

The influence of popular culture and news media, 1917–33

In 1931, Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday* emphasised that Americans unprecedented attention to and participation in **popular culture** in the 1920s was a result of the disillusionment that followed the First World War. Within

over one million immigrants arrived in the USA annually. In 1929, it was only 150,000. Few criticised immigration restrictions, although Congressmen Fiorello La Guardia, who represented a poor district in New York City, pointed out that his dog had 'a distinguished family tree' but was still 'only a son of a bitch'. President Hoover thought La Guardia 'a little out of your class in presuming to criticize the President ... You should go back to where you belong and advise Mussolini on how to make good honest citizens in Italy. The Italians are predominantly [sic] our murderers and bootleggers ... Like a lot of the foreign spawn, you do not appreciate the country which supports and tolerates you.'

However, there were anomalies. Immigration from the Western hemisphere remained unlimited because Californian farmers wanted cheap Mexican labour to pick their crops. Mexican labourers were accustomed to living without running water and indoor plumbing, and their lifestyles, poverty, illiteracy, low-paid jobs, religion and race encouraged **Anglos** to treat them as inferior. Immigration from US possessions such as Puerto Rico and the Philippines was also unlimited. Hoover said he disliked 'undersized Latins' from Puerto Rico entering the USA.

- 2 A 1918 Immigration Act excluded immigrants who advocated revolution, assassination or the seizure of private property.
- 3 Amid talk of alien indigestion, the 1921 Emergency Immigration Act cut overall immigration to 350,000 and specifically aimed to decrease the number of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe.
- 4 The 1924 Johnson–Reed Immigration Act cut the total number of immigrants to 150,000 per annum. It totally excluded the Japanese, further reduced the number of South and East European immigrants, but allowed considerable numbers of Northern and Western Europeans to enter. Republican congressman Albert Johnson of Washington State, chief author of the Act, explained that while 'old' Americans were 'descended from generations of freemen bred to a knowledge of the principles and practice of self-government', the 'new' immigrants usually had no understanding of democracy and therefore threatened 'our cherished institutions'. President Coolidge said, 'America must be kept American ... Those who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America.'
- 5 Further immigration legislation in 1929 was designed to favour North European immigrants.

**Anglos** Hispanic term for white, English-speaking Americans of whatever ancestry.

**Popular culture** The culture of the masses as seen in their beliefs and the literature they read, the movies and television they watch, and the music to which they listen.

#### KEY TERMS

a decade,' he said, 'the radio and the movie nationalized American popular culture.' The phrase 'mass media' had entered the national vocabulary.

### The social impact of cinema

Movies were the most popular form of mass entertainment. By 1920, 50 million Americans were going to the movies each year – roughly half the population. By 1930, it was nearly 100 million. Young Americans were the keenest moviegoers of all.

In the early twentieth century, movies focused on social problems, but by the 1920s the big Hollywood studios such as Fox and Warner Brothers dominated moviemaking and focused more on fantasies of romance, consumerism and social harmony. Such themes appealed to those who sought escape from the recent war, flu pandemic, strikes and Red Scare.

A *New York Times* reporter noted in 1923 that what audiences see 'is partly a reflection of what they are. And what they are is no less influenced by what they see.' Cinema impacted upon society in several ways:

- 1 Americans traditionally had celebrities but in the 1920s celebrities became an obsession. They reminded other Americans that the American Dream was alive and well – impoverished individuals such as Italian immigrant Rudolph Valentino could gain fame and fortune as a movie star. Hollywood studio publicists and movie magazines ensured Americans learned all about their favourite movie stars and advertisers encouraged audiences to purchase the styles and objects the stars displayed. Movies thereby influenced fashion and consumerism.
- 2 Movies affirmed and shaped viewpoints about poverty, labour and gender. In 1918, **J. Edgar Hoover** assigned agents to monitor radicals who made movies about class conflict. Labour union records and newspapers frequently reported how such movies inspired workers to strike or join unions or radical movements. During the 1920s, more middle- and upper-class Americans went to the movies, so movies became more socially conservative: one labour weekly complained that movies constantly told moviegoers 'that you must be content to be poor and not kick about it'. Many movies demonstrated how women who favoured careers over homemaking ended up unhappy, for example, *This Freedom* (1924).
- 3 Many older Americans were convinced that movies corrupted younger Americans: on-screen, the 'flapper films' of stars such as Clara Bow featured economically independent women with liberated lifestyles; off-screen, the private lives of some Hollywood stars were scandalous. Middle- and working-class women in Middletown felt their daughters were increasingly 'forward' and that this owed much to the influence of the movies.

### KEY FIGURE

#### J. Edgar Hoover (1895–1972)

After a decade investigating political radicals for the federal government, he was appointed director of the newly established Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 1935. He targeted gangsters in the 1930s and Communists after the Second World War until his death in 1972. After that, his abuse of power in the hunting down of radicals was much criticised.



The belief that some movies were corrupting society encouraged the imposition of censorship. By 1926, 200 cities and eight states had film censorship boards. They halted the showing of films that showed strikes or criticised capitalism, such as W.S. Hart's *The Whistle* (1921). The state of Kansas limited screen kisses to a few seconds and banned scenes of drinking and smoking.

Moviemakers wanted to avoid trouble with the censors because banned showings meant fewer paying customers. In 1922, they organised the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, which monitored the voluntary code upon which they agreed. Will Hays was the chairman of the Association. In 1927, Hays suggested that there should be no nudity, perversion, miscegenation, childbirth scenes or children's sex organs in movies, and that great care should be taken over issues such as couples in bed, excessive or passionate kissing, and the depiction of crime and criminals. When over 30 American states threatened to censor movies, Hollywood feared the loss of box office takings and established the Hays Code in 1930. It forbade films that might 'lower the moral standards' of audiences. Hays even ordered Walt Disney to remove the udders from his cartoon cows.

However, church groups and women's organisations considered the Code ineffective. They blamed Hollywood for dramatic changes in American society – the rises in the divorce rate and juvenile delinquency and the rejection of traditional values by the young. Henry James Foreman's bestselling book *Our*

## Censorship

[Male, 20, white] Probably no other single factor influenced the spiritual side of my life as did the picture *The Ten Commandments*. I am Jewish but no one in our family is orthodox and we do not make much of religion in our home.

*influence of motion pictures.*

[Male, 21, white] I firmly believe that my going to college was the result of the

parents' supervision.

[Female, 16, white] Of course the movies made me want to rebel against my

such examples in the movies where would we get the idea of being 'hot'? have a great deal to do with present-day so-called 'wildness'. If we didn't see They didn't know anything else but being modest and sweet. I think the movies modest and bashful. They never saw [leading female sex symbol] Clara Bow ...

[Female, 16, white] No wonder girls of older days, before the movies, were so

Gilbert in a movie I feel disgusted, because I think they are carrying it too far.

[Female, 16, white] When I go to see [romantic leads] Greta Garbo and John

Accessed at [https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Blumer/1933/1933\\_10.html](https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/Blumer/1933/1933_10.html)

1929 autobiography by the 1915 movie he had seen a new our whole attitude that movies were responsible. He which boasted 7 million population had 3.9 hours daily. In 1927, one that went on radios, 50 million listeners claimed at least seventh round) As radios were the popular during the The impact of radio stations accepted advertising comedy Amos 'n' the toothpaste of consumerism advertised product Dream.

## SOURCE E

To what extent do these extracts suggest that young people's behaviour was greatly influenced by movies?



*Movie-Made Children* (1933) articulated the growing belief of moralists that the code was not working and Hollywood was corrupting American youth. In his 1929 autobiography, Father Daniel Lord wrote how he had been overwhelmed by the 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation* and had left the movie theatre convinced he had seen a new medium of communication sufficiently powerful to 'change our whole attitude toward life, civilization, and established customs'. Lord said that movies were 'entertainment for the multitudes' so they had a 'special moral responsibility'. He was influential in the establishment of the Legion of Decency, which boasted 7 million members by late 1933.

### The social impact of popular music and radio

America's first radio station was Station KDKA of Pittsburgh, established in 1920. Statistics demonstrate radio's capacity to make a dramatic social impact:

- By December 1922, there were 508 licensed radio stations.
- In 1920, one out of every 500 homes had a radio. By 1930, roughly half the population had radios and the average family kept its radio on an average of 3.9 hours daily.
- In 1927, one third of the money Americans spent on household furniture went on radios, which were usually housed in large, expensive cabinets.
- 50 million listened to the 1927 Dempsey–Tunney boxing match (reports claimed at least 10 radio listeners dropped dead from heart attacks in the seventh round).

As radios were the cheapest form of entertainment, they became even more popular during the Depression era of the 1930s – the 'Golden Age' of radio.

The impact of radio could be seen in several ways:

- 1 Radio stations needed to raise money to fund their programmes, so they accepted advertisements. In 1929, Pepsodent toothpaste sponsored the comedy *Amos 'n' Andy* on NBC. It attracted 40 million listeners and sales of the toothpaste rocketed. Radio advertisements were important promoters of consumerism. They convinced many Americans that purchasing the advertised product constituted progress towards attainment of the American Dream.
- 2 Radio could create celebrities, either alone or in conjunction with other media. Babe Ruth's spectacular baseball career coincided with the growth of radio, movies, tabloids and fan magazines. The media made Ruth a superstar.
- 3 The rise of national networks such as the National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), established in 1926, helped erode the insularity of local communities (especially in rural areas) and homogenise American popular culture. Radio also reinforced popular stereotypes – there were plenty of 'homemaker' shows and *Amos 'n' Andy* depicted black Americans as stupid.
- 4 Radio was a medium through which speakers could wield influence. From 1930, millions across the nation listened to 'Radio Priest' Father Charles



Coughlin's sermons every Sunday. His sermons increasingly expanded beyond religion. He attacked birth control, Communism, international bankers, the gold standard and Herbert Hoover. He advocated nationalisation of the banking system. When Franklin Roosevelt enlisted Coughlin in his 1932 presidential election campaign, Coughlin obliged with memorable phrases such as, 'The New Deal is Christ's deal ... Roosevelt or ruin'. Roosevelt was the master of radio broadcasting (see page 50) but his two predecessors initiated use of the medium. Radio was responsible for the rise of 'disintermediation' politics, through which a politician could speak directly to a nationwide audience to win votes and spread ideas.

5 Some Americans who hoped radio could be a force for intellectual uplift were dismayed when it proved primarily a vehicle for popular culture. The radio helped popularise sports such as baseball (see page 41) and the frequent broadcast of jazz music convinced some Americans that radio was a corrupting social force.

### Jazz

Jazz music was so popular that F. Scott Fitzgerald christened the 1920s the 'Jazz Age'. Jazz was a good illustration of music historian Keebee Garotalo's 2005 contention that, 'A compelling case can be made that popular culture – particularly popular music – has become the ideological battlefield upon which struggles for power, values, and identity take place.'

Jazz was introduced by black performers but popular with white performers and white audiences. However, jazz did little to improve race relations. During Prohibition, only white people were admitted to Harlem clubs such as the Cotton Club to hear top jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington. More significantly, socially conservative white Americans considered black music a corrupting force that reflected black sexuality and was likely to lead to drug-taking and promiscuity. They loathed the new dances with which jazz was closely associated, especially the Charleston with its uninhibited limb movements and the Black Bottom with its bottom slapping. As it was young Americans who particularly liked jazz, many older Americans grew anxious. An article in the *Ladies' Home Journal* asked, 'Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?' A *New York American* editorial described jazz as 'a pathological nerve-irritating, sex-exciting music'.

Clearly, popular culture and news media contributed to what constituted a considerable transformation of society and culture in the 1920s.

### Summary diagram

'Jazz' journal  
Tabloid new  
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CHANGE  
Got the vote  
More worked  
Housework  
Flappers and  
social freedom

Flappers and  
social freedom

### 'Jazz journalism' and minority newspapers

Tabloid newspapers sprang up after the First World War. They focused on photographs and were aimed at audiences with low-level reading skills, unlike traditional newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune*. Their 'Jazz journalism' focused upon bootleggers, speakeasies, movie stars, bathing beauties and scandalous tales of the rich and famous. Jazz journalism made celebrities out of gangsters such as Bonnie and Clyde.

The influence of newspapers was well illustrated by black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, which encouraged the Great Migration. Ethnic newspapers maintained a sense of cultural identity amongst minorities, although studies have suggested that most foreign language publications served to help immigrants to adjust to American life.

Summary diagram: Society and culture in change, 1917–33

Women		Popular culture and news	
CHANGE	UNCHANGED	GOOD INFLUENCE?	BAD INFLUENCE?
Got the vote	Less interested than men in politics	Movies – good and popular entertainment	Corrupted society so increased censorship
More worked	Lower pay, fewer opportunities, 'should stay at home'	Radio – popular and good entertainment	Purveyed popular culture (not intellectual) and consumerism
Housework less onerous	Not everyone could afford all the new appliances	Decreased regionalism and insularity	Homogenised culture – boring?
Flappers and more social freedom	Only a minority were flappers and still much conservatism		

