hearst papers: "INGRID BERGMAN has definitely decided to shed her current husband . . . and wed Italian movie maker Roberto Rossellini." A New York society gossip columnist, rather than a member of the Hollywood press corps, broke this story, a fact worthy of consideration. Perhaps Cassini, who was of Italian descent, had better sources in Italy. But rumors of a Bergman-Rossellini relationship were already in play during Rossellini's stay in Los Angeles in early 1949. The more likely scenario is that the Hollywood press corps ignored this story until Cassini broke it. Indeed Cassini acknowledged that "the rumors were only repeated in discreet whispers, since both Miss Bergman and Signor Rossellini are married."<sup>23</sup>

Once the story made headlines, the rest of the columnists struggled to get an exclusive angle. Most reports were generally sympathetic in tone, like Cassini's, which celebrated the new couple who were "walking on clouds." Nobody wanted to inflict undue damage to "Sweden's greatest gift to Hollywood since Greta Garbo."<sup>24</sup> The following day Parsons reported, in a story that ran on page three of the Hearst papers, "According to my information from Rome, Rossellini makes no secret of his feelings for the Swedish actress and she, in turn, has thrown all discretion to the wind." Though Parsons cast the rumored romance as "almost impossible to believe," she went on to imply that the Bergman-Lindstrom marriage had long been a troubled one: "Always he [Lindstrom] and Ingrid have denied any trouble, but this time it looked as if the rumor is

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<sup>23</sup> "Romance Jells" and "Cholly Knickerbocker Observes," NYJA, April 13, 1949.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

true.” She also shared for the first time with readers that “there was a big battle here [in Los Angeles] in one of the Swedish restaurants before Bergman left.” Even as Parsons exposed the affair of this married woman with a married man—a fact sure to displease many readers—she was attempting to do damage control by establishing the tenuousness of her marriage to elicit sympathy for Bergman. On the other hand, Parsons also highlighted the promising career of actress Marta Toren, whom she cast as “Universal-International’s Ingrid Bergman” in her column that same day, a warning perhaps that Bergman was replaceable.<sup>25</sup>

Parsons spoke via telephone with Lindstrom who denied these allegations. According to Lindstrom, “the story is so ridiculous I can say nothing about it.”<sup>26</sup> Parsons was the first in the Hollywood press corps, or any press corps for that matter, to speak with Lindstrom. The article that relayed Parsons’s conversation with Lindstrom carried the copyright notice: “reproduction in whole or in part strictly prohibited.” The copyright notice precluded use of this conversation without crediting Parsons and receiving permission from the INS to run it, a clear indication of the importance of and fierce competition over this story.

While Lindstrom issued denials, Bergman and Rossellini offered no comment and were largely inaccessible to the press on their remote island location shoot. While the principals involved remained largely silent, the media onslaught continued. *Life* magazine ran an article on Bergman’s “Strombolian Idyl” with her new director. A photo covering three-fourths of the page of Bergman and Rossellini holding hands and looking rapturous was accompanied with text that read: “By last week the columnists were

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<sup>25</sup> Parsons, “Report Ingrid Rift Serious” and “Movies,” NYJA, April 14, 1949.

<sup>26</sup> Parsons, “Report Ingrid Rift Serious.”

gossiping that Miss Bergman had been wowed not only by Rossellini the director but also by Rossellini the man. . . [and] she was considering a divorce from her husband, Dr. Peter Lindstrom.”<sup>27</sup> Even the relatively circumspect *New York Times* ran a photo of Bergman and Rossellini at work on the film. In the photo, Rossellini is sprinkling water on Bergman’s cheeks to help her prepare for a crying scene. The rather suggestive caption read: “TEARS FOR INGRID—Roberto Rossellini, Italian film director, supplies Miss Bergman with the necessary signs of emotion, with the help of a glass of water. She is making a picture in Italy.”<sup>28</sup> The *Times* offered no explicit commentary, but readers could easily read between the lines regarding Ingrid’s tears.

From the outset, Rossellini, a citizen of a former Axis power who had lived and worked in Italy throughout World War II, was treated with suspicion and disdain in the U.S. press. In truth, Rossellini was an anti-fascist whose elite Italian family had had much of their wealth confiscated under Mussolini’s leadership. His acclaimed film *Open City* told the story of the “Italian resistance . . . during the Nazi occupation of Rome.” The facts aside, prevailing racialized U.S. cultural perceptions of Italians and Italian Americans as hyper-sexualized and operating within an inferior moral and ethical framework framed the U.S. media’s coverage of Rossellini. A February 1949 *Time* interview disparagingly described Rossellini as “Italy’s swarthy, balding director.” In breaking the story of the romance, Cassini cast Rossellini as a Latin lover “estranged from his wife for some time and [until recently] engaged in a serious romance with his leading star, Anna Magnani, . . . featured in his smash hit, ‘Open City.’” Cassini noted that “when Roberto met Ingrid he quickly dropped Anna . . . [who was] reported [to be]

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<sup>27</sup> “Strombolian Idyl,” *Life*, May 2, 1949, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> “Women in the News,” *NYT Magazine*, May 1, 1949, p. 5.

contemplating suicide.” The following day, Cassini’s headline read: “Who Said the Latins Were Lousy Lovers? Some Handsome Italians Are Doing All Right With American Beauties.” The filmmaker became a symbol of a dangerous, leftist, foreign masculinity that needed to be contained. He eventually was condemned on the floor of the U.S. Senate as a “common love thief” and degenerate, a characterization rooted in Cold War nativism and concerns over sexualized subversion.<sup>29</sup>

Bergman’s situation was more complex. She was not then (nor ever) an American citizen; the scandal eventually highlighted this fact. She had, however, made her home in the United States since her 1939 arrival in Hollywood. Her daughter had been raised in the United States and was clearly an American child though both her parents were Swedish nationals.<sup>30</sup> Bergman symbolized perhaps a more generalized kind of noble womanhood through her star persona. Within the U.S. context, few knew or cared about the meaning of Swedish womanhood.<sup>31</sup> As film star, her image operated outside national boundaries. This, in conjunction with her apparent “adoption” of the United States as her new home (at least until 1949) meant that Bergman’s gender and sexual transgressions were measured and understood within her transplanted American context, at least by the U.S. media.

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<sup>29</sup> “The Personal Story of Roberto Rossellini,” NYT, January 23, 1949; As quoted in Gallagher, *Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, 312; “Cholly Knickerbocker Observes,” NYJA, April 13 and 14, 1949. On racialized perceptions of Italians and Italian Americans, see, for example, Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>30</sup> Pia Lindstrom officially became a U.S. citizen in 1950. “Pia Lindstrom a Citizen,” NYT, November 11, 1950.

<sup>31</sup> While this chapter explores the scandal solely within the American context, this was truly an international story. (I refer to it as story rather than scandal in this context since its unfolding in the United States was quite different than in other nations.) Erik Hedling examines the meaning of this story in the Swedish press in which it played out quite differently. See Hedling, “European Echoes of Hollywood Scandal,” in *Headline Hollywood*, 190–205.

A *Life* magazine reader, writing to Bergman in response to an article that speculated on the nature of her relationship with Rossellini, declared: “Run up the white flag, advocate free love and join the Communist party. You have disillusioned the whole of American manhood.”<sup>32</sup> The intent of this letter was not to brand Bergman a communist; its tone was slightly bemused and sardonic. Bergman was never a target of HUAC, but such terminology was nonetheless provocative when used in relation to a member of an industry in the midst of purging alleged communists.<sup>33</sup> The term communist increasingly was being used outside of an explicitly political or ideological context to underscore outrageous behavior. Implicit in this letter was the fact that Rossellini was her bridge to these new affiliations. Cassini had begun red-baiting Rossellini before the scandal even broke. He wrote: “Roman society is terribly disappointed at not having a chance to meet Ingrid Bergman. . . . A few hours after she landed, Robert Rossellini . . . spirited her away to a villa outside Rome. And the only people she got to meet were Rossellini’s friends, left-wing intellectuals, Socialists and Communists.”<sup>34</sup> Over the course of the scandal, allusions to his leftist political orientation and his communist friends evolved into headlines reading: ROSSELLINI IS BRANDED A FASCIST BY SENATE.<sup>35</sup> Fascism and communism were and are distinct

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<sup>32</sup> *Life*, May 23, 1949, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Gerald L.K. Smith, conspiracy and right-wing agitator, had in a 1946 appearance before HUAC included Bergman in a list of film industry figures that he believed should be investigated as possible communists. Smith’s charges were not taken seriously though some of those he named (not including Bergman) were targets of the 1947 HUAC probe. See Spoto, *Notorious*, 207–8.

<sup>34</sup> “Cholly Knickerbocker Observes,” *NYJA*, April 12, 1949. Cassini’s anti-Communist crusading in high society—he also dabbled in the entertainment world given the increasing intersections between these two social worlds—was well-noted; in early 1947, the *New Republic* singled him out as “the most interesting economic theorist since Marie Antoinette.” As quoted in Jim Tuck, *McCarthyism and New York’s Hearst Press: A Study of Roles in the Witchhunt* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 48.

<sup>35</sup> “Rossellini Branded a Fascist by Senate,” *NYT*, August 24, 1950.

and different political ideologies, but the shades of difference were blurred in early Cold War America.

As this story gained momentum, RKO, the distributor of *Joan of Arc*, a Bergman film that was currently running in theaters, changed the film's ad campaign. New two-page ads for *Joan of Arc* appeared with numerous several headshots of Bergman that declared, "Love: with the fervent loyalty of woman, JOAN gives herself to one great love."<sup>36</sup> Clearly, Parsons's report that "[t]here was a huddle between Howard Hughes . . . and the other directors of RKO Studios to decide what to do about the Ingrid Bergman-Rossellini picture . . . to try for better public relations" had resulted in a decision to use the scandal to sell the Bergman film they currently had in release.<sup>37</sup> This marketing decision should have put Bergman and Rossellini on notice that RKO owner Howard Hughes held nothing sacred in his efforts to sell films to the American public.

The industry had to contend with the blacklist, the ongoing legal battles of the Hollywood Ten, and the *Paramount* decree; the last thing it needed was more controversy. Joseph Breen, head of the Production Code Administration (PCA), the agency created in 1934 to appease critics by monitoring and censoring the content of films and film advertising, contacted Bergman shortly after Cassini's story appeared. In his letter, Breen told her: "[T]hese reports are the cause of great consternation among large numbers of our people who have come to look upon you as the *first* lady of the screen—both individually and artistically . . . [and they] may very well *destroy your career as a motion picture artist.*" He instructed her to announce "that you have no intention to desert your child or to divorce your husband, and that you have no plans to

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<sup>36</sup> *Life*, May 23, 1949, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> "Hollywood" Louella Parsons, NYJA, April 15, 1949.

marry anyone."<sup>38</sup> Despite Breen's dire predictions, Bergman was named the top female star in a June 1949 poll sponsored by a film exhibitors' magazine.<sup>39</sup> The actress remained a force to be reckoned with in the industry despite the taint of scandal.

Bergman made no public statements and was largely insulated from the media circus from April to late July 1949 while filming on the remote island of Stromboli. After an early May 1949 meeting between Bergman and Lindstrom in Messina, Italy, the couple negotiated long distance over divorce and child custody arrangements throughout the spring and summer of 1949. The story seemed to be losing steam due to a lack of new information and silence from the principals involved.

When the production wrapped at the end of July, Bergman moved to Rome with Rossellini instead of returning home to Beverly Hills,. While Bergman might have been forgiven for leaving her husband, leaving her daughter was another matter. Hollywood has always used the domestic life of its stars as a marketing angle, particularly for the women. The image of the devoted wife and mother was used to counter the reality that Hollywood was a town of working wives and mothers. Bergman was no exception. The long hours and absences from the home, whether on a studio set or on location or on a publicity junket, did not prompt the kind of criticism and concern that would have been directed at women working in a profession other than actress. That Bergman left her husband and daughter behind to spend several months in Italy was not a cause of controversy. Her failure to return to California at the end of filming was another matter.

The Hollywood press corps, which had heretofore been largely supportive of Bergman, began to grow more critical. Hopper led this charge as Bergman's working

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted in Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 226.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas F. Brady, "Of Local Origin," NYT, June 15, 1949.

motherhood came under greater scrutiny and criticism. On August 1, Hopper reported: “I remember when Ingrid first came here [in 1939] for ‘Intermezzo.’ After each scene she’d look at her daughter Pia’s picture and burst into tears of loneliness. Pia was 7 months old and still in Sweden. Now Pia’s 10, and lives in Beverly Hills, while mother’s on Stromboli.” Two days later, Hopper reported upon a visit to Bergman and Lindstrom’s home in a failed attempt to secure a statement from Lindstrom. She reported, “The place looked like Fort Knox. . . . Not even a gopher or a field mouse was visible. . . . The house, which was built originally as a playroom for children, is now a silent citadel.” The implication was that the child that lived in that home had no cause for play.<sup>40</sup>

These attacks on Bergman’s motherhood were damaging, but even more distressing were plans by the Italian press to expose a secret she desperately wanted to hide: her impending motherhood. Bergman’s pregnancy—known for months only by Bergman, Rossellini, and a few close friends and advisors—was about to be given front-page treatment in Italy. Damage control was needed and forthcoming. However, it was not RKO but Joseph Steele, Bergman’s personal publicist, who handled the situation. Steele released a brief statement on August 5 on Bergman’s behalf: “[P]ersistent malicious gossip that has even reached the point where I am made to appear as a prisoner has obliged me to break my silence and demonstrate my free will. I have instructed my lawyer to start divorce proceedings immediately. Also, . . . it is my intention *to retire into private life.*”<sup>41</sup> The day after Bergman’s announcement of her premature retirement, *Giornale Della Serra*, a Rome newspaper, announced her pregnancy to the world.

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<sup>40</sup> “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, August 1 and 3, 1949.

<sup>41</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 247. Emphasis mine.

For several months, Parsons and Hopper had been covering the story long-distance and without direct access to Bergman. Once again, with a major development, neither had been given preferential treatment. Instead, the retirement story had been given first to Michael Chinigo, Rome correspondent for the *INS*. Their anger was palpable and made its way into print. Parsons told her readers: "The most surprised man in Hollywood when Ingrid Bergman announced she would retire from the screen was Howard Hughes. He couldn't believe it, because their understanding (no contract actually signed) was that there would be a second Bergman-Rossellini picture to follow *Stromboli* and RKO would finance it." Hopper, too, weighed in with: "Warners are left holding the bag. . . . They have an epic starring her, titled 'Under Capricorn.' You can now call it 'Plowed Under.'" Bergman's choices were bad for business (the film business, that is, not the gossip business) in the short and long term and were cast as an affront to the industry. She had planned her abrupt and early retirement without conferring with her studio and used her personal publicist as her conduit to the media and RKO. Once such a development would have been unthinkable, but the rules had changed in Hollywood. Bergman was not under contract to a major studio and could plan her career on her own terms.<sup>42</sup>

Parsons further reported, "I have a hunch Hughes need not worry. Those wise to publicity ways believe there was a reason for the 'retirement' angle. It takes the heat off any possible bleat about banning Bergman's pictures. How can you ban someone who is quitting?—until she should change her mind later on." There had been little discussion of bans on Bergman's films up to this point. Such commentary from this usually fierce opponent of censorship was not a positive sign. Hopper opined, "The girl who held

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<sup>42</sup> As quoted in Steele, *Ingrid Bergman*, 205; "Hedda Hopper," *LAT*, August 8, 1949.

herself aloof from all things, who was the well-scrubbed, outdoor, spiritual type, has gone the way of all flesh.” Most chillingly Hopper speculated, “This announcement means that she may have to give up her child.” The subtext of Parsons and Hopper’s grave speculations was the rumored pregnancy, a rumor neither reporter explicitly addressed, a fact well worth noting. The legal consequences alone of spreading such a rumor were too daunting, but it would be a mistake to assume that fear of a libel suit was the only reason they held back. They recognized the profound and negative consequences such a development would have not just on Bergman but on the entire industry. The Hollywood press corps did not, however, speak with one voice of veiled contempt and anger on this issue. Gossip columnist Sheilah Graham speculated that Bergman’s husband “will let their daughter, Pia, go to Ingrid without a fight,” an attempt to counter the charges of bad motherhood being leveled at Bergman in marked contrast to Parsons and Hopper’s combative stance.<sup>43</sup>

Bergman chose to take action. (Her attempt to stem the tide of negative publicity suggests that this “retirement” was a ploy as Parsons suggested; indeed, her retirement turned out to be short-lived.) She recognized that the disfavor of both Parsons and Hopper did not bode well for her career, retirement or not. As Bergman later remembered:

I hated . . . the power of those two women, Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, the gossip columnists. Their power shocked me, and I thought it very wrong that the film industry had allowed them to build up to such an extent that they could ruin people’s careers and lives.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> As quoted in Steele, *Ingrid Bergman*, 205; Hedda Hopper, *LAT*, August 8, 1949; Graham, “Hollywood,” *New York Daily News*, August 11, 1949.

<sup>44</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 131.

In this instance, Bergman decided to use their power for her own ends. She agreed to meet with Hopper who was dispatched to Rome for an interview. As Bergman biographer Laurence Leamer has argued, the choice of Hopper as her media conduit was an inspired, if risky, move on Bergman's part.<sup>45</sup> Hopper's "fearsome authority" was judged by many to eclipse that of Parsons because of Hopper's well-documented willingness in her role as "self-appointed judge and censor of . . . Hollywood" to break the illusion and expose what she considered to be the moral or political failings of those "in the passing Hollywood parade."<sup>46</sup> If Bergman could convince the hyper-moralistic Hopper that she was not pregnant, this would effectively silence speculation in the media.

Bergman's strategy was successful. She denied the pregnancy rumors point blank. Hopper believed her because her pregnancy was not obvious to the naked eye and because she could not imagine that Bergman would risk getting caught in a lie of such major proportions. On August 10, she wrote: "Ingrid [Bergman] declares she will bring suit against the Italian papers which said she was going to have a baby. I don't blame her; there is not a word of truth in it." Hopper's interview effectively silenced such speculation, at least in the U.S. media. The title of the article, "Ingrid Tells Hedda Her Troubles," set a sympathetic tone in which Hopper declared: "Ingrid's only sin was falling in love." The article was structured in a confessional manner with Bergman admitting that she was separated from her husband and was causing her family pain; they were being harassed because of her celebrity. Bergman admitted, "Now I seem to have hurt everyone. There is no protection for my husband or child." Her acknowledgment of the pain she had inflicted provided an opportunity for forgiveness. Hopper was willing

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<sup>45</sup> Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 190-1.

<sup>46</sup> Collie Small, "Gossip is Her Business," *Saturday Evening Post*, January 11, 1947, p. 58; "The Gossipist," *Time*, July 28, 1947, p. 60.

to grant it though not without qualification. Hopper allowed Bergman to speak in her own defense and Bergman charged, “I have been the victim of a lot of lies.” Hopper, however, also made it clear that Bergman should have known the consequences of her actions. “I pointed out to her that . . . everything a star does from the time she rises in the morning until she goes to bed is publicized. Ingrid knows that, but she can’t accept it,” wrote Hopper. She believed that Bergman had consented to and profited from interest in her personal life and that it was disingenuous for her to demand privacy at this juncture in her career. Despite Hopper’s sometimes chiding tone, the interview worked in Bergman’s favor and short-circuited any discussion of her pregnancy in the U.S. media.<sup>47</sup>

Bergman’s long-distance negotiations with Lindstrom continued, but were derailed in late September when Bergman’s lawyer granted interviews with both Cassini and Parsons, which cast Lindstrom as a tyrant who had “dominated her completely,” “controlled all the money,” and now refused to grant her a divorce.<sup>48</sup> Parsons’s headline read: “Ingrid Offering Fortune to Gain Marital Freedom” in an attempt to paint Lindstrom as a gold digger who refused to end a very troubled marriage because he would lose his place in the sun.<sup>49</sup> Parsons’s sympathetic coverage of Bergman prompted a columnist for the *Macon (Ga.) News* to respond. In an article, “Local Columnist Gives Louella Parsons the Word on Why Ingrid Bergman Has Lost Favor Lately,” this journalist argued, average citizens and Bergman fans “have put aside these temptations and gone about the unromantic business of trying to build and keep a home for the kids and see that the grocery bill is kept in fairly good shape. They expected Miss Bergman to

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<sup>47</sup> Hopper, “Ingrid Tells Hedda Her Troubles,” LAT, August 10, 1949.

<sup>48</sup> As quoted in Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 193.

<sup>49</sup> As quoted in Spoto, *Notorious*, 282.

be as big as they are, too!”<sup>50</sup> The Hollywood press corps, however, remained supportive of Bergman and focused primarily on her troubles in obtaining a divorce from a recalcitrant Lindstrom.

### The Bombshell

What had heretofore followed a fairly standard narrative of an actress’s romantic misadventures took a turn into uncharted territory in December 1949. “Ingrid Bergman expects a baby in three months,” announced Parsons, in an exclusive story that made the front page—not the inside entertainment pages—in the Hearst papers and was available to the more than one thousand newspapers that subscribed to the INS. The story gave Parsons one of her greatest triumphs over Hopper who had silenced rumors of a Bergman pregnancy four months prior. Indeed, Hopper later conceded that with this particular story: “Louella left me with egg on my face.”<sup>51</sup>

Yet the stakes were much higher—far beyond the satisfaction of scooping her rival, as Parsons well knew. “For a long period of time it appeared that many people felt that, if Ingrid had sinned, the fault was mine for revealing it. Frustration, anger and bitterness all resulted in attacks on me for having done my job as reporter,” reflected Parsons on this controversy and her role in it. “Common sense, however, told me that if I didn’t break the story, someone else would. It was not the kind of story that could be kept secret forever.” The truth, however, was that Parsons and her peers in the entertainment press had helped to keep just such damaging stories—particularly regarding Hollywood

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<sup>50</sup> “Local Columnist Gives Louella Parsons the Word on Why Ingrid Bergman Has Lost Favor Lately,” *Macon (Ga.) News*, October 28, 1949, Parsons scrapbook #48, LPc.

<sup>51</sup> Parsons, “Ingrid Expects Stork in 3 Mos.,” LAE, December 12, 1949, scrapbook #45, LPc; Hedda Hopper and James Brough, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 77. On the INS subscriber base, see Richard A. Schwarzlose, *The Nation’s Newsbrokers*, vol. 2 (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 230.

stars whose names virtually guaranteed box office revenues—from being publicly disclosed for nearly three decades.<sup>52</sup>

According to Parsons's longtime assistant Dorothy Manners, the Bergman pregnancy "was a story that Louella hated more than anything and it was a story that caused her the most heartache. . . . [E]very word that she wrote was just agony for her."<sup>53</sup> Parsons knew how damaging this revelation about one of the U.S. film world's most important stars could be to an industry already reeling from the negative publicity stemming from the HUAC hearings, the blacklist, and the fall-out from the Paramount decision. She had at most a day or two to wrestle with the legal and journalistic challenges this story presented; if she delayed too long this scoop might be lost to another journalist either due to the impatience of her source—RKO head Howard Hughes—or the fact that such a secret would not keep long in the kind of company town that was Hollywood. Never before had she been given the go-ahead by a studio head to print such explosive material—information that could unquestionably compromise a performer's career. Previously a stony silence in her column or an oblique chastisement was the punishment accorded individuals in disfavor with Parsons. Even in the case of Orson Welles, whom Parsons held in nothing but contempt after his betrayal over *Citizen Kane*, Parsons acted largely behind the scenes and rarely attacked him in print: she chose instead banishment from her celebrity universe.

With "so many denials from so many apparently authentic sources," as Parsons remembered, the Bergman story required careful consultation with Hearst executives and lawyers. The legal ramifications would be considerable if the story proved to be untrue

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<sup>52</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 68, 74–5.

<sup>53</sup> Dorothy Manners oral history, HWPCc.

for both the Hearst organization and for Parsons. As Manners remembered, “she was worried about her own finances.” Indeed both Lindstrom and Rossellini threatened to sue once the story went to press—suits that never came to pass.<sup>54</sup>

Despite all of the afore-mentioned reasons why Parsons could have chosen not to print the story, she went ahead with it. She did so because the information was passed along to her from RKO head Howard Hughes. Parsons never revealed the source that confirmed the Bergman pregnancy. She declared: “I have been asked many times who this person was. I gave my word that I would never tell.” She only hinted that she “was given a message from a man of great importance not only in Hollywood, but throughout the United States.” By most other accounts, including Bergman’s, it was unquestionably Hughes who gave Parsons the information regarding the pregnancy and expected that she would print it. Parsons would have desired to maintain the RKO chief’s goodwill for herself as well as for her daughter Harriet who was then working as an RKO producer. Parsons was accustomed over the course of her thirty-four-year career to serving as a conduit for such important, studio-sanctioned news though the salacious nature of this item was unprecedented.<sup>55</sup>

Hughes, however, represented a new breed of studio head in the age of divestiture with his firm belief that *any* publicity was good publicity. Hughes had long defied film

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<sup>54</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 75; Manners oral history, HWPCc.

<sup>55</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 74. While various accounts of the scandal disagree on how Hughes obtained news of Bergman’s pregnancy and how (or more precisely through whom) he transmitted the information to Parsons, there is no question that, upon learning of the pregnancy, he authorized Parsons to release this news. And even if Hughes was not Parsons’s initial source, she would have conferred with him before printing the story. Parsons had a good working relationship with Hughes and would not have risked his wrath by going to press with such an explosive story about the star of an RKO film shortly before its release. Another factor that would have contributed to Parsons’s desire to curry Hughes’s favor was that her daughter Harriet was then employed at RKO as a producer, where she worked from 1943 to 1955. See George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 236; and As quoted in Tricia Crane, “Parsons Jr.: She Produced What Mom Juiced,” *Valley News*, April 11, 1980, LP bio files.

industry conventions in his overt use of scandal and controversy to market films—in some instances he even seemed to court controversy to boost box office receipts. In Bergman's case, Hughes may have acted in part out of anger because he had bankrolled *Stromboli*, an art film, with the expectation that Bergman would follow it up with a second, more mainstream film for RKO. With the pregnancy, those plans were, at best, postponed for some time. The fate of not-yet-released *Stromboli* also hung in the balance. Without Bergman's consent or knowledge, he decided to embrace the controversy and use it to market *Stromboli*.

Hughes's decision was not simply the act of maverick in the U.S. film industry. This stands as an early and extreme example of a larger trend in postwar and post-*Paramount* decree Hollywood. As studios shrunk their payrolls to combat falling revenue, fewer and fewer employees were signed to the standard contract. As the standard studio contract became less normative, the studios no longer had a long-term investment in actors since a studio might retain an actor's services for only a film or two, as in the case of Bergman and RKO in 1949. The studio focus became publicity in service to the film rather than nurturing and sustaining the reputation and image of the talent involved. Performers and other creative personnel, in turn, were now able to hire their own publicity agents and craft their own images, something that had previously been forbidden under the standard contract. Now the performers, the independent production companies, and the studios, which remained in charge of distribution, each had their own publicists, all of whom vied for column inches. These various public relations people did not always operate in concert to achieve common goals—sometimes with disastrous consequences as in the case of Bergman's pregnancy.

Parsons may have had to convey very controversial information, but she framed it in the best possible light for Bergman. She wrote:

Few women in history, or men either, have made the sacrifice the Swedish star has made for love. . . . [B]eing a movie queen of Ingrid's stature and renouncing her place in the sun by retiring to live the life of a recluse in a strange country away from all she loved—her child, her public and her friends—is indeed a sacrifice. . . . He [Bergman's husband] has refused to discuss a divorce. . . . Now the question is: Will he grant her request for a divorce so that her child may be born in wedlock.<sup>56</sup>

In breaking this very sensitive story, Parsons wrote sympathetically about Bergman's plight and shifted the blame onto the two men in her life. Parsons cast Lindstrom, the estranged husband, as the villain for refusing to a divorce. Rossellini was pointedly described as the "suave, dark-eyed Italian," thereby invoking racialized discourse on Italian masculinity to discredit Rossellini while suggesting that Bergman might be his victim. Indeed, Parsons implied that Bergman had been blinded by love, but the subtext here was the power of Rossellini's sexuality, framed within the context of the "Latin lover," which had driven Bergman to sacrifice her family, home, career, and image. This line of reasoning would grow increasingly prevalent as the scandal grew.

In the past, Parsons had not hesitated to condemn actions as immoral or inappropriate if her goal was to impede the career of a subject. In this case, Parsons was writing in part at the behest of a studio chief who had decided to use scandalous off-screen behavior to promote a film. Yet she was acutely aware of Bergman's standing as "the star of stars" and her importance to the industry.<sup>57</sup> Parsons knew that tarnishing Bergman's image would not serve the greater good of the industry so she crafted this initial report in such a manner to generate goodwill for Bergman by turning her into a

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<sup>56</sup> Parsons, "Ingrid Expects Stork in 3 Mos."

<sup>57</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 71.

noble victim who had become the pawn of two men defined in much of the U.S. media by prevailing ethnic and racial ideology as the icy, withholding Nordic and the passionate, impetuous Italian. This interpretation contained Bergman's sexuality, which had after all become front-page news, by focusing instead upon the men who surrounded her.

For nearly two months, Parsons was hung out on a potentially libelous limb. Bergman and Rossellini neither confirmed nor denied her report. They gave only one joint interview—to the *New York Times*. Rossellini responded to Parsons's report, "Whether she is [pregnant] or not is nobody's affair. I think that report deserves neither denial nor confirmation because it is an attempt to pry into the private life of a woman, who to assert her right to her own life, has given up her career." Unfortunately Bergman would learn that the nature of celebrity culture was such that a retreat to private life would not suffice to guarantee her "right to her own life" without the cooperation of the media. Rossellini summarized Bergman's position on the subject in the *New York Times* interview: "As an artist I have a certain responsibility toward the public and I may be criticized. All right, if that's the case I no longer want to be an artist. I want to be a happy wife with the man I love." As Hopper had earlier pointed out, Bergman was expected "to be above reproach" because of her "saintly" persona and status as a role model. To forestall further criticism in this vein, Bergman simultaneously acknowledged that she had shirked her responsibilities to her public and had given up those responsibilities to absolve herself of further guilt. She hoped that her retirement might silence critics and end the media scrutiny, but this was not to be.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "Bergman Nuptials Wait on Divorce," NYT, December 15, 1949; Hopper, "Ingrid Tells Hedda Her Troubles."

Throughout the *Times* article, Lindstrom was taken to task for refusing to a divorce, a tactic Parsons also used to deflect criticism from Bergman. Said Bergman, “Since last April I have repeatedly asked my husband to give me a divorce. . . . Unfortunately, there have been some difficulties; otherwise I would already be Roberto’s wife.” If he had done so, according to Rossellini, “we would have been spared all the criticism which has been poured on us.” Many other newspapers, which were forced to borrow heavily from the *Times* article to cover this story, emphasized Lindstrom’s obstruction as the root of the problem with headlines such as: “Ingrid’s Mate Stands in the Way.”<sup>59</sup>

While this lack of an outright denial seemed a tacit acknowledgment, only confirmation would put an end to Parsons and the Hearst organization’s legal worries. While Cassini’s initial report months earlier on the love affair had placed him in the enviable position of being the journalist who broke a major story, with all of his peers and competitors scrambling to get an angle, Parsons’s exclusive was greeted with some consternation and great caution from the rest of the entertainment press corps. The *Hollywood Reporter* offered, “The local talk yesterday was the Louella Parsons bombshell on Ingrid Bergman’s expecting a baby. The nation’s press bombarded the office of Dr. Peter Lindstrom.”<sup>60</sup> Most other entertainment reporters, with the notable exception of Hopper, mentioned the story. They did not, however, give it the space or prominence that Cassini’s earlier report on the relationship had received.

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<sup>59</sup> “Bergman Nuptials Wait on Divorce”; “Ingrid’s Mate Stands in the Way,” *New York Daily Mirror*, December 16, 1949. Indeed, if Lindstrom had agreed to a quick divorce, much of the controversy might have been avoided as Adrienne McLean has argued. McLean, “The Cinderella Princess,” in *Headline Hollywood*, 172–3.

<sup>60</sup> *Hollywood Reporter*, December 13, 1949, scrapbook #48, LPc.

Entertainment columnist Earl Wilson remarked (in a single sentence buried in the middle of his column), “Irving Hoffman renamed Stomboli ‘Strombambino,’” while Sheilah Graham speculated that Lindstrom would demand custody of Bergman’s baby.<sup>61</sup> Hopper, who helped quash rumors of this pregnancy months earlier, ran a column the next day devoted to anecdotes about the filming of *Stromboli* that made absolutely no mention of the pregnancy. A screenwriter on the project was quoted as saying: “[W]e had 800 visitors on the island . . . and we got Bergman through the crowd to a balcony so she could be seen to mollify the mob.”<sup>62</sup> This story, positing that an entire crowd had seen Bergman but no signs of a pregnancy, was a not-so-subtle refutation by Hopper of Parsons’s report.

Parsons also came under fire for going to press with this story at all, regardless of its accuracy. In an article, “The Case of Ingrid Bergman,” liberal journalist and scholar Max Lerner explicitly named Parsons and placed her at the center of the controversy. He argued, “Ever since Louella Parsons not so demurely broke the story for the INS, the storms of debate have raged . . . about newspapers and their ethics in splashing this extremely private story until it reaches into every gossip nook in the nation.” Lerner decried the “piracy that we practice against the spotlight personalities of our time, peering into every crevice of their private lives, leaving them in the end depersonalized.”<sup>63</sup> While many journalists and intellectuals recognized the dangerous precedent set by Parsons’s report, their concerns were overshadowed by those critical of Bergman and the social problems she was made to exemplify.

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<sup>61</sup> “It Happened Last Night,” Earl Wilson, *New York Post*, December 15, 1949; Graham, “Hollywood,” *New York Daily News*, December 15, 1949.

<sup>62</sup> As quoted in Hopper, “Hollywood,” *New York Daily News*, December 13, 1949.

<sup>63</sup> Lerner, “The Case of Ingrid Bergman,” *New York Post*, December 15, 1949.

In Hopper's "year in review" column for 1949, she linked bad headlines—read Bergman—with communism. Hopper argued that box office receipts had dropped precipitously because "of lurid headlines." "[T]he wayward activities of stars affect not only the welfare of all their co-workers, but even the men who run the theaters in small towns all over America," Hopper pronounced. As for an unnamed star, clearly Bergman, who "made the biggest, boldest headlines of the year," Hopper lectured, "You want the fruits of world-wide fame without accepting the responsibility of it. A movie name, for better or worse, is pure dynamite." Hopper called upon industry leaders to invoke the morality clause in such cases: "They can hire or fire." Hopper then broached one of her favorite topics, on which she continued to write with great passion and regularity: communist subversion in Hollywood. She compared the complaints of the aforementioned "big star" with similar concerns voiced in 1947 by members of the Committee for the First Amendment. Like Bergman, Hopper argued, CFA members "had tried to use their fame foolishly, and it had boomeranged." Hopper did not explicitly call Bergman a communist or a communist sympathizer, but implied it in the comparison with the CFA. "Many top movie figures have been charged with Red sympathies and Communist front activities," Hopper continued. She contended that it was "no invasion of privacy to a true American" to clarify political affiliation. "Thus I think any filmite on whom the pink label has been hung owes it to the public to state his position," Hopper charged. This implication here was that like those who should answer the question of communist affiliation, Bergman should provide an unequivocal response to the question of her pregnancy. This comparison was not equivalent. Bergman posed no threat to national security. At worst the quagmire of her personal life might have an adverse effect

on the principals involved and the film industry. Yet the hyperbole generated by Hopper and other reporters on Bergman's significance to and impact on American society would lead U.S. politicians to make similar comparisons and demand restitution.<sup>64</sup>

### Confirmation and Condemnation

Finally, Parsons was vindicated—at least regarding the veracity of her report—in the eyes of the public and her peers. “Son Born to Ingrid” screamed headlines across the nation on February 3, 1950, which re-ignited the media circus. In the Hearst papers, this parenthetical statement accompanied the story of the birth, a sign no doubt of the legal worries Parsons's initial report had produced:

(Announcement of the birth confirmed an exclusive story . . . by Louella O. Parsons, seven weeks ago. On Dec. 12 Miss Parsons disclosed Miss Bergman had consulted physicians and was soon expecting a baby.)<sup>65</sup>

Immediate reaction to the birth from the gossip columnists varied wildly. Parsons and Cassini strongly defended Bergman. Cassini gushed, “When in the year 2000 school children will have to read about history's greatest love stories there's no doubt that the Ingrid Bergman-Roberto Rossellini stormy romance will be mentioned at the head of them all. . . . Ingrid displayed great courage and composure in a situation that might have completely overwhelmed a woman who did not have her great heart and her great capacity for love.” Cassini championed Bergman while casting aspersions on both of the men in her life: Lindstrom came under fire for refusing to accept that his wife had fallen in love with another man; Rossellini was dismissed as “the smooth Italian.” Parsons argued that Bergman was “not in the least bowled over” by Rossellini “as had been written.” According to Parsons, “the Italian director” who was “[n]ever one to let an

<sup>64</sup> “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, January 2, 1950, scrapbook #18, HHc.

<sup>65</sup> “Son Born to Ingrid,” NYJA, February 3, 1950.

opportunity go by,” pursued Bergman relentlessly to London and then to Hollywood before she “was fascinated by his attentions.” These characterizations of Rossellini implied that he had manipulated Bergman into this unfortunate situation, and this theme would grow ever more pronounced.<sup>66</sup>

Not all the columnists were, at this point, determined to try to recuperate Bergman’s image. Walter Winchell weighed in ironically with: “Talk about coincidences: In ‘Stromboli’ Ingrid is a married woman who has a chee-ild by her lover.”<sup>67</sup> Entertainment columnist Earl Wilson wrote that Bergman never asked that people think she was a saint, but “she never stopped that sort of kindly publicity. She profited from it. It made her rich. She wore the halo well. Then the tables were turned; the publicity went the other way. Now, suddenly, the newspapers had gone mad. . . . Smart as she is, she couldn’t see that there were two sides to the coin.”<sup>68</sup>

As for Hopper, she did not immediately address the situation, unlike most of her peers. When she finally broke her silence, her anger was evident. She wrote: “Aug. 9 I interviewed Ingrid Bergman in Rome, Italy. That was the day the Italian papers said she was going to have a baby. She denied it up hill and down dale, and said, ‘Do I look as though I were going to have a baby?’ ‘No,’ said I.” Hopper then concluded, “The morality clause in every player’s contract can now be deleted.”<sup>69</sup> The standard seven-year studio contract contained a morality clause, which allowed the studios to release performers on the grounds of moral or ethical breaches: this clause, for example, had been invoked to justify the firing of the Hollywood Ten. Of course, Bergman was not

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<sup>66</sup> Cassini, “Ingrid and Roberto—One of the Great Love Stories,” NYJA, February 5, 1950; Parsons, “Hollywood,” NYJA, February 4, 1950.

<sup>67</sup> “Walter Winchell in New York,” *New York Daily Mirror*, February 3, 1950.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson, “It Happened Last Night,” *New York Post*, February 3, 1950.

<sup>69</sup> “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, February 6, 1950, Hopper scrapbook #18, HHc.

under such a contract to RKO; she had fulfilled her obligation to RKO with the completion of *Stromboli*, thus the studio had no weapons to use to try to coerce Bergman to behave as they saw fit. Hopper was well aware of this fact and of the industry-wide changes that were offering many other performers increasing autonomy, changes of which she clearly did not approve. Hopper's suggestion that Bergman should be held accountable for both her initial lies and for the pregnancy itself reflected the angry demands of many observers. Indeed this issue would ultimately be taken up in the halls of Congress.

At this juncture, the Hollywood press corps lost control of this story. They had been instrumental in putting the story into play, but with the birth of the child before Bergman's divorce from Lindstrom was final, condemnation rang down from all quarters—criticism that indicted the entire U.S. film industry and the Hollywood press corps in particular.<sup>70</sup> Even if they had chosen to, which they did not, neither Parsons nor Hopper would have been able to spin the story to protect Bergman or the film industry. After this initial discussion in the wake of the birth, they became largely silent on the subject: silence and retreat seemed the only option, particularly given the outrageous ad campaign for *Stromboli* planned by RKO. Their story had taken on a life of its own and would be used in a fierce political battle for headlines and ownership of the battle to contain communism on the homefront. What came next transcended Parsons, Hopper, and the entertainment press. The Hollywood gossip columnists had succeeded all too

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<sup>70</sup> An Italian court recognized Rossellini's Austrian annulment from his first wife Marcella on January 23, 1950, but Bergman did not secure a Mexican divorce from Lindstrom until February 9, 1950, seven days after the birth of her son Robertino on February 2, 1950. On Rossellini's annulment, see Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 202 and Gallagher, *The Adventures of Roberto Rossellini*, 345. On Bergman's divorce, see "Ingrid Bergman Wins A Divorce in Mexico," NYT, February 10, 1950.

well in their struggle to prove to the world the significance of their work and that of the industry they covered.

The same edition of the *New York Journal-American* that reported the baby's birth also revealed that the film *Stromboli* would open in the United States in mid-February. The film was released in the United States by RKO after considerable editing to delete "certain scenes in the picture . . . reminiscent of recent highly publicized rumors concerning the Swedish actress and the Italian director."<sup>71</sup> The film's ad campaign was another story.

While RKO doctored the film's content to make it unobjectionable to censors and avoid suggestive parallels to real-life events, this was not the case with what RKO termed "movie history's 'biggest advertising campaign.'"<sup>72</sup> RKO exhibitors were instructed that the image of Bergman in a passionate embrace and the controversial copy that accompanied it was "the keynote of the entire advertising campaign." The ad read: "Raging Island . . . Raging Passions! This is It! The Place: Stromboli The Star: Bergman under the inspired direction of Rossellini."<sup>73</sup> Joseph Breen and his office registered their disapproval over the suggestive nature of the ads and demanded that they be pulled.<sup>74</sup> The Catholic Press Association of the United States attacked the ads as "sentimentalizing the private misfortune of the star to sell the picture."<sup>75</sup> RKO went ahead with the ad campaign anyway, but *Stromboli*'s success in wide release across the United States was

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<sup>71</sup> NYT, January 15, 1950.

<sup>72</sup> NYJA, February 2, 1950.

<sup>73</sup> *RKO Radio Flash*, January 28, 1950, p. 12, The American Film Institute/Louis B. Mayer Film History Program, Center for Advanced Film Studies, Beverly Hills, California.

<sup>74</sup> On Breen and ad campaign, see "Stromboli," in *American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States*, Patricia King Hanson, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 2367. Not coincidentally RKO re-released the controversial film, *The Outlaw*, with outrageous ads days after the premiere of *Stromboli*. Ads for the two RKO films shared a page in the *New York Times*. See NYT, February 16, 1950.

<sup>75</sup> "Stromboli' Ads Decried," NYT, February 10, 1950.

unlikely, scandal or no scandal. Bergman's U.S. fans expected a sleek, mainstream Hollywood product, not a dubbed art house film.

Rossellini was not happy with the film as cut for its U.S. release; as it turned out, nobody else—critics and audiences alike—was either. Initially, RKO's publicity strategy seemed a success as *Stromboli* opened to a strong box office. However, within a week, ticket sales fell sharply due to scathing reviews and negative word of mouth. *Time* judged the film “[a] bleak draggy little picture, . . . [which] fulfills neither RKO's prurient advertising claims nor Rossellini's obviously artistic intentions.” This review also stated, “Actress Bergman plays a piece of post-war European flotsam,” an inescapably harsh assessment of her character that could be read as a statement on Bergman herself or at the very least as a not-so-subtle allusion to the controversy in her private life.<sup>76</sup>

*Stromboli* was not only panned, it was banned in the entire state of Georgia, in several cities in upstate New York, in Memphis, and throughout the nation. Bans of *all* Bergman and Rossellini films were called for in some locales. Religious organizations, such as the Federal Council of Churches, the U.S. Catholic Church, and the Albuquerque (NM) Ministerial Alliance, all voiced disapproval as did the Salvation Army and other civic groups. The controversy also gave independent exhibitors the opportunity to reiterate long-standing concerns over the negative impact of controversy in the stars' private lives. The Allied States Association, the second largest theater owners organization in the nation, used the scandal as an opportunity to lobby the studios to “fine

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<sup>76</sup> “The New Pictures,” *Time*, February 27, 1950, p. 96.

or suspend stars whose off-screen behavior subjects the industry to criticism.” These demands would be answered in the halls of Congress.<sup>77</sup>

Congressman John E. Rankin (D-Mississippi), a former chairman of HUAC, congratulated Memphis censor Lloyd Binford on his decision to ban all Bergman and Rossellini films. Rankin called for “the Christian people of America” to “join in protecting their children from having her loathsome pictures paraded before their eyes now and hereafter.” Two days after Rankin’s condemnation of Bergman, Democratic Congressman Ed Lee Gossett of Texas, denounced “this outrageous film” that glorified “a couple that have incensed the decency and morality of the world. Even the ad itself insults refined sensibility.” Senator Edwin C. Johnson (D-Colorado) stated for the record that he agreed with Gossett “100 percent.” A month later, Johnson had much more to say on the subject.<sup>78</sup>

On March 14, 1950, Johnson condemned Bergman and Rossellini on the floor of the U.S. Senate. Senator Johnson famously called Bergman “one of the most powerful women on earth today—I regret to say, a powerful influence for evil.”<sup>79</sup> This piece of political rhetoric deserves closer examination for several reasons. Johnson rightly identified Bergman as a powerful woman, but for reasons rooted in an overly simplistic understanding of the relationship between audience and performer. Bergman, for example, had inspired female fans to adopt her curly, cropped style hairstyle in the film *For Whom the Bells Toll* (1943). Some feared she might also make extramarital sex fashionable. Generations of moral watchdogs have used (and continue to use) this long-

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<sup>77</sup> “Seeks Ban on ‘Stromboli,’” NYT, February 15, 1950. On the *Stromboli* protests, see also “Starring Ingrid Bergman,” NYT, February 12, 1950.

<sup>78</sup> *Appendix to the Congressional Record*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 12-13: A1010; *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3:1820.

<sup>79</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3285.

discredited cause-and-effect model to accuse the film industry of inciting juvenile delinquency, violence, and host of other social ills. But the measurement of the reception of mass media images and ideas is a highly subjective and delicate process: one that politicians such as Johnson should best stay out of.<sup>80</sup> Yet the Hollywood columnists, with their hyperbole, played no small role in providing Johnson with this ammunition. Parsons and Hopper may have railed against the negative effects ascribed to film, but they were all too willing to trumpet the considerable, positive influences of the nation's media. But to concede the positive was to implicitly concede the negative as well.

Bergman did, however, have tangible power, which she exercised. Bergman left the studio system to assert artistic and financial control over her career. She formed her own production company and negotiated with the Hollywood power brokers on her own terms. She initiated the collaboration with Rossellini. Her legions of devoted fans gave her tremendous power at the box office. She went head to head with Hopper, another of Hollywood's most powerful women, lied to her, and got away with it for months. Bergman had beauty, talent, intelligence, and considerable material wealth. She used all of this power to transgress the boundaries of domestic ideology as articulated in early Cold War America. Johnson did not articulate this, but this was at the root of the power that he feared.

Johnson had harsh words for both Bergman and Rossellini; he characterized the couple as "free-love cultists" and "moral outlaws" who made a mockery of the institution of marriage. Rossellini, however, bore the brunt of the attack and the blame as he had in

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<sup>80</sup> As Lizabeth Cohen and other scholars have demonstrated, consumers read, understand, and use the mass media in myriad and often counter-hegemonic ways that belie attempts to impose a simple cause-and-effect model. See, for example, Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

much of the media coverage, including in the reporting of the gossip columnists. Johnson sought some explanation for actions that precipitated Bergman's "sudden plunge from the highest pinnacle of respect to the gutter." He suggested that she might suffer from schizophrenia. "A mental abnormality" seemed the only explanation, to Johnson, for "her unnatural attitude toward her own little girl" and her rejection of the "happiness, fame, millions of friends, leisure, and great wealth" she left behind in the United States. He further charged that she must have been "the victim of some kind of hypnotic influence" exerted by Rossellini. Indeed, Bergman came to be cast as Rossellini's victim and dupe in many reports on the scandal.<sup>81</sup>

From the moment the scandal broke in April 1949, claims were made that Bergman was Rossellini's prisoner. Cassini's initial report on the relationship claimed that Rossellini had isolated Bergman in a foreign country. This theme grew so pronounced that Bergman addressed it when she announced her retirement in August 1949: "[P]ersistent malicious gossip that has . . . reached the point where *I am made to appear as a prisoner* has obliged me to break my silence and *demonstrate my free will*."<sup>82</sup> Her words did not stop critics from characterizing Rossellini as a "love pirate" who stole "her very soul."<sup>83</sup> Hopper lamented, "I had no idea she'd throw her career away on a volcanic island, under the direction of a guy named Rossellini."<sup>84</sup> Such an interpretation turned Bergman into a helpless victim as opposed to an active participant in her own life. Indeed, for many it was easier to vilify Rossellini rather than address the manner in which Bergman challenged Cold War domestic ideology and conceptions of womanhood.

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<sup>81</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3282, 3284, 3286.

<sup>82</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 247.

<sup>83</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3286.

<sup>84</sup> "Hedda Hopper," *LAT*, August 8, 1949.

Johnson did clearly articulate what he considered to be the sexual subversion at work in Bergman and Rossellini's relationship. According to Johnson, Bergman's actions made no sense "unless she were laboring under some sort of mental obsession." In early Cold War America, extramarital liaisons were among a range of sexual activities outside the bounds of matrimony (including homosexuality) that were cast as not only immoral but also unpatriotic and a threat to national security. Indeed, Johnson characterized Bergman and Rossellini's actions as "a crusade against the holy bond of matrimony." The notion that communists used sex to achieve political conversion or for the purposes of manipulation and blackmail had gained wide currency in early Cold War America. The fight to contain communism on the homefront became yet another justification for the policing of sexual behavior, as in the case of Bergman.<sup>85</sup>

Johnson further charged: "[T]he stupid film about a pregnant woman and a volcano. . . has exploited America . . . to the mutual delight of RKO and the debased Rossellini. . . . A way must be found to protect the people in the future against that kind of a gyp." Not only Bergman and Rossellini came under attack by this senator. He charged that RKO had "deliberately exhibited the moral turpitude of the leading lady to pack their theatres." Johnson singled out Eric Johnston, head of the MPAA, for criticism. According to the senator:

[Johnston] the motion picture-czar is merely a front for the money changers of his association. With one eye on the cash register and the other constantly winking at evil, he has permitted scandal to pile up on scandal until the movies, a powerful influence for wholesome life, have lost the confidence of the people. It breeds contempt for society's most precious conventions, and contributes to juvenile delinquency and crime generally.

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<sup>85</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3286, 3285. On sexuality and gender roles in Cold War America, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), esp. chapter 4.

Johnson hoped that “out of the degradation associated with Stromboli . . . may come a better Hollywood.” And he had a plan for how to make a “better Hollywood.”<sup>86</sup>

Johnson proposed a bill that required actors, producers, and films be licensed by the Department of Commerce to ensure their “decency.” According to Johnson, “The object is to insure wholesome motion pictures for the people and to eliminate persons of low character from making and appearing in films.”<sup>87</sup> Under Johnson’s proposal, actors, actresses, producers, and distributors would all pay a licensing fee on a sliding scale to the Department of Commerce.<sup>88</sup> Fines would be imposed—ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000 dollars—and licenses would be revoked if any of the licensees were found guilty of or admitted committing acts of “moral turpitude.” This bill was sent to the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee, which Johnson headed, for consideration. Hearings were scheduled for May 1950.

Then in late April, Johnson abruptly announced that he was terminating his probe into the film industry. Industry leaders had agreed to reform the advertising code to prevent publicity campaigns for films from capitalizing upon private notoriety. As Stephen S. Jackson, the investigator appointed by Johnson, declared, “[A] satisfactory plan of self regulation had been worked out.”<sup>89</sup> On June 21, 1950, the MPAA, in a unanimous vote, amended the Advertising Code (the counterpart to the Production Code for publicity materials) to ban any advertising tied to personal misconduct: “No text or

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<sup>86</sup> *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3281, 3282, 3288.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 3282-3.

<sup>88</sup> Johnson proposed that actors and actresses pay \$1, producers pay \$100, and distributors pay \$10,000.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas F. Brady, “Hollywood Relaxes,” *NYT*, May 7, 1950.

illustration shall be used which capitalizes, directly or by implication, upon misconduct of a person connected with a motion picture thus advertised.”<sup>90</sup>

Two months to the day that Johnson denounced Bergman on the floor of the Senate and used the scandal as a pretext to propose federal regulation of the industry in form of the “decency” licensing, he withdrew the bill from consideration. Why did Johnson reverse himself so quickly given the vehemence of his rhetoric on the floor of the Senate the previous month? Johnson was neither the first nor the last politician to scapegoat Hollywood and thereby gain the national spotlight. But if his only motive was publicity, then Senate hearings would have given him a starring role as head of the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee. As a seasoned politician serving out the last of three terms in the U.S. Senate, Johnson made an outrageous, initial proposal that garnered considerable attention. In this way, he secured the cooperation of an industry determined to avert another federal investigation and eager to reign in Hughes’s excesses. Johnson’s choice of investigator indicated that his stance was far less critical or uncompromising than his speech on the floor of the Senate suggested. He chose an insider, Stephen S. Jackson, a former New York State juvenile court judge who had served as temporary head of the PCA in 1947 and 1948 while Breen was on leave. Indeed, in announcing its withdrawal, Johnson claimed “he had never felt very strongly about it and offered the bill primarily to start discussion.” Yet Johnson not only started a discussion, he was able to force a substantial tightening of the industry’s self-regulation of advertising.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> “Film Men Vote Ban on Exploitive Ads,” NYT, June 22, 1950.

<sup>91</sup> “Ends Film License Plan,” NYT, May 15, 1950. Less than two months, after “the Motion Picture Licensing Act” was shelved, Johnson spoke at a dinner honoring Louis B. Mayer. Mayer was one of the “money changers” whom Johnson had excoriated on the floor of the Senate in March. In his remarks, Johnson acknowledged that he had recently said “some ugly things about Hollywood.” Yet he praised Mayer and declared, “There is nothing wrong with Hollywood today which more Louis B. Mayers in that

A *New York Times* report suggested another compelling motive for Johnson's short-lived probe: "A few armchair analysts even lightly conjecture that the speeches are an Administration attempt to take newspaper headlines away from Senator Joe McCarthy's attacks on the State Department."<sup>92</sup> Just one week after the birth of Bergman's baby, Joseph R. McCarthy, (R-Wisconsin) leapt from relative obscurity to national prominence with his speech warning that 205 men working in the State Department were members of the Communist party. McCarthy's claims had since been causing much trouble for Truman's administration. Indeed, Johnson's attack on Bergman and the film industry helped divert media attention (and headlines) from McCarthy for a time. But in so doing, Johnson had transformed a news story about the private lives of public figures into a cautionary tale of considerable national political and cultural import and danger. A measure of the line that had been crossed was the unwillingness of the entertainment press to give this story much play after the birth of the baby and the attendant condemnation. Even Hopper, who might well have jumped on this story and used it to further harass Bergman, shied away from it.

### Exile?

The Motion Picture Licensing Act may have been shelved at the end of April 1950, but Bergman's worries were far from over. Her legal battles with Lindstrom over their divorce, child custody arrangement, and financial settlement continued. Lindstrom refused to recognize the Mexican divorce Bergman had secured a week after her son was born and counter-sued for divorce on April 20, 1950, in what he termed an effort to "make the termination of their twelve-and-a-half year marriage legal in California."

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industry would not cure." Johnson's presence at this dinner is further evidence of his less than adversarial stance toward the industry. *Appendix to the Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1950, 96 pt. 16-18: A4652.  
<sup>92</sup> "Censorship Threat," NYT, March 26, 1950.

Finally, on May 24, Bergman and Rossellini were married by proxy in Mexico. "I know it is a strange sort of marriage, but it would have taken a long time to have all the papers straightened out so that we could have a wedding in Rome. And we wanted to be married as quickly as possible," Bergman remarked about this marriage that seemed strange indeed given Lindstrom's pending divorce suit. Rossellini sought to clarify the admittedly tangled legal situation: "The Mexican marriage will be recognized in Italy. . . . Therefore Ingrid won't be a bigamist, as some people might think." Rossellini also pointed out that with the marriage Bergman was now "an Italian citizen . . . and will therefore travel under an Italian passport from now on."<sup>93</sup>

This was no small issue since Bergman had become in the words of Senator Johnson, a woman "Without a Country" as a result of the scandal. After Bergman left the United States in April 1949 to film *Stromboli*, she did not work in the U.S. film industry for more than seven years and did not set foot on American soil for almost eight years. This makes for a dramatic story: Bergman falls from grace and is punished for her "sins" with "exile" from the United States and the U.S. film industry.

Bergman has explained her decision to remain in Europe differently. Twin daughters were born to Bergman and Rossellini in June 1952. She wished to raise her growing family in Europe. She was further constrained by Rossellini, whom she later portrayed as a pathologically jealous and possessive man who refused to allow her to return the United States. Bergman's decision was also influenced by what she referred to simply as "waves of hatred" she felt directed toward her from the U.S. press, public, and

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<sup>93</sup> Camille Cianfarra, "Ingrid Bergman Wed By Proxy," NYT, May 25, 1950.

government. This last factor deserves closer consideration because it had a considerable impact on the range of choices available to her.<sup>94</sup>

Bergman's options, at least in 1950, were severely limited by her indeterminate visa status and the political climate in Hollywood and throughout the United States. News of the birth in February 1950 prompted speculation regarding Bergman's visa status since she was not a U.S. citizen. Immigration officials were quoted widely that her case required review. The *Los Angeles Times* reported: "If Ingrid Bergman should decide to return to this country, she might run afoul of immigration regulations. . . . [which] pertain to moral character." Senator Johnson, in his attack on the floor of the Senate in March 1950 was unequivocal about her alien status. "Under our law no alien guilty of moral turpitude can set foot on American soil again. Mrs. Peter Lindstrom has deliberately *exiled herself forever* from the country which was so good to her," declared Johnson. While Johnson spoke with great authority, he was no expert on immigration law and conferred with the Senate legal counsel and the Justice Department. Six days after his diatribe on the floor of the Senate, Johnson entered a legal brief on Bergman's readmission status into the *Congressional Record*. The brief did not provide a definitive answer, but it did indicate that Johnson's declaration of Bergman's exile was an overstatement. Bergman could potentially be denied entry into the United States on the grounds of "moral turpitude," but "she [also] could be admitted at the discretion of the Attorney General." In presenting this information, Johnson carefully pulled back from

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<sup>94</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 264, 289.

talk of exile and argued that since Bergman might need to appear in court in California, she “should [and could] be admitted . . . for a temporary visit.”<sup>95</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that Bergman applied for a visa at this time, so there was no official ban. Bergman’s immigration status was, however, tenuous. She was, in effect, at the mercy of the Attorney General’s office and the prevailing political and cultural sentiment. Johnson’s hyperbolic attack on Bergman and Rossellini was launched just weeks after Senator Joseph McCarthy had begun his witchhunt for subversives in the U.S. government, providing even less incentive for Bergman to risk a return to the United States.

Bergman’s situation grew more perilous because of Johnson’s continued attacks on her husband throughout the fall of 1950. Johnson had ceased public condemnation of Bergman and the U.S. film industry by late April, but remained focused on discrediting Rossellini as an alleged drug addict, violator of the Mann Act, and nazi collaborator during World War II. This last charge regarding Rossellini’s political affiliation was the most serious and was the one that Johnson pursued most diligently. In July 1950, Senator Johnson proposed a resolution “expressing Senate disapproval of the exhibition in the United States of motion pictures produced or directed by Fascists, Nazis, or Communists.” In the resolution, Johnson declared that “[e]very arm of this Government has . . . to deal with subversives” and justified his resolution as needed to stop this “insidious propaganda” generated by communists and other “enemies of democracy.” Johnson argued that the danger of communist subversion in the U.S. film industry was “no idle conjecture” given the recent incarceration of the Hollywood Ten stemming from

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<sup>95</sup> “U.S. Law May Bar Return of Ingrid,” *LAT*, February 4, 1950; *Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 2-3: 3286, 3624. Emphasis mine. On Bergman’s indeterminate visa status, see also Spoto, *Notorious*, 296–7.

their contempt of Congress convictions. Rossellini was then singled out as “the most notorious of all foreign motion-picture directors” and was, in fact, the only one of these “enemies of the United States” listed by name in the resolution. Johnson reiterated the charges that Rossellini was a fascist, a nazi collaborator, and a narcotics addict; for good measure he added that Rossellini had been “twice incarcerated in a mental institution.”<sup>96</sup>

Johnson’s Interstate (and Foreign) Commerce Committee passed the resolution on August 23, a resolution that was clearly geared to smear Rossellini. After all, the resolution was not legally binding in any manner, but it packed considerable rhetorical power as far as the animus directed toward Rossellini—and Bergman by association. Press coverage focused on the charges leveled against Rossellini, not the actual intent of the resolution, with headlines reading: ROSSELLINI IS BRANDED A FASCIST BY SENATE.<sup>97</sup> In September, Johnson entered correspondence with Gustavo Garzia, an Italian journalist, into the *Congressional Record*. Garzia had defended Rossellini in a March 1950 letter to Johnson. Subsequently, he investigated Rossellini’s past and concluded that Johnson’s charges were true. Garzia now argued that Rossellini “must never set foot in a civilized country like America.”<sup>98</sup> With her husband branded a fascist in the U.S. Senate (and his communism implied), Bergman had little reason to believe that she would be able to re-enter or would be welcome in the United States.

Thus Bergman had many reasons to fear the political climate in the United States, reasons that would have kept her from working in the U.S. film industry as well. This did not mean that Hollywood entirely turned its back on Bergman. She received offers of

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<sup>96</sup> Senate, *Report Condemning Communist, Fascist, or Nazi Film Exhibition in the United States*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, S. Rept. 2365, serial 11371, 1–3.

<sup>97</sup> “Rossellini Branded a Fascist by Senate.”

<sup>98</sup> *Appendix to the Cong. Rec.*, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., 1950, 96 pt. 14-15: A3260.

work from Hollywood (and from others in the European film world) throughout her supposed exile.<sup>99</sup> Whether or not such plans would have come to fruition is impossible to know, but Bergman did work during these years. Her short-lived retirement ended in the fall of 1951 when Bergman began work on *Europa '51*, the first of five films she would make with Rossellini over the next four years.

In the summer of 1955, Hedda Hopper conducted an exclusive interview with Bergman in Italy. Hopper's decision to do so, despite being played for a fool by Bergman in 1949, illustrates the manner in which the Hollywood press corps had been overwhelmed by the magnitude of the scandal and forced to participate to some extent against their will and against their better judgment. According to Bergman, she agreed to the interview to put an end to the rumors of her marital strife and unhappiness and to demonstrate that her career and life had not been ruined by the scandal. Bergman later claimed to be indignant when Hopper reported the exact opposite: namely, that Bergman was desperately unhappy in her marriage and longed to work again in the Hollywood film industry. But the decision to speak with Hopper was a calculated one on Bergman's part and an obvious overture to Hollywood. Hopper's portrait indicated that Bergman was in fact paying for her past "sins," which could only help to generate sympathy for Bergman. Indeed, this article helped Bergman relaunch her Hollywood career.<sup>100</sup>

After a fierce debate in the executive offices of Twentieth Century-Fox, which included a poll of theater owners to gauge their reactions to a new Bergman film, she was signed to star in *Anastasia*, which was shot in London. She began production on this film

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<sup>99</sup> Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 229; McLean, "The Cinderella Princess," 180; Spoto, *Notorious*, 316. In her autobiography, Bergman recounts the visits many members of the Hollywood community made to her in Rome throughout this period of supposed exile.

<sup>100</sup> Bergman and Burgess, *My Story*, 271-2; Leamer, *As Time Goes By*, 237-8.

in London in May 1956, nearly seven years after production on *Stromboli* had wrapped.<sup>101</sup>

The notion that Bergman had been exiled from Hollywood and the United States emerged most prominently in the discourse on her triumphant return in *Anastasia*.<sup>102</sup> The film tells the story of Anna Anderson, who went from poverty and obscurity to life in the international jet set with her claim that she was the presumed dead daughter of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The publicity campaign for the film highlighted how the film's narrative arc (from princess to poverty and exile to princess again) paralleled Bergman's personal situation. This time around nobody complained about the use of this star's private life to help promote a film. While the film was still in production, the Fox publicity department worked to garner media attention and support for the film. Parsons, Hopper, and the rest of the Hollywood press corps, perhaps chastened by the role they had played in alienating and "exiling" one of Hollywood's biggest stars for nearly seven years, welcomed her back with great warmth and enthusiasm.

The film was a resounding success upon its December 1956 release. Even Hopper, who all concerned knew might very well excoriate Bergman and her film, had kind words to say. Hopper received a note from Buddy Adler, a Fox producer on the film, in which he thanked her "for the nice things you said about it [*Anastasia*] in the column."<sup>103</sup> In January 1957, Bergman finally returned to the United States. She flew to New York for a weekend to accept the New York Film Critics' Circle Award for best actress for her work in *Anastasia*. Little more than two months later, Bergman was

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<sup>101</sup> In November 1957, Bergman and Rossellini separated and were granted an annulment the following June. The end of their marriage also made headlines.

<sup>102</sup> McLean, "The Cinderella Princess," 188 n. 57.

<sup>103</sup> Adler to Hopper, December 18, 1956, Twentieth Century-Fox Productions folder, HHc.

awarded the Academy Award for best actress, capping a brilliant publicity campaign built around Bergman's return to and redemption in Hollywood. As Parsons once suggested, "Ingrid, The Fallen Angel" had indeed risen again.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 15.

## Epilogue

In 1957, Ingrid Bergman's triumphant return to the U.S. motion picture industry as well as her triumphant return to the United States for a brief visit meant that she fully rejoined the celebrity universe as scripted by Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper. On August 14, 1957, for example, Bergman was the lead story in Hopper's column: "Ingrid Bergman has been announced for half a dozen films," Hopper shared with her readers, "but the one she is definitely going to make is 'The Journey' with Yul Brynner for Anatol Litvak."<sup>1</sup> Much had changed, however, in the U.S. entertainment industry and in the working environment of the Hollywood press corps during Bergman's seven-year absence.

In the 1950s, Parsons and Hopper's brand of gossip reporting began to be contested and challenged from many quarters—Hopper, in particular, was a target of criticism for her redbaiting in blacklist Hollywood. Their style of reporting would eventually be eclipsed by the enhanced ability of film industry personnel to tell their own stories, by the demands of the popular new medium of television, and by the emergence of celebrity scandal magazines that broke new ground in the media disclosure of the private lives of public figures. In short, the celebrity gossip industry Parsons and Hopper had helped to found increasingly had little use for these celebrated reporters and turned them into mere celebrities to be reported upon. In the twilight of their careers in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Parsons and Hopper became anachronisms who represented the bygone era of the oligopolistic Hollywood studio system, but they did not go quietly into

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<sup>1</sup> "Hedda Hopper," LAT, August 14, 1957. Because Parsons and Hopper reported upon productions from the embryonic stages and because Hollywood film productions often were subject to considerable staffing and creative changes until the final cut appeared in the theaters, their reports had short shelf lives and were subject to considerable revision. In this case, Deborah Kerr ultimately starred in this 1959 film with Brynner.

that good night. They continued to work into their eighties and resisted being marginalized until sidelined by old age and ill health in the mid-1960s.

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The 1950s was, first and foremost, the era of the blacklist. On March 21, 1951, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) resumed hearings into subversive activity in the film industry, which had been abruptly terminated three and half years earlier. Actor Larry Parks, one of the eight “unfriendly” witnesses not called to testify in October 1947, was the first witness before the committee. Parks acknowledged his Communist party membership. When pressed to identify other communists in the industry, he did so. Thus began a parade of hundreds of film industry employees intermittently testifying before HUAC between 1951 and 1954. Forced to choose between their own continued employment and well-being and that of colleagues they knew or suspected of being communists and communist sympathizers, many of those subpoenaed chose to name names. In this period, more than two hundred film industry employees were identified as suspected communists and fellow travelers to HUAC and blacklisted.<sup>2</sup> There were also a plethora of “shadow” blacklists, or graylists, compiled by a whole host of organizations and individuals, which included private agencies such as the American Legion and Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals (MPAPAI) as well as journalists such as Hopper. This meant that hundreds of people in all of the entertainment industries (for the freelancers cast a wide net that also encompassed theater, radio, and television) found themselves under suspicion with their livelihoods imperiled.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1956, John Cogley reported that 324 people were named between 1951 and 1953 and of this number 212 were gainfully employed in the film industry and thus truly blacklisted. John Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting 1-Movies* (1956; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 109–10.

Hopper had the power to dictate the employment prospects of the film industry workforce and she used it. She did not, however, use it only to indict subversives. As Victor Navasky has argued in his study of blacklist Hollywood, “Newspaper columnists such as . . . Hedda Hopper were as happy to fill their spaces by getting the deserved off the list as by putting the blameworthy on.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Hopper was capable of defending those she considered innocent of such charges, particularly her good friends. In September 1953, news that Lucille Ball, the beloved star of “I Love Lucy,” had registered to vote in 1936 with the Communist party made headlines. Ball’s April 1952 statement to a HUAC investigator had been released to the press and caused a media uproar. Though Ball explained that she had done “so only to please her ailing grandfather, Fred Hunt, a Socialist,” this explanation did not appease all of her fans and the press.<sup>4</sup> In this instance, Hopper rushed to the defense of her friend and received a heartfelt letter of thanks from Ball and her husband Desi Arnaz: “Dear Fabulous: You have proved to be not only a great friend, but a helluva reporter. How can we ever thank you, except to say . . . that if you’re ever in a mess, S.O.S.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this and other efforts to protect the innocent, Hopper’s overriding mission was to expose the “guilty,” an agenda so single-minded and potentially destructive that she eventually alienated important allies in conservative anticommunist circles.

By the early 1950s, Hopper had amassed an impressive roster of powerful friends through her anticommunist activism, including Senators Richard M. Nixon and Joseph McCarthy and financier and presidential advisor Bernard Baruch to whom she wrote in May 1953: “What a mess they turned up in Hollywood. The House on Un-American

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<sup>3</sup> Victor S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 89.

<sup>4</sup> “Now That Lucille Thinks of It, She Did Vote Commie,” *New York Daily News*, September 13, 1953.

<sup>5</sup> Ball and Arnaz to Hopper, September 25, 1953, Lucille Ball folder, HHc.

Committee certainly are doing a good job. It would be fine thing if we could get rid of these ‘artists’ who fell for the line.”<sup>6</sup> Her invective was hardly less restrained in her column. The previous month, for example, Hopper wrote,

“Walt and Roy Disney made haste to deny that Sol Kaplan, an unfriendly witness in the House Un-American Activities investigation, was ever employed in their music department. . . . If all the studios were as quick to take exception to unfriendly witnesses as the Disneys, we would not have so many unfriendly movie fans. . . . All our producers need to do before hiring a questionable character is to phone the FBI for information.”<sup>7</sup>

This is just one example of how Hopper helped enforce the blacklist by naming names for her newspaper audience, estimated to be as large as twenty-five million at this time. She also continued her critique of the film industry for its alleged inactivity and lack of vigilance.

Yet her influential friends could not shield her from the rising tide of criticism—from the far left and the far right and the middle of the road—that peaked in 1953. Alvah Bessie, one of the Hollywood Ten, wrote “An Open Letter to Hedda Hopper” in the Communist journal *People’s Daily World* in August 1953 attacking Hopper and challenging her to account for the fates of those who had been blacklisted. Hopper devoted an entire column to a rebuttal in which she listed by name eleven CFA members who were “doing all right” despite the fact that they had once been among “a number of people on the airwaves plaguing the [HUAC] committee that was trying to learn something about Communists in our country.” She was, in effect, denying that there was a blacklist, as did most of the Hollywood establishment in this decade.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hopper to Baruch, May 8, 1953, Bernard Baruch folder, HHc.

<sup>7</sup> “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, April 13, 1953.

<sup>8</sup> Alvah Bessie, “An Open Letter to Hedda Hopper,” *People’s Daily World*, August 14, 1953 and “Hedda Hopper,” LAT, August 20, 1953 in Unfriendly Ten file, HHc.

Hopper was used to and even welcomed such attacks from what she dismissed as “a pinko sheet.” The same year, however, she was disavowed by the MPAPAI, a serious blow to this long-time member and former officer who was now being ostracized by her conservative anticommunist brethren. The Alliance embraced its role as one of several channels that provided “clearance” for individuals under suspicion of communist affiliation. The Alliance was jockeying with the FBI, the Screen Actors Guild, the American Legion, and others for the jurisdiction over the clearance process. Hopper’s invective, however, began to jeopardize the Alliance’s credibility when she continued to sully the reputations of individuals who had been cleared for employment in the film industry. After director Edward Dmytryk, one of the Hollywood Ten, completed his prison sentence, he testified before HUAC and named names in April 1951. Thus he was removed from the blacklist. Yet Hopper continued to attack him, which precipitated a split within the Alliance. Hearst political columnist George Sokolsky’s brutal attack on Hopper at an Alliance meeting was reported in the Hollywood trade papers: “[P]eople with Miss Hopper’s obsession are very dangerous for us (anticommunists). They hurt us all over the country by taking an almost blood bath attitude. They give the cause of anti-Communism a bad name.” According to Sokolsky, her “blind hatred” was also detrimental to the already bruised public image of the film industry.<sup>9</sup>

Hopper’s “surprise attack” on the film industry at a major exhibitor’s convention led *Variety* to examine the low esteem in which Hopper was held not just by the Alliance but by one of the major metropolitan newspapers in which her column was syndicated.

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<sup>9</sup> “N.Y. Daily News Exec Editor Reveals Hedda Hopper Frequently Warned,” *Variety*, November 8, 1953, HH bio files. On Hopper’s break with the Alliance, see also Cogley, *Report on Blacklisting*, 166–7. On Dmytryk’s travails, see Edward Dmytryk, *It’s a Hell of a Life But Not a Bad Living: A Hollywood Memoir* (New York: Times Books, 1978), 146–7.

In a November 1953 address to the Theatre Owners of America, Hopper charged that the American public would not attend the films of any actors called before HUAC “whether or not they are cleared.” In an interview with *Variety*, Richard W. Clarke, executive editor of the *New York Daily News* revealed that Hopper had been “‘frequently warned’ . . . to stick to the job at hand and ‘not try settling international affairs.’” But, as he went on to acknowledge, “the paper was ‘helpless’ in doing anything to curb her” since that could only be accomplished by her syndicate. Though Hopper had lost the support of the MPAPAI—perhaps in part as a result of a turf battle between her and Sokolsky—she still had the support of her syndicate chief, Robert McCormick, as demonstrated by their voluminous correspondence. McCormick could not stop the criticism, but he could and did keep her column intact and in print. Yet *Variety*’s willingness to broach the topic of Hopper’s travails indicated that her place atop the Hollywood press corps was no longer unassailable.<sup>10</sup>

Hopper continued her redbaiting, but other forces were at work to challenge the power and influence of the leaders of the Hollywood press corps. The means and methods of procuring celebrity gossip and the nature of the stories printed were changing with the emergence of a group of mass-market celebrity scandal publications in the early 1950s. In December 1952, the inaugural issue of a magazine called *Confidential* hit the newsstands. *Confidential*, with what Thomas Wolfe termed its “aesthetique du schlock,” was the most successful of these magazines, dedicated to exposing the alleged “truth” kept out of the rest of the U.S. press, including the columns of Parsons and Hopper.<sup>11</sup> *Confidential* focused primarily on entertainers though politicians, business leaders, and

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<sup>10</sup> “N.Y. Daily News Exec Editor Reveals.”

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Wolfe, “Public Lives: Confidential Magazine; Reflections in Tranquility by the Former Owner, Robert Harrison, Who Managed to Get Away With It,” *Esquire*, April 1964, 87.

other public figures also appeared in its pages. Stories of drug and alcohol abuse and sexual experimentation and activity were its forte; *Confidential* covered events and incidents and problems that were at most alluded to in the mainstream gossip columns.

These publications took the methods Parsons and Hopper had pioneered and long used to more extreme lengths and built entire newsrooms around them. Parsons and Hopper had constructed considerable informational networks that included the police, the hospitals, and any agencies and individuals that were in a position to provide useful information. *Confidential* developed an entire “research” team, a company called Hollywood Research Incorporated, which used private investigators. Most importantly, sources were paid for the information they provided; sometimes they were blackmailed into providing it for free. There is no evidence to suggest that Parsons and Hopper ever paid their sources; indeed they did not need to do so because of their stature in the national press and in the film industry. Parsons and Hopper’s gossip exchanges were built upon a mutuality in which the currency was promotion. For *Confidential*’s gossip exchange, the only currency was cash.<sup>12</sup>

This was a brave and disturbing new world of gossip reporting in which even the celebrated reporters were not safe. In April 1959, Parsons appeared on the cover of *Confidential* in a story on “Hollywood’s Hatchet Woman.”<sup>13</sup> This story was mainly recycled information—rumors and otherwise—from other sources written in a hard-boiled and accusatory style that delivered little of the scandal promised. *Confidential* was

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<sup>12</sup> On *Confidential*, see Mary Desjardins, “Systematizing Scandal: *Confidential* Magazine, Stardom, and the State of California,” in *Headline Hollywood: A Century of Film Scandal*, ed., Adrienne McLean and David A. Cook (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 206–31.

<sup>13</sup> Travis Kent, “Louella Parsons: The Hatchet Woman Hollywood Fears,” *Confidential*, April 1959, Louella Parsons clippings, 1959, Louella Parsons collection, University of Southern California Regional History Collection, Doheny Memorial Library, USC.

in the business of promising scandal and intrigue. Sometimes it delivered, more often not. Innocuous fare swathed in hyperbole was the mainstay of Parsons and Hopper's columns, but their hyperbole was overwhelmingly positive and flattering. The hyperbole of the 1950s scandal magazines was uniformly inflammatory and negative and represented an evolution in celebrity gossip reporting that began to leave Parsons and Hopper behind.

Faced with this competition, Parsons and Hopper acted to help celebrities protect themselves and forestall negative publicity. When actor Rory Calhoun, for example, learned that *Confidential* was about to reveal that he had been jailed for auto theft as a teenager, he took preemptive action to spin the story in his favor. He contacted Hopper and told her the story. Hopper went to press before *Confidential* and crafted a narrative designed to generate sympathy for a "reformed" Calhoun. He benefited, but so did Hopper since she secured a compelling, exclusive story in the process.<sup>14</sup>

With the studio system collapsing under the weight of the *Paramount* decree and competition from television, the once tightly coordinated Hollywood publicity machine was replaced with a more ad hoc system in which talent agencies, independent production companies, and the studio publicity departments vied for column inches. In reflecting upon the passing of an era, in which according to Parsons, "every effort was made to protect stars from themselves, from the press and from the world," she baldly stated, "stars are no longer studio properties but independent operators."<sup>15</sup> Parsons's disapproval of this independence was directly related to the extent to which it decreased creative personnel's dependence upon her. These "independent operators" were now free to craft

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<sup>14</sup> Desjardins, "Systematizing Scandal," 228 n. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Louella Parsons, *Tell It to Louella* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, Sons, 1961), 136.

their own images and many chose to do so on television where they could speak for themselves.

By the early 1950s, more than ten million homes across the nation were equipped with a television set. This new entertainment medium had begun to make serious inroads on the financial and cultural might of the motion picture industry. As Hopper wrote, "Hollywood set the social style for thirty years of our history, until TV came along."<sup>16</sup> The gossip reporters sought to take advantage of this new medium, with weekly programs and specials. Just as many silent films stars failed to make the transition to the "talkies," or sound films, many of these reporters, including Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, had trouble translating their gossip reporting onto the small screen. Entertainment journalist Ed Sullivan found the right format for television gossip reporting and executed it with remarkable success. His show, "Toast of the Town," began airing on 1948 and was renamed "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1955, a change that demonstrated that Sullivan had finally achieved the celebrity that had so long eluded him. As a gossip reporter covering the Broadway scene, Sullivan had long languished in Winchell's shadow, but his television work changed all that. Sullivan became not the reporter, but the host who welcomed celebrities into America's living rooms to perform and promote and chat. The celebrity variety and talk show replaced the print gossip column as the most powerful vehicle for promotion. Celebrities could now tell their own stories with the stoic Sullivan providing the venue as well as invaluable promotion.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hedda Hopper and James Brough, *The Whole Truth and Nothing But* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), 216.

<sup>17</sup> On Sullivan and television, see Neal Gabler, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 447, 449.

In August 1955, just a little over a month before Parsons was to begin her first television show, "See Hollywood with Louella Parsons," she abruptly withdrew from the program.<sup>18</sup> Parsons had had little success in film, and live television was hardly going to offer a more hospitable environment. Indeed, her television appearances were few: a cameo in a 1956 television movie of her life story, a 1958 interview on "Person to Person" hosted by Edward R. Murrow, and a 1961 appearance on "What's My Line."

Hopper conversely made at least two failed attempts to mount her own television show. These 1948 and 1959 efforts failed, but Hopper became a popular guest and appeared on scores of television shows from the late 1940s through the early 1960s, including "The Perry Como Show," "I Love Lucy," and "I've Got a Secret." In 1959, she announced plans to host a television special, "Hedda Hopper's Hollywood," scheduled to air opposite "The Ed Sullivan Show" on January 10. This was no coincidence. Hopper was testing the waters with a special to see if she could mount a challenge to Sullivan. Initially her efforts seemed to be working as she had a galaxy of stars—Bette Davis, Gary Cooper, Charlton Heston, Steve McQueen—scheduled to appear. Sullivan, however, was ready to answer this challenge. He paid thousands of dollars to secure the film's biggest stars for his show. When he learned that Hopper was paying her guests the bare minimum on the union scale—something she could legally do because her show was a special as opposed to a continuing series—he used this as a pretext to sabotage her program. Sullivan complained, "This is the most grievous form of payola. . . . Here is a columnist using plugs in a column to get performers for free."<sup>19</sup> Sullivan had the upper hand because celebrities could ill-afford to alienate the man who hosted the premiere talk

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<sup>18</sup> "Louella Calls Off TV Show," *Mirror-News*, August 26, 1955, LP bio files.

<sup>19</sup> "Moses and the Money Changers," *Time*, January 11, 1960, p. 38.

show on television. Hopper's guests began to cancel. Charlton Heston, Mae West, Bette Davis, Mickey Rooney, Steve McQueen, Joan Crawford, and Tuesday Weld were among those who rejected Hopper in the face of Sullivan's wrath. Hopper still had star power in the form of Gary Cooper, Bob Hope, Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz, and others, but Sullivan had won this battle. Hopper returned to making appearances on other people's television shows, and Sullivan remained the preeminent celebrity reporter/host in the U.S. media.<sup>20</sup>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Parsons and Hopper received numerous accolades as their long careers in the entertainment media drew to a close. The Masquers Club, the California Press Women's Club, the Las Vegas Variety Club, the Los Angeles Urban League, and the Mount Sinai Men's Club all offered honors. Parsons was the first reporter to receive a Golden Globe from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association in honor of her "outstanding journalistic reporting throughout the world."<sup>21</sup> Hopper was named an ambassador by her home state of Pennsylvania and was honored by the American Legion for her years of faithful service in rooting out communist subversion in Hollywood.

Their influence was truly waning as the 1960s began, but both women struck back by publishing new memoirs. In these tomes, Parsons and Hopper struggled to reconcile old and new Hollywood. In doing so, their shared sense of dislocation in a dramatically changed working environment was palpable. In *Tell It to Louella* (1961), Parsons assured her readers, "Happily, the younger generation of stars has continued to tell me its secrets." Indeed, she struggled to balance stories of old Hollywood and new Hollywood and assert her continued relevance. Yet her focus was clearly on the stars of

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<sup>20</sup> On the Hopper-Sullivan feud, see George Eells, *Hedda and Louella* (New York: Warner, 1973), 327.

<sup>21</sup> "Louella Parsons Gets 'Golden Globe' Award," LAE, March 10, 1960, LP bio files.

“yesteryear”: Clark Gable, Rita Hayworth, Joan Crawford. As for the threat posed by television, she argued that the film industry had “been on the critical list for one condition or another” and now it was the threat of “the killer TELEVISION.” Yet Parsons asserted, “Hollywood not only is going to *Live*—It’s going to *Jump!*” Hopper, not surprisingly, struck a very different, chiding, and pessimistic note on the fate of the film industry in her 1963 memoir *The Whole Truth and Nothing But*. Hopper devoted her final chapter to “[w]hat went wrong with Hollywood.” According to her, the greed and shortsightedness and lack of patriotism of the “founding fathers” who “ruled like pharaohs” led to “the death of glamour.” The studios’ failure to respond to the competition of television combined with the greed of the “ever-loving” agents who created the “overpriced star system” had brought the motion picture industry to the brink of ruin. Hopper despaired of a solution being found. Parsons’s optimism that the film industry would survive and prosper would be proven correct, but neither she nor Hopper would be around to cover this particular story.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the early 1960s, Parsons battled a series of illnesses that seriously compromised her ability to continue writing her column. The byline remained hers, but the burden of the work increasingly fell on her longtime assistant Dorothy Manners. Finally, on December 1, 1965, Parsons’s retirement at the age of eighty-four was official, and Manners took over the column. On that day, Manners wrote, “A Goodbye to ‘Miss P’” who had “been forced by ill health to retire” from “job she loved, reporting the Hollywood she loved and defended for . . . over 40 years.”<sup>23</sup> By this time, a seriously incapacitated Parsons had already taken up residence in a nursing home where she would

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<sup>22</sup> Parsons, *Tell It*, 14, 301, 303; Hopper and Brough, *Whole Truth*, 321, 323, 324, 326, 327.

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Manners, “A Goodbye to ‘Miss P,’” LAE, December 1, 1965, LP bio files.

remain for the next seven years until her death on December 9, 1972 at the age of ninety-one.

Hopper maintained an active and full schedule in the 1960s, writing her column and memoir, working in film and television, and continuing her political activism through campaigning, conventioneering, and reporting. In a July 1960 issue of the *American Legion* magazine, a letter to the editor praised Hopper: "It takes a lot of guts for Hedda Hopper to come out publicly in her syndicated column and expose fellow travelers and dupes."<sup>24</sup> She campaigned for Richard Nixon in his failed 1960 bid for the presidency for which Nixon was "deeply grateful."<sup>25</sup> In September 1964, Hopper attended the Republican National Convention just as she had for more than twenty years and chronicled it in her column. This was, however, the last Republican convention she would cover. Hopper was ailing throughout the next year and half though she continued to maintain a full and hectic schedule, which included her daily column. In late January 1966, the eighty-year-old Hopper fell ill with pneumonia. She died on February 1, 1966, exactly two months after her rival Parsons had retired to a nursing home. The era of the "super-gossip columnist" had come to a close.<sup>26</sup> The celebrity gossip industry was, however, thriving. By the mid-1970s, its mainstream, mass-market potential would be fully exploited when Time, Inc. introduced a new publication called *People*.

In 1970, *Look* magazine published an article by George Eells, future biographer of Parsons and Hopper, which asked, "Whatever became of the common scolds?" A whole host of reporters—Rona Barrett and Jill Jackson among others—had stepped into the vacuum created by the demise of the "two all-time super-pushers of Inside Dope and

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<sup>24</sup> *American Legion* magazine, July 1960, American Legion file, HHc.

<sup>25</sup> Nixon to Hopper, November 8, 1961, Nixon file, HHc.

<sup>26</sup> George Eells, "Whatever Became of the Common Scolds?" *Look*, November 3, 1970, p. 90.

Stardust” though none had the kind of power once wielded by Parsons and Hopper.<sup>27</sup>

This was the beginning of a groundswell of attention devoted to the place of celebrity gossip in the U.S. media and society in the early and mid-1970s. In all of it, Parsons and Hopper were given their due as the “founding mothers” of the celebrity gossip industry.

This focus on gossip and the obsession with what was going on behind closed doors was tied to explosive developments on the U.S. political scene that had created a more aggressive and independent U.S. press. In the late 1960s, public opinion had turned sharply against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. The U.S. press grew disenchanted with a military and political establishment that provided reporters with misinformation or no information at all. On the heels of a prolonged U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, the Watergate scandal exploded in the early 1970s. As a result, America’s press had a mandate as never before to peer behind closed doors and ferret out the truth for its audience. All public figures, not just political and military leaders, came under this new media microscope. A corollary effect of the disillusionments of Vietnam and Watergate was the extent to which the celebrity gossip industry also gained greater leverage and freedom to peer into the lives of their subjects.

In August 1976, *Esquire* devoted a special section to “Gossip so hot we had to seal the pages.” According to this report, gossip was “the leading growth industry in the land and is probably responsible for a hefty chunk of the economic recovery.”<sup>28</sup> The considerable success of *People* magazine no doubt fueled such comments. In May 1985, Parsons and Hopper, “The Warrior Queens of Gossip,” were the subject of a *People* profile in conjunction with the release of a television movie, “Malice in Wonderland,”

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Look how far you’ve read already!” *Esquire*, August 1976, p. 51.

based on their lives and careers. *People* pronounced, "In their heyday, . . . Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper scared everybody in Hollywood. . . . Hollywood quaked because it chose to. . . . [T]hey all—stars and bosses—handed the two women heapings of power on a silver platter."<sup>29</sup> Even in the pages of a magazine deeply indebted to their work, Parsons and Hopper were not credited as the architects of their own careers. It is a measure of the ubiquity of celebrity culture in the late-twentieth-century United States that they could not be seen clearly as the pioneers that they were. There had never been anyone like them before Parsons began her career in 1915 but seventy years later a thriving celebrity gossip industry now had many foot soldiers and needed no four-star generals to direct the campaign.

When asked by moderator Edward R. Murrow on a 1959 political roundtable show if gossip reporting invaded individual privacy, Hopper responded, "The people of the theater and the people of the motion pictures, everything they do is news and I put gossip in the same category as news." In 1961, Parsons simply wrote, "Hollywood is news." How pleased they might be to learn that in the twenty-first century these statements would largely be accepted as the unvarnished truth.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Richard Lemon, "The Warrior Queens of Gossip," *People*, May 13, 1985, p. 133, LP bio files.

<sup>30</sup> "Small World," CBS television broadcast, December 6, 1959, Museum of Television and Radio, New York; Parsons, *Tell It*, 7.

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Listed here are the manuscripts and writings that have been of direct use in the preparation of this dissertation. This bibliography is by no means a complete record of all the works and sources consulted over the length of the project. I offer it as a convenience for those who wish to pursue further study on this topic.

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