



The Production Code and Impact on the Film Industry

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Abstract. The goal in this paper is to demonstrate that had the relevant authorities delayed affecting the production code by a few more years, the planned boycotts by the Catholic Legion of Decency, some sections of Protestant fraternity and women's groups against films deemed immoral would have sunk the entire American film industry thanks to unprecedented dips in profits.

Keywords: The Production Code · Film industry · Censorship

1 Introduction

Popularly known as the Hay's Code and named after Will, H. Hays, the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America beginning 1922 to 1945, the role of the Production Code was to determine acceptable and unacceptable content in motion pictures for the United States public audience viewership (Chung 87). The Production Code was adopted in 1930, and Hay began enforcing it in 1934. Hay appointed Joseph Breen to be the administrator of the Code and implement it in Hollywood. Different factors such as the decline of morality and social pressure surrounded the administration of this code. Additionally, it played a vital role in salvaging the film industry from unprecedented dips in profits. The following paper evaluates how the timely action by the relevant authorities to embrace the Production Code saved the American Film Industry by understanding its various dimensions. The goal in this paper is to demonstrate that had the relevant authorities delayed affecting the production code by a few more years, the planned boycotts by the Catholic Legion of Decency, some sections of Protestant fraternity and women's groups against films deemed immoral would have sunk the entire American film industry thanks to unprecedented dips in profits.

The Great Depression had a significant impact on the film-making industry in the United States. The Great Depression was the worst economic downturn in the history of the industrialized world, lasting from the stock market crash. The consequential economic disaster that occurred during that time due to the 1929 stock market crash caused a change in American values and beliefs in multiple dimensions worsened Hollywood (Krutnik 21). There arose an increasingly jaded attitude from the empty reassurances from politicians in the early years of the depression. Change in the attitudes of patrons was a reflection of the cynicism and a challenge of traditional beliefs. Another factor

that played a role was the increasing political controversy in Hollywood. There was a rising complexity of the moral climate that emerged in the industry in 1931 (Reyes 16). There was increasing freedom, and films portrayed things that were controversial and scandalous. The majority of Americans concluded that the crash in the stock market was the underlying primary cause of the excesses from the previous decade. The depression created room for extensive scandals ranging from rape, drug abuse, and murder in the reality.

2 Scandals in Hollywood

There are serious scandals that happened in Hollywood, which lead to resistance and tension. One of the scandals was Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle. There was an increasing temperature regarding the moral decline in Hollywood. In 1921, comedian Fatty Arbuckle received rape and murder accusations. The information seems to show that he raped and murdered a young actress. O'Brien identified this to be possibly the first significant scandal (O'Brien, 13). Information reveals that the comedian was at a party with the comedian (Virginia Rappe), and the two ended up in a hotel bedroom together. The guests heard screaming from the room and rushed there, finding the actress in anguish. She died a few days later from a ruptured bladder. Rappe's friend accused Arbuckle of raping the actress and accidentally killing her. Instead of receiving a first-degree murder accusation, he received manslaughter charges but was cleared after three trials because there is no evidence of rape and Arbuckle was regarded by those who knew him closely as a good-natured man who was shy around women.

Walt Disney's anti-Semitism is another scandal presented during the pre-Production Code period. According to Richards, Walt Disney received accusations of being anti-Semitic (29). One demonstration of this behavior was in 1938 when he invited a Nazi propagandist filmmaker (Leni Riefenstahl) to his studio following Kristallnacht. Also identified as *The Night of The Broken Glass*, Kristallnacht was a Nazi government campaign that led to the burning of synagogues, smashing of Jewish shops' windows, and murder of Jews by the Nazi youths across Germany. Thus, there was a level of evidence demonstrating that Walt Disney was an anti-Semite, and the American population was boycotting and criticizing such behavior. The meeting with Riefenstahl only showed an agreement point, which portrayed a negative image of him.

Other scandals included the murder of director William Desmond Taylor, who was found on 1st February 1922. Lester (108) explains that the murder remains a code case. Another scandal was Wallace Reid, who died due to a drug overdose caused by his addiction to morphine. Another one concerned actress Mary Pickford, an American actor who got a quickie divorce to marry dashing matinee idol Douglas Fairbanks (Dixon & Foster 202). The unnatural death of actors and directors illustrates the moral corruption in Hollywood. Scandals, the use of drugs, and murder are morally unacceptable. It is necessary for taking actions that reduce and eliminate those problems before the negative impact continue to grow.

3 The National Legion of Decency

Also identified as the Catholic Legion of Decency, the National Legion of Decency foundation was in the 1930s, and the founder was Archbishop John T. Nicholas of Cincinnati. The foundation started as an organization with the principal objective of selecting and identifying the motion pictures that the Catholic audience could view based on their objectionability (Biesen 35). Catholic members were supposed to pledge that they would patronize only the non-offensive motion pictures. These were supposed to restrain from offending the decency and morality of Christianity. There was significant support of the concept, which extended to other Christian churches. Some of the other churches eventually embraced this concept.

The impact that the condemnation by Legion would have caused was extreme on the film industry. During that time, the population of staunch Catholics was approximately twenty million. There was also an addition of the protestant allies who saw this to be an ideal approach towards ensuring the followers viewed the right content. The effect was that most of these members would avoid viewing the screening of these films. Therefore, the Production Code presented a significant impact because it increased the trust in the content that viewers would receive.

4 Content Examples that Led to the Resistance Towards Hollywood

The Miracle Woman is one of those pieces of content that created concern about the content presented to the audience. The movie was starred Barbara Stanwyck and was directed by Frank Capra. A part of this film demonstrated a high extent of religious hypocrisy in the spiritual field (Brook 112). There were more issues presented in Hollywood, eventually resulting in the movement against the industry. The film showed Stanwyck, who acts as the preacher's daughter engaging in some inappropriate behaviors. It presents that she became disillusioned because of her father's death. Additionally, the film demonstrates that Stanwyck's father received ill-treatment from his church during his dying days. One thing presented in the movie is that Stanwyck grew up being skeptical about religion. Therefore, she conspires with a con man and begins performing fake miracles for financial gain. They pretend that they are evangelists so that they can take the donations from gullible believers. Scenes like performing miracles for profit completely against church doctrines. Actions like this will be seen as unfaithful and shouldn't appear on the screen. It's dangerous that there is a possibility some people will imitate immoral behavior. No doubt church authority will ban movies with a theme like *The Miracle Woman*.

Dance, Fools, Dance is another film that creates much tension in the public. People complained about this production that featured 1920s flappers because of excessive lucid party scenes played. The film involved two siblings, Bonnie Jordan and her brother Rodney, whose lives change when their father dies from a heart attack after losing his whole fortune through a crash in the stock market. Bonnie opts for a man's job, where she ends up as a cub reporter for a newspaper. On the other hand, Rodney gets absorbed into a beer-running gang, but things begin to heighten for him quickly. In one incident, Rodney's gang guns down another group, and he is the driver of the getaway car, and he is terrified

about the situation. The scene of murder and gun shooting is considered dangerous and inappropriate to be shown. The tendency of atmosphere should be harmonious and peaceful. The primary goal of the film industry is for entertainment and to ease tension instead of creating more violence and agitation.

A journalist named Bert Scranton, Bonnie's colleague, found out much information about what happened. The gang's leader called Jake Luva, orders Rodney to kill the journalist. Rodney was reluctant, but Luva threatened him, leaving him without another choice. Following the murder of her colleague, Bonnie receives the task of investigating the case. He infiltrates Bert Scranton's club as a dancer only to learn that the murderer is her brother. Bert catches her on the act and wants to kill her, but Rodney arrives in time, and a shootout occurs. Bert, Rodney, and Bert's henchman die. Bonnie reports everything that she found out to the paper, including her brother's role. She leaves her job role and meets an old from, whom she kisses. The kissing sceneries before marriage would have offended religious people and were against religious principles. The shooting was also a demonstration of violence, while the robbery was against the church's moral teachings. The rottenness demonstrated in this movie is one that negatively affects the character in society.

5 Social Pressure on the Film Industry and the Planned Boycotts

After the negative impacts presented in the music industries, different organizations, and denominations, the viewership of Hollywood began declining (Dassanowsky 98). The diverse movements against the industry, especially religious and different feminist movements, significantly affected the sales. Dassanowsky further elaborates that even without sounds, there was a powerful portrayal of sexual and violent scenes, which caused an uproar from American moral guardians against the content presented. Consequently, the film industry executives saw it necessary to deliver strict guidelines that would salvage it. The initiatives resulted in the formation of the Production Code. According to Harrison's Report, Harrison provides some suggestions for exhibitors on the films best suited to attract and satisfy the audience. He also incorporates with the Chicago Legion of Decency to classify film into different categories. Class A to C demonstrates films that are recommended to immoral style.

6 Creating Policies that Help to Censor the Film Production

Following all the tension experienced in the film industry, the Production Code came into action. Its formation was an attempt to introduce full censorship in the United States by laying down extensive guidelines that would lead film producers in the content they presented to the public. The underlying concept in this code was that if motion pictures present stories that will affect lives for the better, they can become the most powerful force for the improvement of mankind (Gilbert 10). The presentation showed that the films presented in the industry failed to attain the lofty objective they were supposed to deliver.

Three primary principles guided the Production Code. The first outlined that no picture was to be produced that would be lower than its audience's moral principal

levels. Therefore, no production was allowed to throw out the audience's sympathy to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin. The second principle was that the productions should be undertaken based on the right standard of life. These should be subject only to the needs of drama and entertainment. The final principle was that there should be no ridiculing of law, whether natural or human nor should sympathy be created for its violation.

There were various components and headings considered in the delivery of the three principles, including Crimes Against the Law, Sex, Vulgarity, Obscenity, Profanity, Costume, Dances (suggestive movements), Religion, Locations (the bedroom), National Feelings, Titles and Repellent Subjects (extremely graphic violence) (Lockhart 46). The Code directly influenced the content of the majority of American films from 1930 to 1966, when the Motion Picture Association of America introduced a rating system along with the BBFC's classification certificates.

7 Conclusion

This paper presented the extensive impact that religion can give in ensuring morality in society. It demonstrates the effects through the Hollywood sector that almost sunk due to the rule passed on the content allowed for viewership of Catholic followers. It led to the formation of the Production Code, which outlined the producers' content to viewers. The absence of this Code would possibly have witnessed a fall of the industry.

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