**Censorship**

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When the film industry transitioned from silent films to producing talking films, it also led to a shift in the content that was released for public viewing in theaters. It was amidst rising concerns about the alleged profanity in talking films that first led to the introduction of rules and a code of conduct that had to be followed by filmmakers. Strict censorship in films reached its zenith with the Production Code Administration (PCA) era. This organization came into being precisely because the social landscape of that era did not permit the common release of ‘profane’ content. This social landscape changed with time. The rigidity in the PCA code (the Hays Code) and the disinclination of the members of the Legion to adapt to the changing outlook of film viewing was one of the major reasons.

The film industry is, like any industry, essentially dependent on what its consumers want to see. Despite having an authoritative say in what content Hollywood films could let the public see, the Production Code Administration (PCA) answered to moneymen. The Legion depended on and was directly accountable to the board of directors at Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). (Doherty, 1999) Having a profit-driven approach especially meant that if profane films started to sell, censorship would automatically lose its iron grip on the content that was released in films. The PCA completely losing its authority in the 1960s also happened because of films violating the Code or seeking exemptions and still succeeding in selling the film with impressive box office returns. The earliest and most significant example of this happening was “Gone with the Wind”. (Stokes, 2007) Despite the Hays Code strictly prohibiting the use of word ‘damn’, Clark Gable said it in the released version when producer David Selznick successfully managed to obtain an exemption from the code. This film is still one of the highest grossing films ever and went on to win several prestigious awards. The downfall of PCA authority had begun with the success of Gone with the Wind. Following this controversy, new blood within the PCA tried to bring reforms that were acceptable to the Legion but would also provide filmmakers with the freedom that they had proven was the need of the day. The success of “The Blue Moon” and “The French Line” also proved this point since both these films had been released without being approved by the PCA. It was the release of “Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf” and its unafraid profanity in 1966 that sealed the deal for the end of PCA. (Simmons, 1997) This is, therefore, a two-pronged argument. The PCA lost its place in film censorship because of the success of several films that openly violated its code. This success meant that the social climate had changed to be more accepting of what was considered immoral in the 1930s when the code was written. It also meant that the profit garnered from alleged profanity was more important to the bankers funding PCA than the morality of it.

Another valid reason for the end of PCA oversight was how the courts of the country shaped the legal discourse around film censorship. In 1915, after Mutual Film Corp. had refused to submit their films for review, the situation turned into a court case that reached the Supreme Court. The court unanimously decided to rule that the First Amendment of the American Constitution did not cover or protect motion pictures. The film industry and its producers were therefore left at the mercy of censoring organizations. (Milner, 2013) Another similarly impactful court case happened in 1952 when Joseph Burstyn took a case to the Supreme Court regarding his film called “II Miracolo” which had been deemed blasphemous by the Catholic Church. The court ruled that films were indeed a means of expression and were protected via the First Amendment. (Strub, 2009) Therefore, a change in the social atmosphere had not only triggered capitalist patrons to withdraw their support from film censorship but had also succeeded in deterring the legal justice system from their support of a Judeo-Christian morality in films. All of these eventually resulted in the transition of film regulation from direct censorship under PCA to a friendlier ratings system under Code and Ratings Administration (CARA) in 1968.

The ratings system under PCA was based on a standardized method termed ABC. A-rated films were suited for viewing by audiences while B-rated films were ‘morally objectionable’. C-rated films were condemned. There was I to IV within the ABC ratings with A-I being the films suitable for all audiences and A-IV being only for adults. The rating system today has a G rating when the film is suitable for general audience. The PG rating prescribes parental guidance. A PG-13 rating does not bring any restrictions but only brings warnings. It simply informs parents that the film contains more violence or offensive material than the PG films. R-rated films were restricted, and children could not watch without a guardian present. X-rated films or NC-17 films are the ones that only adults are allowed to watch. (Jenkins, 2005)

The internal censorship system that operated under PCA was famously termed by filmmakers as ‘self-regulation’. It was called so because before the PCA was formed, filmmakers themselves resorted to asking religious authorities to help formulate a set of rules which the filmmakers had to follow at all costs. Only the Catholic Church stepped forward to assist in the formation of this code which henceforth started to reflect the morality of Catholicism. Religious supremacy was increasingly paramount in those days and the Legion grew in power precisely because they presumed to be a representation of the ‘silent and sane’ majority of people. The Catholic Legion of Decency was headed by archbishops and it openly formulated and implemented the ABC ratings system and also engineered the appointment of the head of PCA. (Black, 2013) This system of internal regulation in Hollywood during the years 1934-1968 therefore happened with an overwhelming influence of the Catholic Church. This system of ratings can be identified to be in stark contrast with the ratings system under CARA. The biggest positive point of having the ratings system of today is not having such a suffocating religious shadow on the way films and cinema expresses art to its audiences. This then connects with another aspect of improvement in the CARA system. Under CARA, the ratings and the way films are monitored is highly flexible and continues to change and adapt to the current social mindset. The fact the PCA was so heavily influenced by the Catholic Church made it inflexible.

However, the CARA system of ratings also has its own flaws which cannot be ignored. CARA is a very secretive organization with members from within the filmmaking fraternity. Film production houses that control the creation and distribution of more than 95% of all the films in Hollywood also control the way they are rated. The same production houses also control almost all the media production and eventually its consumption. Such an undeniable hegemony of a few production houses over the entire ratings system puts a strain on the reliability of the system that is being put to use.

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