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The Domestic Motion Picture Work of the Office of War Information

CEDRIC LARSON

CEDRIC LARSON, co-author of *Words That Won the War*, the story of the First World War's Creel Committee on Public Information, is now assembling material for a book on the Office of War Information.

PERHAPS no phase of the work of the Office of War Information is of greater significance than its work in the realm of motion pictures. To appreciate properly the contribution of the Bureau of Motion Pictures, some knowledge of the history and organization of the Office of War Information as a whole is necessary.¹

When the late President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9182, on June 13, 1942, establishing the Office of War Information, he declared that the Director should, among other functions and duties:

“Formulate and carry out, through the use of press, radio, motion picture, and other facilities, information programs designed to facilitate the development of an informed and intelligent understanding, at home and abroad, of the status and progress of the war effort and of the war policies, activities, and aims of the Government. . . .

“Review, clear, and approve all proposed radio and motion picture programs sponsored by Federal departments and agencies; and serve as the central point of clearance and contact for the radio broadcasting and motion picture industries, respectively, in their relationships with Federal departments and agencies concerning such Government programs.”²

As Director of the OWI, President Roosevelt named Elmer Davis, who had come prominently before the public eye as a CBS news analyst from 1939 to 1942 after having been a free-lance journalist over a period of fifteen years. The director did not have to start from scratch in pursuit of the mandate to create a world-wide anti-Axis propaganda offensive. The terms of the executive order provided the nucleus of an organization by amalgamating the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), the Office of Government Reports (OGR), the Division of Information of the Office for Emergency Management (OEM), and the Foreign Information Service of the Office of the Coördinator of Information, which was renamed the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). As it subsequently developed, the psychological warfare work of the OSS became the foundation of the OWI Overseas Branch. The other organizations were taken over and redistributed in the various sections of the Domestic Branch.

The Office of Government Reports, which had been set up as an administrative unit in the Executive Office of the President in July, 1939, consisted of four divisions: the Division of Press Intelligence (which harked back to the NRA), maintained as a clipping and news-digest service for government offi-

¹ The writer wishes to thank Elmer Davis, wartime Director of OWI, for advice and suggestions in completing this research.

² *Federal Register*, VII, No. 117 (1942), pp. 4468-4469.

cial and members of Congress; the United States Information Service (established in 1934), a central clearing house to which the general public could write for governmental information; the Division of Field Operations, with representatives in each State whose duty it was to foster cooperation between federal field services and to form a link between federal and state officials; and finally, the Administrative Division.

The Office of Facts and Figures, which Mr. Davis likewise inherited, had been established by executive order in October, 1941, and had a personnel of about four hundred, organized under assistant directors in four bureaus—Intelligence, Liaison, Operations, and Production. The Intelligence Bureau was taken over virtually intact by the OWI and put under the domestic director. The Bureau of Operations served as a liaison agency between the government and the radio industry; the Bureau of Production had planned and disseminated material and programs that were sponsored by the OFF itself; the Liaison Bureau had specialized in relations with other media of public information.

The Division of Information in the Office of Emergency Management, originating from President Roosevelt's letter to Wayne Coy in February, 1941, had served the war establishments in much the same manner as the information services of the "old-line" departments. Robert Horton, later information director for OPA, headed this division.

Even today not much information is available on the work of the Office of the Coördinator of Information (later OSS). Its activities were classified

as secret. The Foreign Information Service, under Deputy Coördinator Robert E. Sherwood, constituted its propaganda section, and its annual budgetary expenditures were almost twenty millions a year. When the office was incorporated into the OWI, Mr. Sherwood, well-known author and playwright, was named Overseas Director of OWI.

Looking back at these heterogeneous agencies and bureaus that formed the nucleus of the OWI, Elmer Davis says: "The Domestic Branch of OWI was a cocktail shaken up out of three very dissimilar ingredients—predecessor organizations which differed widely in their objectives as well as their techniques. It took almost a year, until June, 1943, to create a blend that was reasonably satisfactory to the executives of the agency; and about the time that this was accomplished, Congress poured most of the contents of the shaker down the drain."³

The powers of the director, in the language of the executive order, were considerable, at least potentially. Section 5 of the order read: "The Director is authorized to issue such directives concerning war information as he may deem necessary or appropriate to carry out the purposes of this Order, and such directives shall be binding upon the several Federal departments and agencies. He may establish by regulation the types and classes of informational programs and releases which shall require clearance and approval by his office prior to dissemination." To implement this broad grant of power, Section 7 provided that "the several departments and agencies of the Government shall make available to the

³ Elmer Davis, *Report to the President*. (MS.)

Director, upon his request, such information and data as may be necessary to the performance of his functions and duties." No doubt the director was held to be the arbiter of what constituted "necessity" in a specific case. Mr. Davis construed the powers bestowed upon him quite conservatively, feeling that "a high degree of decentralization" was a better policy. Perhaps this course was well advised, for the OWI from first to last had to defend itself against attacks from both Capitol Hill and the fourth estate generally.

At the time of the merger of agencies into the OWI, Lowell Mellett was director of the OGR. He had also been designated Coördinator of Government Films by presidential letter in December, 1941, and acted as liaison officer between the government and the motion picture industry. The appointment had been made in direct response to the formal request of the Hollywood producers immediately after Pearl Harbor that the President designate one federal agency to which the industry could make its requests known and offer assistance in the war effort. It would seem natural that Mr. Davis should name Mr. Mellett Chief of the Motion Picture Bureau, thus enabling him to continue much of the work formerly delegated to him as Coördinator of Government Films. Heading the bureau, Mr. Mellett served without compensation as one of the President's administrative assistants.

The Bureau of Motion Pictures, into which the film activities of the OGR and the OEM were consolidated, was an arm of the Domestic Branch of the OWI. The directive setting up the bureau stipulated that it ". . . will serve as the central point of contact between

the motion picture industry, theatrical and nontheatrical, and . . . will produce motion pictures and will review and approve all proposals for the production and distribution of motion pictures by Federal departments and agencies." The Overseas Branch of the OWI had its own Bureau of Overseas Motion Pictures, directed by Robert Riskin, Hollywood producer and writer. It was charged with responsibility for all film materials destined for nations outside the Western Hemisphere, including its own sizable and varied output.

From the hearings before the subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives, held in May, 1943, we learn quite a bit about the motion picture work of the OWI.⁴ The domestic operations of the Motion Picture Bureau for 1942-1943 had entailed the services of 142 persons, at a total cost of \$1,346,405. Now the Bureau was asking for \$1,222,904 for the ensuing fiscal year. During its first year the OWI as a whole cost the taxpayers about \$37,000,000. Of that sum, about \$9,500,000 was spent on its total domestic informational activities.

Organizationally the Motion Picture Bureau was composed of five divisions. It may be helpful at this point to list the divisions and their component sections:

Office of the Chief: Office of the Associate Chief; Research, Reports and Information Division.

Nontheatrical Division: Office of Divi-

⁴ *National War Agencies Appropriation Bill for 1944, Hearings before Subcommittee of Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, 78th Cong., 1st Sess., Part I (Washington, 1943), pp. 922-923. Hereafter cited as 1944 Appropriation Hearings.*

sion Chief; Film Distribution Section; Film Register Section; Film Utilization Section—Departmental; Film Utilization Section—Field.

Coördination Division: Office of Division Chief; Creative Section; Film Stock Control Section.

Newsreel Division.

Motion Picture Industry Liaison (field): Office of Assistant Chief; Film Analysis Section; Liaison Section.

Production Division (field): Office of Division Chief; Production Manager; Creative Section; Technical Section; Photographic Section.

The Subcommittee on Appropriations was told that the activities of the bureau were threefold: (1) original creation and production of war films; (2) coördinating the motion picture activities of other government agencies; and (3) liaison with the motion picture industry in order to obtain the greatest possible distribution of government war films and to assist the industry in making its own films significant to the prosecution of the war.

Of the 142 regular employees of the bureau, almost 60 during the year 1942–1943 were allocated to the Production Division, which, as was shown at the hearings, was to plan, write, and produce films on important war topics for distribution both through commercial theaters and through nontheatrical channels such as colleges, civic and business groups, city and county school systems, commercial libraries, and local defense councils. It also produced special films for the information campaigns of other government agencies, such as the drives of the War Manpower Commission in critical labor areas, of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps for recruitment of specialists, and of the War Production Board for conservation of materials of all types.

The Coördination Division acted as a clearing house for the scripts of other government agencies, determining their treatment and priority, and advised the War Production Board on the allocation of film stock for the use of civilian government departments. The Newsreel Division coöperated with the commercial newsreel companies by preparing special footage which was used by the newsreels with their own editorial treatment.

The Nontheatrical Division carried out a unique project in mobilizing a majority of the estimated 20,000 16-mm. sound projectors in the country for the showing of war films. Each month four or five new films were issued through this medium. As early as May, 1943, there were 37 one- and two-reel subjects totaling almost 13,000 prints in the hands of 185 distributors. The local audiences reached by these films were thought to number more than 5,000,000 persons a month.

Through the Motion Picture Industry Liaison much assistance was rendered to the studios in obtaining accurate factual information for films touching directly or indirectly on the war, and many war-information films were produced and distributed by the industry without cost to the government. As an integral part of its wartime program the motion picture industry set up a War Activities Committee, which was composed of producers, distributors, exhibitors, and theater owners. The facilities of the 16,000 theaters represented by the exhibitors and theater owners in the committee were pledged for the exhibition of war information films. A government film of one reel or less was released through these theaters every other week to an

estimated audience of 90,000,000 persons.

The motion picture industry through individual companies produced the *America Speaks* series, released through the same 16,000 theaters. The series was composed of 26 short subjects a year on war themes which alternated in the theaters from week to week with the war-information short subjects released by the OWI. The schedule for both Hollywood-produced and OWI-produced films was arranged by the War Activities Committee. During the spring of 1943 it was felt that schedules calling for one war film a week on the screens, in addition to the short special treatments necessary to bringing timely war information to the people, "represent about the maximum demand which the Government should make on public screen time."⁵

The Bureau of Motion Pictures presented its releases to the War Activities Committee, which maintained a reviewing group representing its membership. If the reviewing group accepted the picture, prints were made and supplied to one of the major companies for dissemination to all the pledged theaters. In general, the films that went to the War Activities Committee were war-information subjects made primarily by the bureau in cooperation with the various agencies that had a vital war-information mission to accomplish.

The theaters ran without charge the war-information films issued by the government, which paid only for the cost of making the prints. The studios, in turn, made the *America Speaks* series without any cost whatsoever to the government; both the cost of the prints and the production expenses were borne by the industry.

The OWI "short subject" releases given booking in 1942-1943 included such titles as *Salvage, Manpower, Japanese Relocation, Fuel Conservation, Colleges at War, Paratroops, Farmer at War, Food for Fighters, Doctors at War, and A Message from Malta*. In the same period three trailers released by the OWI were incorporated into regular newsreel prints for national distribution: *Free Labor Will Win, Give Us a Hand* (a call for technicians), and *Four Rules on Rubber* (how motorists can help conserve rubber).

Another category of films released by the OWI Bureau were "regional specials." Some of these were *Women Wanted* (a recruiting film aimed at enlisting women for war work), *A Message from a Marine* (an appeal to workers not in war industries to avail themselves of the opportunities for war-work training), *Get a War Job* (how civilian skills could be transferred to war work), and *Send Your Tin Cans to War* (a local tin can salvage campaign).

A fourth type of OWI "specials" was footage of factual war information prepared by the Bureau of Motion Pictures for use by newsreel companies. Editors of newsreels were free to take the footage or leave it. When it was used, the editors were free to give the subject independent editorial treatment. Typical subjects in this category included: *Don't Travel, Lend-Lease Report, Farm Manpower, Point Rationing, Meat Rationing, Nurse Recruiting, and Rent Control*.

In its first year, the bureau produced and released one feature-length film, entitled *The World at War*. It was a

⁵ 1944 *Appropriation Hearings, Part I*, pp. 923-924.

pictorial history of the period from 1931 to June, 1942, compiled from newsreels, government films, and film sources of the allied nations and enemy countries.

The industry produced several films for the Bureau of Motion Pictures by contract, which were released through the War Activities Committee. Among these was *The Air-Raid Warden*, produced by Walt Disney Productions for the Treasury Department in the interest of facilitating income-tax collection. Other Hollywood productions for national distribution were contributed by the War Activities Committee itself. These included *Point Rationing of Food* (prepared by the Screen Cartoonists Guild, with a musical score contributed by Warner Brothers) and *Out of the Frying Pan into the Firing Line* (contributed by a trade association to the War Production Board in the interest of the drive to collect fats and greases).

A great deal of effective war work was done on the screen through the OWI's distribution of films that brought the story of the battle front vividly to the people at home. Some of the best of such films were *Battle of Midway* (two reels), jointly photographed by the OSS and the Navy Department, a technicolor report of the battle of Midway; *At the Front* (four reels), an Army Air Forces production, showing the training of officer candidates by the Army Air Forces at the headquarters of the Technical Training Command; and *Prelude to War* (six reels), from the Special Services Division of the War Department, an orientation film for Army personnel produced as one of a series on "why we fight."

Somewhat fuller reference to the industry's nationally famous series, *America Speaks*, is in order here. The films in the series that seemed especially successful included *Mr. Blabbermouth*, a two-reel MGM production stressing the harmfulness of careless talk in wartime; *Letter from Bataan*, a Paramount film highlighting the need for conserving food and materials; *We Refuse to Die*, a two-reel Paramount subject on the epic of Lidice; *Everybody's War*, a 20th Century-Fox one-reel release showing the contribution of one small American city to the war; *Arsenal of Might*, a one-reel Universal release about America's industrial effort; *Plan for Destruction*, MGM's two-reel reënactment, utilizing original German footage, of Haushofer's plan for conquest in geopolitics; *Oil Is Blood*, one reel, produced by RKO-Pathé Pictures, on the importance of oil in war production; and *Men Working Together*, Columbia Pictures' one-reeler depicting a war poster coming to life, showing that men in the fighting services work together with men on the production line.

A specific illustration of how war information was brought to the public through films may be interesting. *Salvage*, a theatrically released picture produced by the OWI, is typical of the general process. First, the War Production Board came to the Bureau of Motion Pictures and, in effect, said: "We must do a better job of salvaging materials than we are now doing. We want to show the American people through the theaters what can be salvaged, what should be salvaged, and how it can be done." On the basis of the information available to the bureau from the WPB, a plan for the content of the picture was made. The next step was to take a

camera crew into the field to shoot salvage operations, emphasizing, among other things, how salvage materials were being utilized in actual war work. The completed picture was shown all over the country and featured at many salvage rallies.⁶

Through careful budgeting, the actual cost of the theatrical films of the OWI was a little more than \$4,000 a reel; the average cost of a reel of the nontheatrical (16-mm.) films was a little more than \$2,000. The OWI expressed gratification at this low-cost record.⁷

The press comment on the releases of the OWI were uniformly favorable. Following are samples of the comment⁸ on *Salvage*:

"It's a 'must.' The subject is forceful in its simplicity and packs a vital message to the Nation as a whole."—*Film Daily*.

"It is a subject that should be shown in all theaters."—*Motion Picture Herald*.

"The exhibition of *Salvage* in every American theater should be a 'must' for this month."—*Motion Picture Daily*.

"Both *Salvage* and *Manpower*, first on the schedule set by Office of War Information Film Chief Lowell Mellett, are dramatic because what they have to say is vital to our safety. The fact that Donald Nelson doubles as a forceful and persuasive commentator helps *Salvage* punch home the urgency of the Nation's need for scrap—iron, tin, rubber, and fats."—*Newsweek*.

Many people in the motion picture industry had feared that some form of editorial censorship would creep into the OWI through the Bureau of Motion Pictures. However, the bureau chief attempted to clarify the situation

and set the trade at rest on this score in two letters addressed to the heads of the motion picture studios. Mr. Mellett's communication of December 9, 1942, read in part as follows.

"Considerable confusion seems to exist among motion-picture producers regarding Government channels. This letter is an effort to clear up this confusion. . . .

"All contacts with any Government agency (including the armed forces) regarding motion pictures should be cleared through this Bureau. . . .

"For the benefit of both your studio and the Office of War Information it would be advisable to establish a routine procedure whereby our Hollywood office would receive copies of studio treatments or synopses of all stories which you contemplate producing and of the finished scripts. This will enable us to make suggestions as to the war content of motion pictures at a stage when it is easy and inexpensive to make any changes which might be recommended. We should like also to set up as a routine procedure an arrangement whereby our Hollywood office might view all pictures in the long cut. While this is rather late in the operation to introduce any new matter it would make it possible for us to recommend the deletion of any material which might be harmful to the war effort.

"*Contact with foreign governments.* Questions involving relations and policies with foreign governments should be cleared through the Hollywood office also. The Office of War Information

⁶ *1944 Appropriation Hearings*, Part I, p. 931.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 932.

⁸ Quoted in *1944 Appropriation Hearings*, Part I, p. 940. Several pages of typical press comments on OWI films are given.

is in contact with every friendly and neutral foreign government. Where technical advice is needed, this office will undertake to find a representative of a foreign government who is qualified to render such assistance. . . .

"*Censorship*. This office has no authority in regard to censorship for foreign export. . . ."⁹

About six months later, in May, 1943, Mr. Mellett amplified certain aspects of the first letter of policy:

"The letter of December 9, 1942, was completely in line with the voluntary coöperation between the motion picture industry and the Government in all matters affecting the war effort. The coöperation was initiated by the industry and there never has been any disposition on the part of this office to consider it anything more than a free and voluntary undertaking of the industry. We have consistently sought to keep our staff engaged in this work as small as possible and the letter of December 9 was designed to enable this small staff to operate with maximum efficiency. . . .

"Our reviewers in Hollywood read scripts when submitted and present to the producers immediately such views as result and offer such suggestions as may seem to be of value. There is a clear understanding on the part of the producers that they are completely free to disregard any of our views or suggestions; that we have no authority enabling us to force our views upon them and have never desired any such authority. In effect our operation is largely one of keeping producers informed of wartime problems and conscious of possible implications of proposed pictures or details of pictures.

"There is nothing in any part of our operation that can possibly be construed as censorship."¹⁰

The Hollywood producers generally, however, were distrustful of Washington "bureaucrats" and felt that the OWI cramped their style. Perhaps the position of the motion picture industry was best put by producer Walter Wanger in an article published in the spring of 1943, and reprinted, in part, in the Congressional Record:

"Mr. Lowell Mellett of the Office of War Information created a tempest in a lens when he made two requests last December. First, Mr. Mellett wanted all motion pictures shown to him in the rough, or long, version, before cutting. These requests caused apprehension within the industry. Outside, editors generally took the position that a threat to freedom of speech in one medium affected all. That conclusion is logical, and sums the national mind. Censorship before utterance is abhorrent to Americans, who believe that autocracy can have no deadlier weapon than a blue pencil.

"Mr. Mellett explained that he did not desire censorship, that he was merely implementing advisory practices. In other words he was attempting to make certain that, in his view, the motion picture was being of maximum service to the war effort. His chief, Mr. Elmer Davis, taking note of expressed fears, deprecated that 'Hollywood is letting its imagination carry it away.'

"Hollywood is concerned about more than censorship. The OWI shows a growing desire to *write things into* scripts. Indeed, there is a mounting

⁹ *Ibid.*, Part I, p. 937.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Part I, pp. 937-938.

urge to dominate production. The officials moving in this direction are not equipped by any past relation to the motion picture industry."¹¹

Mr. Wanger went on to point out what he considered to be fallacies in the thinking of the Bureau of Motion Pictures of the OWI: (1) he charged that the OWI was entrusting the "full sweep of war power" to amateurs without experience in motion pictures; (2) he stated that the OWI seemed to feel the American people were "boobs" who needed "hammer-hammer propaganda," when actually they were bored by clumsy pictures. Mr. Wanger expressed surprise that "in a life-and-death struggle where psychological warfare is so important, our government can be so shortsighted as to sanction amateur dealing with a psychological weapon—the motion picture."¹²

Summing up his recommendations to the OWI in its relations with motion pictures, Mr. Wanger said: "Change, for the benefit of the results you want, from a take-over attitude to one of coöperation. You will find in your files, *from motion picture leaders*, suggestions for specific pictures far more powerful, toward the ends of victory and understanding, than any suggestions that have come to Hollywood from Washington. We really do know something about our business. We wish to make an even larger contribution to winning the war and achieving good will on earth than motion pictures already have made. The industry is not jealous of prerogatives, nor of personal standing; it has proved its willingness to waive profits in war-necessary film making. Give the industry the broad lines of policy, and leave the commit-

tees within the industry the task of producing results.

"The real issue at stake is the one thing of which the industry *is* jealous. You should share that concern: the unimpaired entertainment power of the American motion picture, which constitutes its great strength and which is absolutely indispensable if the medium is to be of round-the-world value after the war."¹³

The charge bandied about on Capitol Hill during the budget hearings in the spring of 1943 was that the Domestic Branch, including the Motion Picture Bureau, had been used for political ends by the administration, although forthright proof was nebulous. The budget of the film-making agency of the OWI was slashed from the \$1,300,000 that it had asked to about \$50,000, barely enough to maintain the office of the chief. Films in production were to be completed, but no new ones were to be launched.

The National Association of Visual Education Dealers wired Mr. Mellett their pledge to continue disseminating 16-mm. motion pictures. The War Activities Committee of the motion picture industry, no doubt sharing the relief of the producers over the curtailment of the Motion Picture Bureau, now had the field to itself, and indicated its intention to carry on and expand its film propagandea work in behalf of the war.

From the summer of 1943 onward,

¹¹ Walter Wanger, "OWI and Motion Pictures," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (1943), p. 100.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 103-107.

¹³ *Ibid.* Wanger's article has been cited in some detail because it mirrors accurately the official attitude of the film industry toward the OWI.

the Motion Picture Bureau of the OWI was only a shadow of its former self. Today, from the perspective of a troubled peace, it seems that the all but wiping out of domestic government film work when it had reached a moment of promise was shortsighted and hasty. However, it was the step ardently desired by the motion picture industry, since to that industry even a faint suggestion of censorship was anathema.

From the summer of 1943 on, the history of motion pictures in the OWI shifts largely to its Overseas Motion

Picture Bureau, but that is a long story in itself, with the whole world as its locale, and out of the scope of the present article.

With Mr. Mellett and his Bureau, the *bête noire* of the motion picture industry of 1942-1943, safely shorn of power by the congressional economy ax, the Hollywood producers were left free to handle propaganda on the silver screen unhampered by officialdom in Washington. To their credit it must be said that they turned in a good job by and large.