

Remaking Film Journalism in the Mid-1910s

Two images can serve as an entry point for understanding the transformation of the motion picture industry and its trade press during the mid-1910s. The first image gives us a quantitative view of the transformation; the second, a qualitative view.

The first image (fig. 6) graphs the median page length of a weekly issue of the three most prominent film trade papers of the period: *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Motography*.¹ Absent from the graph are five theatrical papers that during the 1910s increasingly covered film: *Billboard*, *Morning Telegraph*, *New York Clipper*, *New York Dramatic Mirror*, and *Variety*. Similarly, the weekly film review magazine *Wid's* and Chicago-based *Exhibitors Herald* (both founded in 1915) are not represented in the image. As far as quantitative measures go, however, the growth in the sheer number of trade papers was less significant than the growth in their size.² The graph quantifies what any number of silent film historians have felt in their hands and backs: *Moving Picture World* had grown heavy by 1916.

Even more dramatic than the growth of *Moving Picture World* was that of *Motion Picture News*—a publication that ballooned from a mere 36 pages per issue in 1912 to 84 pages in 1914 and to 151 pages in 1916. The statistical content analysis of these papers shows that the growth of news and editorial content in both *News* and *World* closely mirrored increases in advertising pages. The rise of the feature film contributed to this growth of the papers. Manufacturers and distributors needed to differentiate their programs of feature films and, in some cases, individual productions from those of the competition. The trade press offered feature manufacturers and distributors a vehicle to achieve this. The relatively small page growth of *Motography*, however, demonstrates that we cannot assume that the trade press

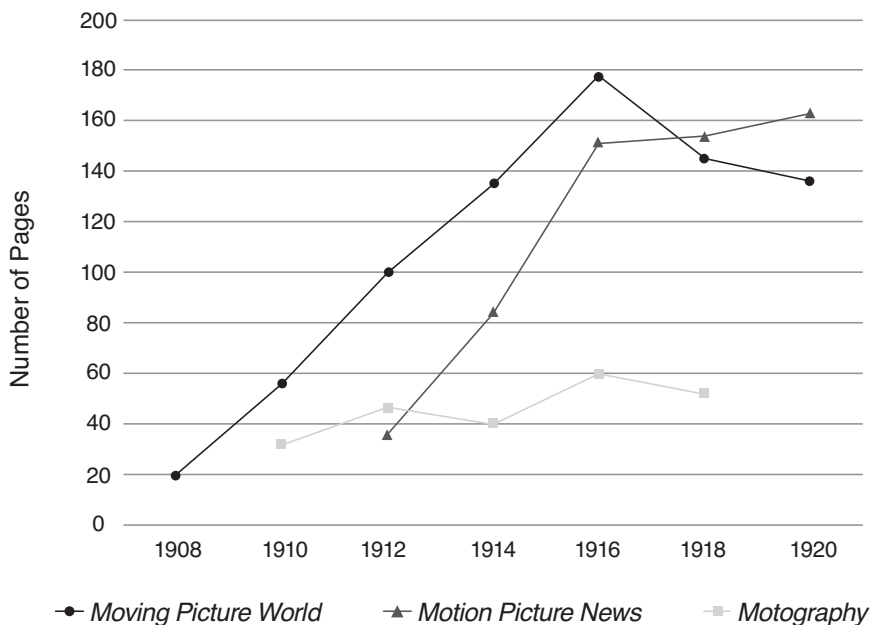


FIGURE 6. Median total pages per issue of *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Motography*. Source: Six issues analyzed per year for each trade paper, selected using a random number generator. Graphic by Lesley Stevenson.

merely reflected the rising and falling prosperity of the film marketplace. Despite achieving the highest estimated circulation of any film trade paper of the 1910s, the Chicago-based *Motography* failed to leverage these subscribers toward increased advertising.³ Therefore, any convincing explanation for the growth of *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News* must account for how and why these two papers were the most effective at participating in and capitalizing on the film industry's changes.

The second image (fig. 7) provides one piece of this explanation, revealing the leadership roles that *News* and *World* had assumed within the film industry by the mid-1910s. The photograph was taken in October 1915 at the board of directors meeting of the Motion Picture Board of Trade. Established the previous month to combat the threat of censorship laws, the Board of Trade was the first significant industry trade organization to form in the wake of the collapse of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) in 1915.⁴ The Board of Trade's founding directors included two trade paper editors, both of whom appear in the photograph. W. Stephen Bush (a columnist and editor of *Moving Picture World*) stands second from the left, wearing a light-gray suit. William A. Johnston (publisher and editor of *Motion Picture News*) stands ninth from the left, between the bearded Ohio exhibitor Max Stearn and the ambitious young showman Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, whose publicity savvy exceeded even that of Johnston's.⁵



FIGURE 7. Photograph from the first meeting of the board of directors of the Motion Picture Board of Trade in October 1915. W. Stephen Bush (*Moving Picture World*) is second from the left; William A. Johnston (*Motion Picture News*) is ninth from the left. Source: "Men Who Head the Motion Picture Board of Trade," *Moving Picture World*, Oct. 30, 1915, 802, http://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/moviwor26chal_o826.

The photograph offers a window into a time when, for a brief moment at least, trade paper editors occupied formal leadership roles within the film industry. The MPPC (or the "Trust") never would have admitted a trade publisher to its board of directors—it financed one trade paper (*Film Views and Index*) and fought others (*Moving Picture News* and *Motography*). Similarly, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), established in 1922, did not allow publishers or editors to be official members. Although, as we will see, Martin Quigley came to play an influential role within the MPPDA, he and his fellow trade press editors were not official members, much less directors. In 1915, however, the Board of Trade recognized trade paper publishers as one of six membership classes allowed in the organization (the other five classes were manufacturers; equipment and film suppliers; exchange operators; exhibitors; and a miscellaneous class of actors, directors, writers, and employees). This was the sign of a heterogeneous trade organization, to be sure. But it was also a sign of the important role the trade press was playing in public relations and the restructuring of the industry, including the formation of the very trade organization depicted in the photo. After receiving his appointment to the board of directors of the Board of Trade, William A. Johnston wrote, "MOTION PICTURE NEWS takes a natural pride in the final accomplishment of the body. The very name, 'Board of Trade,' was first mentioned by this publication."⁶

This chapter explores the industrial contexts and publisher maneuverings that allowed *Motion Picture News* and *Moving Picture World* to achieve so much success and influence in the mid-1910s. Specifically, the ascent of these trade

papers depended on three interrelated developments in the US motion picture industry: the fall of the MPPC, the rise of the feature film, and the threat of censorship policies. These changes created the need for articulate industry leaders, new cooperative organizations, and larger advertising budgets. At this same moment, important changes were under way in the American publishing industry. In the early to mid-1910s, the field known as “industrial journalism” was formalizing its standards of practice and arguing for its importance to the American economy. William A. Johnston had a background in industrial journalism and advertising. His meteoric rise came from his skillful application of the practices of industrial journalism to the motion picture industry. In the process, he gained powerful allies and more enemies than he could count.

FILM INDUSTRY TRANSFORMATION

Only a few years before the taking of the Board of Trade photograph, a very different trade organization dominated the editorial columns of the film industry trade press. The Motion Picture Patents Company framed the discourse of the American film industry, forcing the trade papers to take sides—either for the MPPC, against it, or somewhere in the middle. The trade paper battles over the MPPC and the Independents reached their height in 1910. The hostility expressed in ink reflected and exacerbated the tensions within the industry following the MPPC’s aggressive takeover of fifty-eight exchanges across the country, a maneuver that formed the basis of the MPPC’s distribution arm, the General Film Company (GFC).⁷ In this climate, the wishy-washy editorial positions of previous years gave way to condemnations and expressions of outrage.

By the dawn of 1913, however, the situation had changed significantly. The MPPC was in decline—the result of internal conflicts, ineffective and expensive patent litigation, and inflexible production and distribution strategies.⁸ Independent manufacturers and distributors were effectively competing against this organization and its members. *Moving Picture World*, which had acquired the MPPC-backed *Film Index* in 1911, offered listings and reviews of both MPPC and Independent films and commented that both had a legitimate place within the industry. Even more telling, *Moving Picture News*, which had described itself in 1911 as the “official organ of the independent manufacturers and the N.I.M.P.A.,” now included advertisements, listings, and news stories about MPPC manufacturers and their films.⁹ Two years before the US Supreme Court ruled that the MPPC was in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act, the trade press was already presenting a view of the industry in which the distinction between Trust and Independent meant less than the distinction of product quality of the leading manufacturers. Some of these leading manufacturers were MPPC members (Vitagraph and Biograph); others were Independents (Famous Players and Universal). All of them needed to persuade exhibitors to book their films.

A second key industry change in the mid-1910s—and very much related to the MPPC's waning power—was the rise of the feature film.¹⁰ The number of feature films in the American marketplace skyrocketed in the 1910s, from only eight in 1912 to an estimated 835 in 1916.¹¹ The producers and distributors of these films utilized a business strategy of product differentiation; they distinguished their films from the films of competitors based on screen stories, production values, and, especially, the casting of stars. Some of the MPPC manufacturers produced feature films, but their distributor, the GFC, was poorly equipped for the exploitation of features. The GFC rented films to exhibitors for single days and charged them on a per-foot-of-film basis. Many exhibitors liked the price stability and daily program changes. But the Independent manufacturers and their distributors, especially Paramount, found exhibitors willing to accept a different model—longer runs and pricing based on a film's quality or star power, not a flat per-foot basis. Independent manufacturers could invest more in feature productions because their distribution and rental model enabled them to profit more from a successful film.¹²

The film industry trade papers were beneficiaries of the feature's rise. The growth in feature films closely correlates with the swelling of *Moving Picture World's* and *Motion Picture News's* pages in the mid-1910s (see fig. 8). The trade papers offered a way for feature distributors to differentiate their products and promote them to exhibitors. A colorful two-page advertisement, a positive review, and an exciting news story about the making of the film could help craft the perception that a feature film was, indeed, something special. Even if an exhibitor had already signed on to a feature program—thus becoming contractually obligated to accept a whole slate of films—distributors knew that if exhibitors believed in a movie, they promoted it more to their clientele, resulting in a larger box-office gross.¹³ The production of short films in 1916 also remained strong: 4,115 shorts, which required some promotion to exhibitors.¹⁴ The coexistence of features and shorts was a boon to the trade papers' advertising departments. Much like the late-1920s transition to sound—in which distributors simultaneously promoted silent and sound films to exhibitors—the rise of the feature and continued production of shorts effectively created two marketplaces for film buying. The trade papers most effective at connecting buyers to sellers stood to gain handsomely in this environment.

The rise of the feature film also encouraged the theatrical trade papers to devote more coverage to film. *Billboard* and *New York Dramatic Mirror* were the leaders in this respect. Both papers established film sections in 1908, and these sections more than doubled in size from 1912 to 1916. The best-remembered theatrical paper to cover film, *Variety*, lagged in comparison. As a data visualization of *Variety's* shifting content coverage illustrates, the publication actually decreased its attention to film in 1910 and 1912 compared to 1908 (see fig. 1). It was not until the rise of the multireel feature film in 1913 and 1914 that *Variety* established a film news and reviews section and increased its film coverage again. *Variety* was the indisputable king of vaudeville papers in the 1910s, but it did not really become a leading

film-oriented trade paper until the mid to late 1920s (a topic I explore in depth in chapter 4).

Feature films brought more money and significance to the film and theatrical trade papers, but they had the opposite effect for thousands of small movie theaters. In his essay on the crisis of the small exhibitor, Ben Singer describes the “painful transition for many rank-and-file exhibitors” during the mid to late teens: “With their small capacities, low admissions, humble trappings, and modest socioeconomic demographics, many small theaters had great difficulty affording the expensive feature services.”¹⁵ *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Motography* had to walk a fine line with this group of exhibitors, who were avid readers of the papers. The trade papers framed any criticism of the industry and its films as constructive; they wanted to improve the industry. Similarly, they praised the construction of new, bigger, and better theaters. Small exhibitors reading these papers took offense at the implicit suggestion that the industry’s improvement and welfare meant the ruination of their personal businesses. The growing resentment and suspicion felt by these exhibitors exploded during the trade press war discussed in the next chapter.

With the MPPC’s decline and the feature film’s rise, new fault lines were forming in the film industry, between manufacturer-distributors and exhibitors, as well as among exhibitors themselves. Yet the common threat of censorship laws required coordination across the different branches of the industry. Chicago passed the nation’s first motion picture censorship statute in 1907, but these laws really started to catch on across the country in the early 1910s. Between 1911 and 1913, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kansas all enacted censorship laws that prohibited the exhibition of films deemed “immoral,” “indecent,” “obscene,” or likely to inspire crime.¹⁶ These laws added new expenses to the business of film distribution. In addition to requiring that certain films be altered before being shown, the censor boards raised revenue by charging fees to distributors, an expenditure that became known as a “censorship tax.” In 1915, the US Supreme Court famously upheld the constitutionality of Ohio’s censorship law, declaring that films were a “business pure and simple” and need not be afforded the First Amendment rights of free speech. *Mutual v. Ohio* enabled the continuation and expansion of state and municipal movie censorship laws across the United States for the next four decades.¹⁷ Even more common than censorship boards in the early to mid-1910s were state and municipal laws prohibiting the Sunday screening of motion pictures. The genesis of such bills came from politicians and religious leaders—some of whom perceived the movies as immoral, others of whom more pragmatically calculated that church attendance went up when there were no public amusements with which to compete.¹⁸

Manufacturers, distributors, and exhibitors all agreed that censorship laws and Sunday ordinances posed threats, but they disagreed about what should be done about them. If they did nothing, their businesses would suffer. If their response

was too aggressive, they risked alienating community leaders and inviting harsher restrictions. In this context, trade papers became important sites for debating strategies, tracking policy developments, and affirming the anger of exhibitors. *Moving Picture World*, *Motography*, and *Motion Picture News* gave significant news coverage to censorship policies being drafted across the country and the efforts of local exhibitors to curb such measures. A common refrain among the trade papers called for collective action. Choosing the right strategy was important, but it could only succeed if sufficient numbers within the industry backed it and worked in concert. This growing belief led to the 1915 establishment of the Motion Picture Board of Trade, an organization composed of manufacturers, exchanges, exhibitors, and trade paper editors that “Declare[d] War on Enemies of [the] Industry.”¹⁹

The leading trade paper editors became some of the industry’s most important voices on such matters. Among exhibitors, no trade paper columnist carried more influence than W. Stephen Bush. Bush had earned the respect of exhibitors through his *Moving Picture World* columns, which advocated for exhibitors to hold a status and influence within the industry on par with the manufacturers. He also published film reviews that panned movies he considered bad for exhibitors, the advancement of film art, and/or the industry as a whole. Unlike William A. Johnston, his chief rival editor, Bush had an intimate understanding of exhibition. Beginning in 1908 (and perhaps earlier), he had traveled across the eastern United States, presenting lectures to accompany films and slideshows.²⁰ Midsized and small movie houses were not abstract concepts to Bush; they were real spaces, owned and run by real people whom he had met. He understood his audience of readers very well. He also understood their resentments. For too long, he argued, the exhibitors had been treated as a “janitor”; exhibitors needed to seize their proper place as leaders of the industry.²¹ To borrow a phrase from twenty-first-century politics, W. Stephen Bush knew how to fire up his base. Exhibitors turned to his columns to have their worldviews confirmed and resentments validated just as much as, if not more than, to be educated or persuaded about some particular point.

Bush’s substantial writing on censorship began with advocating for a “Modern Sunday”—one that could satisfy the desires of community leaders and exhibitors alike. In a series of 1912 columns, Bush advocated for rewriting Sunday laws so that they legalized movie exhibition on three conditions: “(I) The religious or educational character or tendency of the picture, (II) The explanatory lecture, which is allowed on Sunday everywhere under the present laws and which gives the Sunday exhibition a dignity of its own, and (III) The limitation of time, setting a certain hour on Sunday for the beginning of motion picture exhibitions.”²² Bush went on to state that “educational character or tendency” should be understood broadly, and clearly *Moving Picture World*’s advertisers agreed (Universal promoted certain films as being “Fine for your Sunday show” and “A ‘Jim Dandy’ for the Sunday program”).²³ As censorship laws and Sunday restrictions only grew in subsequent years, however, Bush’s stance became increasingly militant and uncompromising.

Film historian Richard L. Stromgren observes, “From 1913 until the end of his association with *Moving Picture World* in 1916, Bush’s focus on issues narrowed continually until he was, by the last year, writing about virtually nothing but censorship.”²⁴ In his increasingly hardened stance in 1915 and 1916, Bush forcefully argued against legal censorship of any form. This stood in contrast to others who argued that state laws were preferable to city laws or that a federal law, the Smith-Hughes Bill, would be better than a patchwork of state laws.²⁵

On the matter of censorship, Bush was the trade press’s most significant inward-facing or industry-facing columnist, especially when it came to the exhibitor community. But the most powerful trade press publishers and editors are also outward facing: they speak to the public, government, and other groups on behalf of the industry. In this public-facing role of the editor, Bush was second in importance to William A. Johnston of *Motion Picture News*. In 1914 and 1915, Johnston had emerged as the film industry trade press’s most capable diplomat. His effectiveness at speaking to those outside the film industry may have stemmed from the fact that, until 1913, he was fully outside of the industry himself. The tool kit he brought with him came from a field that was on the rise: industrial journalism.

THE FORMALIZATION OF INDUSTRIAL JOURNALISM

To fully understand the dramatic growth of the motion picture trade press in the 1910s, one must look beyond the film industry. The trade papers may have covered the movie business, but they engaged directly and competed in the business of publishing.

At the same moment that the film industry was trying to reorganize itself in the mid-1910s, the field of publishing known as “industrial journalism” was enjoying a triumphant moment—the result of several years’ worth of coordination, government lobbying, public relations, and policy drafting.

If censorship was the key policy issue for film distributors and exhibitors, then postal rates were the key policy issue for trade publishers. In 1907, the trade papers used their own trade organization—the Federation of Trade Press Associations of the United States—to lobby for the second-class mailing privilege to apply to a broader array of trade publications.²⁶ Charles T. Root, publisher of the important American retail trade paper the *Dry Goods Economist* and a leader of the lobbying efforts, remarked that the second-class postal law was one of “the two principal foundation stones on which all our periodical publications are built. . . . Without the cheap, efficient, and prompt distribution granted to papers by this postal law, the dissemination of the business press would probably never have reached its large and influential proportions.”²⁷ The savings were enormous: publishers paid a penny per pound to mail their periodicals second-class, even though the actual cost of delivery borne by the Post Office came out to somewhere between five to eight cents per pound.²⁸

Congress had created this generous foundation stone with the Post Office Act of 1792. The US Post Office offered subsidies that charged a lower postage rate to recipients of magazines and newspapers than recipients of letters (eventually, senders were charged instead of recipients owing to the difficulty of collecting payment).²⁹ The postal subsidies may have been idealistically borne from the vision of encouraging citizens to read and participate in their democracy, but the generous second-class subsidies lasted well into the twentieth century thanks to political forces. Publishers lobbied Congress to maintain and expand the subsidies, and more than a few politicians understood that cheap postage and a grateful press helped them to spread their message, win elections, and stay in office. Nevertheless, as the subsidies grew increasingly expensive for the federal government, and as more and more publications applied for second-class mailing status, the Post Office undertook several attempts to distinguish between which periodicals did and did not merit the privilege. In 1879, the Post Office imposed content guidelines, disallowing the postal subsidy for publications chiefly focused on advertising rather than news and commentary. As the attorney for the Post Office argued, “the government should not carry at a loss to itself publications which are simply private advertising schemes.”³⁰

The restriction against “private advertising schemes” receiving the second-class mailing subsidy was one of the greatest gifts that American trade publishers ever received. If corporations could have obtained the subsidy for their house organs and advertising circulars, then they might have concentrated their spending and outreach efforts there. Instead, advertising in a trade paper became a more cost-effective way to reach readers. And as US trade papers gained readership and stature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this became an instance of path dependency—an initial decision and advantage influencing the future course of decisions. Some companies, both within the film industry and outside it, published their own organs and circulars. Yet these always came as supplements, not substitutes, to their purchases of advertising in the trade press.

For Charles T. Root, advertising represented the second “principal foundation stone” of trade publishing, and, to mix metaphors, “the cord on which pretty much all publishing is strung.”³¹ Even with the benefit of cheap postage, the cost of producing a trade paper far exceeded the revenue obtained from subscriptions. Typically, subscriptions generated between only 10 to 20 percent of a publication’s revenue. In many ways, paid subscriptions were more important as evidence that the right readership wanted to receive the paper than they were as a source of income. Within this environment, trade papers had to walk a certain tightrope: they had to stay friendly enough to the advertisers of the industry to retain their business, but they also had to appeal enough to readers to keep their subscriptions.

The film and theatrical trade papers had heaped accusations of advertiser bias on one another during the height of the MPPC conflicts. And for decades preceding that moment, similar suspicions had cast a negative light on the trade

papers of larger American industries. As Horace M. Swetland, president of the Federation of Trade Press Associations of the United States in the early 1910s, remarked, “The early history of Industrial Journalism was besmirched with the trade ‘write-up,’ the ‘puff,’—and an attempt to cater to personal pride and prejudice of the advertiser. It has out-lived this degrading and debasing period, and stands to-day, clean and wholesome in its advocacy of what it believes to be for the best interests of its readers.”³² By casting the age of the “puff” as part of industrial journalism’s early history, Swetland presented the modern era as one governed by higher levels of professional standards. Under Swetland’s presidency, the federation pursued a campaign designed to legitimize the profession and formalize standards of practice.

In 1913, the federation took a major step at codifying industrial journalism’s standards of practice and improving its image by adopting a “Declaration of Trade Press Principles.” Because most of these principles were evoked, followed, or violated by the film industry trade papers over the next few years, the ten-point declaration merits full reproduction here:

1. We believe the basic principle on which every trade paper should build is SERVICE—service to readers and service to advertisers, in a way to promote the welfare of the general public.
2. We believe in TRUTH as applied to the editorial, news, and advertising columns.
3. We believe in the utmost frankness regarding circulation.
4. We believe the highest efficiency of the Business Press of America can be secured through CIRCULATIONS OF QUALITY rather than of Quantity—that character, and not mere numbers, should be the criterion by which the value of a publication should be judged.
5. We believe in Cooperation with all those movements in the advertising, printing, publishing, and merchandising fields which make for business and social betterment.
6. We believe that the best interests of manufacturers, the Business Press and consumers can be advanced through a greater interchange of facts regarding merchandise and merchandising and to this end invite cooperation by manufacturers and consumers.
7. We believe that the logical medium to carry the message of the manufacturer directly to the distributor [*sic*] and the user is the Business Press.
8. We believe that while many advertising campaigns may profitably employ newspapers, magazines, outdoor display, etc., no well-rounded campaign seeking to interest the consumer or user is complete without the Business Press.
9. We believe in cooperating with all interests which are engaged in creative advertising work.
10. We believe that business papers can best serve their trades, industries or professions by being leaders of thought; by keeping their editorial columns

independent of the counting-room, unbiased and unafraid; by keeping their news columns free from paid reading notices and puffery of all kinds; by refusing to print any advertisement which is misleading or which does not measure up to the highest standards of business integrity.³³

The tenth and final point is especially noteworthy. It announces the high ambition of trade paper editors: “being leaders of thought,” leading an industry by leading its press. In a 1915 lecture to New York University journalism students, trade publisher E. A. Simmons made the point even more emphatically: “the success of any trade, technical, or class journal lies in the determination to make a paper that will not follow, but will lead the industry to which it is devoted—that will be a motor, not a trailer.”³⁴ This was the goal that William A. Johnston was striving to achieve. In the course of doing so, he loudly embraced these ten trade press declarations, even as he became the film industry’s most notorious printer of “puffery.”

WILLIAM A. JOHNSTON AND THE TRADE’S QUALITY CIRCULATION

When William Allen Johnston launched *Exhibitors’ Times* in May 1913, he was not an expert on motion pictures. The young industry already had a small stable of self-proclaimed experts, most of whom had worked in some capacity for *Moving Picture World*. Thomas Bedding, Louis Reeves Harrison, F. H. Richardson, Epes Winthrop Sargent, Alfred H. Saunders, and the abovementioned W. Stephen Bush all had experience writing about motion pictures and, in some cases, working in production and exhibition. Johnston lacked this intimate understanding of the film medium, yet he possessed an expertise that proved even more valuable: he understood journalism and advertising as businesses. Johnston took the framework he had learned in journalism and applied it to motion pictures—an industry that seemed chaotic yet full of promise, an industry in need of a professionally conducted trade paper to lead it.

For the first year, Johnston focused on the business and advertising sides of trade publishing, leaving the editorial page to Thomas Bedding. In the first issue of *Exhibitors’ Times*, Johnston wrote a column restating familiar platitudes: the influence of the motion picture was “probably as great as, if not greater, than words from the pulpit, the newspaper, and stage”; and in light of this huge responsibility, nothing would “appear in the pages of THE EXHIBITORS’ TIMES which does not tend toward the propagation of good pictures.”³⁵ But for the next several months, it was Bedding’s voice that spoke for *Exhibitors’ Times*. To call Thomas Bedding arrogant would be like calling Thomas Edison litigious—true statements, yes, but they don’t capture the extreme lengths to which each man went. Although Bedding addressed various industry issues in his “Right off the Reel” column, his writing always seemed to wind its way back to the topic of his own greatness. Bedding frequently reminded readers that he was a Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society

and had participated in the growth of motion pictures since 1896.³⁶ In 1912, merely one year before taking the helm of *Exhibitors' Times*, Bedding proclaimed that he was “predestined to edit ‘The Implet.’” Despite being the house organ for Carl Laemmle’s Imp Film Company, *The Implet*, Bedding promised, would “address all exhibitors, manufacturers, and the general public throughout the world” and “be different from anything and everything else.”³⁷ In actuality, *The Implet* lasted only a few months before transforming into the more straightforward exhibitor-oriented house organ *Universal Weekly*. His lack of modesty aside, Bedding did have strengths as an editor, and his greatest attribute was his understanding of England’s film market. At their best, his columns and the correspondences he published offered interesting comparative analyses of the American and English film marketplaces that most other American trade papers lacked.³⁸

Although Johnston mostly stayed away from Bedding’s editorial page, the publisher’s hand very much guided the rest of the makeup of *Exhibitors' Times*. Johnston emphasized that *Exhibitors' Times* operated “solely in the interests of Motion Picture Exhibitors,” following the example of the *Dry Goods Economist*—the US’s leading retail-oriented trade paper—which had a policy of service to its readers above all else.³⁹ Every week, the thirty-two-page weekly paper included an “Operators Forum” (*operator* was the contemporary term for a projectionist) and a number of separate departments designed to inform the exhibitor and uplift the field of exhibition as a whole. There were departments devoted to “Theatre and Construction,” “Music and the Picture,” “Advertising the Picture,” and “Appearance and Manners,” which offered suggestions on how theater ushers should dress and stand. In addition to these departments, *Exhibitors' Times* covered exhibitor gatherings and solicited letters and correspondences from leading industry figures, including manufacturers.

One section that was missing from *Exhibitors' Times* was film reviews. This is somewhat surprising considering *Exhibitors' Times*’ stated emphasis on providing a service to exhibitors and, especially, in light of the fact that *Moving Picture World*, *Motography*, *Billboard*, and *New York Dramatic Mirror* all published sections of film reviews. Instead, the titles of films only appeared within one of three places: (1) the listing of release dates printed at the back of the paper (standard practice among all the industry’s trade papers); (2) an occasional news story announcing the production or release of a quality film (the Famous Players adaptation of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, for example)⁴⁰; or (3) an advertisement (the amount of advertising was modest—no more than six pages, typically, per issue—and included equipment advertisements along with those promoting films and distribution services). Overall, *Exhibitors' Times* was the expression of a publisher who was more focused on an industry’s ideals and macrolevel structure than the nitty-gritty realities of day-to-day management. The abstract notion of making “better pictures” mattered more than evaluating individual films. Similarly, theater construction and usher etiquette received more attention than the question of how a small

exhibitor could balance mortgage payments, labor costs, and film rental fees and still stay in business. Focusing on high-level issues of industry improvement also allowed Johnston to keep his hands clean of the partisan fighting that had earlier engulfed the trade papers. Johnston repeatedly emphasized that “*The Exhibitors’ Times* is an independent journal . . . and that it is not connected, directly or indirectly, with any commercial enterprise whatever.”⁴¹

A mere five months after founding *Exhibitors’ Times*, Johnston acquired *Moving Picture News*. He merged the papers under a new title: *Motion Picture News* (Bedding and Johnston “endeavored to familiarize the public with the correct nomenclature of the subject—‘motion’ pictures not ‘moving’ pictures”).⁴² The deal, completed in September 1913, proved transformative both for Johnston and the film trades. In his 1914 book, *Theatre of Science*, Robert Grau marveled that “the rapid growth of the new publication, under the editorship of William A. Johnston, formerly publisher and founder of ‘The Exhibitors’ Times,’ has been unprecedented in the trade-journal field. . . . ‘The Motion Picture News’ is and will remain absolutely non-partisan in every sense. It is utterly free from control.”⁴³ Although Johnston deliberately distanced *Motion Picture News* from the partisan reputation of *Moving Picture News*, he gained two important assets from the acquisition: exhibitor subscriptions and advertising contracts. In 1912, *Moving Picture News* claimed a circulation of ten thousand and included a dozen pages of advertising in the typical issue—numbers that dwarfed *Exhibitor’s Times*. Johnston quickly embarked on a campaign to retain and increase *Moving Picture News’* base of advertisers. He also became the paper’s dominant editorial voice. Thomas Bedding left *Motion Picture News* in October 1913, and it is unclear whether his exit was voluntary. What is clear is that the merger of the two journals led to a merger in Johnston’s titles: he became the publisher and editor of *Motion Picture News*.

Although Johnston reiterated that *Motion Picture News* was published in the interests of exhibitors, he used his columns to speak to manufacturers and a larger imagined community of the motion picture industry. Significantly, he sought to enhance the legitimacy of his paper and himself by educating the motion picture industry about the best practices of industrial journalism. In one November 1913 column, entitled “Advertising Is an Economy,” Johnston explained the logic for advertising in a professionally conducted trade paper. “You have alternatives,” Johnston explained:

You can send out your own printed matter: letters, booklets and the like; or you can even publish your own medium to carry your advertising.

You can do this: And it isn’t economical—not as economical as it is to take advantage of an established journal which goes through the mails cheaply and never into the waste-paper basket.

You want to reach 10,000 people, let us say. Very well, the mailing then of a letter will cost you in postage \$200.00 alone. You can have a magazine or newspaper carry this same message for you for a few dollars per ten thousand circulation.

As for your own publication you not only bear its heavy publishing charges, and Uncle Sam very properly calls your medium an advertising house-organ and charges you high mailing rates. All of which is frightfully expensive.

Again, it is certainly more convincing to the buyer to have your message given him through a disinterested medium, a medium he knows and believes in, and to which he pays a yearly subscription price for authoritative information about his business.⁴⁴

Johnston was educating the film industry about the second-class postal subsidies that made trade papers a bargain compared to a house organ. But his references to “a disinterested medium, a medium [the buyer] knows and believes in,” are also telling. Johnston understood the importance of perception to his brand—especially the perception that *Motion Picture News* would be unbiased by the very advertisers he was courting.

In the same November 1913 column, Johnston attempted to attract advertisers that had already paid for space in *Moving Picture World*, *Billboard*, and other publications. He emphasized that “duplication should not be avoided. This is an accepted fact today. . . . Duplication—letting several mediums tell your message—is impressive, and the basic force of advertising is to impress your buyer. It doesn’t cost any more. A judicious division of large and small space will stretch your appropriation through several mediums just as long as in judicious space in one.”⁴⁵ Four years later, after *Motion Picture News* had outpaced all its rivals in advertising growth, Johnston argued the exact opposite point—for the end of duplication in advertising and the elimination of all but two trade papers.⁴⁶

In 1914, Johnston disrupted the status quo of American cinema’s trade press—and dramatically increased his advertising revenue—by redefining the industry’s understanding of circulation. The third and fourth “Declarations of Trade Press Principles” had emphasized circulation, particularly the importance of accurately reporting the paper’s readership and the principle of “CIRCULATIONS OF QUALITY rather than of Quantity—that character, and not mere numbers, should be the criterion by which the value of a publication should be judged.”⁴⁷ These principles were firmly established among the trade papers covering American iron, dry goods, and shipping, but the film and theatrical papers had essentially ignored them. Prior to 1914, the film and theatrical trade papers had competed for the crown of quantity and the highest circulation. The paper Johnston had acquired, *Moving Picture News*, bragged in 1911 that it offered “guaranteed larger circulation than any other trade paper.”⁴⁸ *Billboard*, *Moving Picture World*, and *Motography* all made similar claims.⁴⁹ To boost their circulations, these trade papers tried to recruit any and all possible subscribers and, additionally, distributed their paper to newsstands. Unlike the leading trade journals of other industries, these motion picture and theatrical trade papers did not employ the services of an outside firm to audit their circulation and subscriber list. They reported their

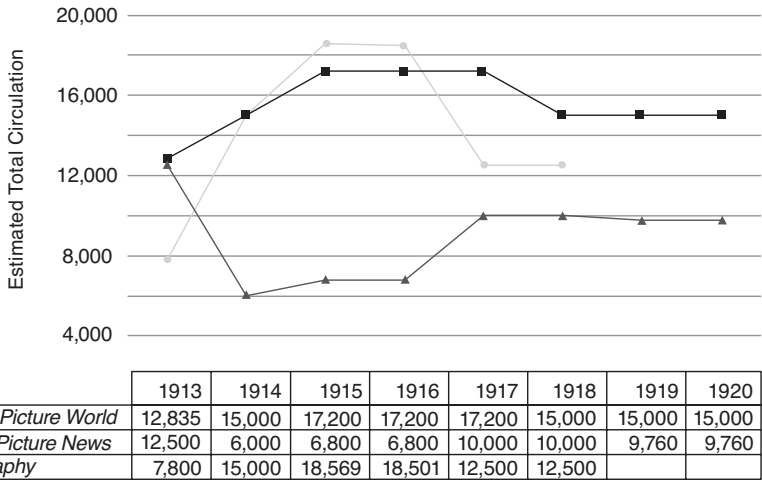


FIGURE 8. Circulation estimates for *Moving Picture World*, *Motion Picture News*, and *Motography*, 1913–20. Source: N. W. Ayer & Son's *American Newspaper Annual and Directory*, Library of Congress Digital Collections, <https://lcn.loc.gov/sn91012092>.

circulations each year to the advertising bureaus, and most readers and advertisers knew they needed to take the numbers with a grain of salt.

Johnston wanted to steer his publication, and the motion picture industry as a whole, in a different direction. He refused to allow *Motion Picture News* to be sold on stands. He claimed to only pursue subscriptions of the “purchasing exhibitors” who were valuable to manufacturer and equipment advertisers (he estimated the number was seven thousand, far lower, he noted, than the guesses of eighteen thousand theaters, which, he said, “the trade itself has found and knows to be incorrect”). He promised to be more truthful and transparent with advertisers about who was receiving their messages. Any dollar an advertiser spent reaching someone outside the industry, someone who couldn’t purchase his wares, was a waste of money.⁵⁰ As a result of these new policies, *Motion Picture News*’ reported circulation fell by half from 1912 to 1914 (see fig. 8). But this steep drop in circulation should not be interpreted as a failure. After all, *News*’ advertising sales were skyrocketing across this same period (see fig. 2). Instead, Johnston had redefined in the minds of his advertisers what circulation meant to a trade paper. He had shifted the standards of American cinema’s trade press toward the professional standards of industrial journalism, which valued “CIRCULATIONS OF QUALITY rather than of Quantity.”⁵¹ In fact, this became the new slogan for *Motion Picture News*. Beginning in September 1914, the phrase “HAS THE QUALITY CIRCULATION OF THE TRADE” appeared in all caps immediately underneath the title of *Motion Picture News* (see fig. 9).⁵² Johnston had imposed the standards of industrial journalism on the film industry and, in the process, increased

SEPTEMBER 26, 1914

Motion Picture News

HAS THE QUALITY CIRCULATION OF THE TRADE

ATTACK ON WAR FILMS RENEWED



DANIEL FROHMAN
Presents
The celebrated international star,
Mme BERTHA KALICH
In her foremost dramatic success,
"MARTA OF THE LOWLANDS"
By Angel Guimerà

A POWERFUL
AND
SYMPATHETIC
DRAMA OF
TRAGIC HUMAN
EXPERIENCES

In
Five
Parts
Released
Oct. 5th

Produced
by the
FAMOUS PLAYERS FILM COMPANY
213-229 W 26 ST ADOLPH ZUKOR PRESIDENT NEW YORK
DANIEL FROHMAN Mgr. Dist. EDWIN S. PORTER Tech. Dir.

VOLUME X

NUMBER 12

PRICE, 10 CENTS

FIGURE 9. Beginning on September 26, 1914, *Motion Picture News* printed on its cover: "Has the Quality Circulation of the Trade." Source: *Motion Picture News*, Sept. 26, 1914, cover, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/motionpicturenew101unse_0969.

advertising sales and enhanced his legitimacy among the industry's leading manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers.

Two months later, in November 1914, Johnston borrowed further from the playbook of industrial journalism, launching a separate magazine called *Accessory News* (fig. 10). *Accessory News* appeared within *Motion Picture News* and focused on "Construction, Equipment, Operation."⁵³ But by listing *Accessory News* as a separate magazine, Johnston was able to charge premium advertising rates to the manufacturers of projectors, chairs, and other theater supplies who wanted their products to appear in the section that would be most closely read by potential buyers. Before Johnston, film trade papers had edited projection and equipment sections for the benefit of the reader. The leading section, F. H. Richardson's "Projection Department" in *Moving Picture World*, encouraged readers to write in with questions about projector and theater operation.⁵⁴ And, in 1910, *Moving Picture World* aggregated numerous columns by Richardson and published them in book form as *Motion Picture Handbook: A Guide for Managers and Operators of Motion Picture Theatres*.⁵⁵ Richardson's "Projection Department" and *Handbook* organized information for the benefit of the reader. In so doing, Richardson and *Moving Picture World* were embracing one of the ideals of industrial journalism: putting the subscriber's interests first.⁵⁶ But Johnston went a step further with *Accessory News*: he organized readers for the benefit of the advertiser. Johnston did not invent this model himself (*Accessory News* essentially imitated the *Store Equipment* magazine within the *Dry Goods Economist*).⁵⁷ He was, however, the first to successfully import it into the film industry, where others would reuse it—most notably, Martin J. Quigley in the "Better Theatres" section of *Exhibitors Herald*.

Johnston's most significant accomplishment of 1914—and the one that may have been most responsible for attracting more manufacturers and distributors to purchase advertising—was the "Review of Film Trade Conditions of America," a special issue of *Motion Picture News* published in the summer. The leading trade papers of other American industries had long compiled data on the industry and shared it through special issues and annuals. Johnston brought this practice to the film industry with a new level of detail and thoroughness. The information was collected, he claimed, by ninety-seven field correspondents dispersed across the US, Canada, and England. The correspondents were told to investigate their territories and report on a series of questions:

- What is the approximate number of theatres compared with last year?
- How are the small houses being affected by the new and larger theatres?
- How many theatres are being remodeled and improved and in what ways?
- What types of features are in demand?
- How does the single-reel program compare in popularity with multiple-reel subjects?
- Are audiences changing, and how?⁵⁸

Construction,
Equipment,
Operation

Accessory News

Everything for
the Modern
Picture Theatre

Tel. 7650 Bryant

NO. 220 WEST FORTY-SECOND STREET

New York City

Volume X

NOVEMBER 14, 1914

Number 19

What "Accessory News" Means

THIS is the day of the modern picture theatre, finely and fully equipped, and efficiently run.

Which, briefly, is the reason why we have added "Accessory News" to MOTION PICTURE NEWS.

* * *

WE have been planning "Accessory News" for some time.

It has seemed to us that such matters as theatre construction, equipment and operation are important enough to demand a new magazine devoted wholly to this field.

We have felt that they deserved more than a mere department and much more than casual editorial interest—that they should, by no means, be pushed out of sight by the mass of film news, reviews and advertising.

* * *

SO we hit upon the idea of "Accessory News."

It is not separate from MOTION PICTURE NEWS, but it is, nevertheless, a magazine within itself.

It has its own manager and its own separate staff of writers.

It has its own cover or title page in color and in every way is made to stand out prominently and distinctly as it should.

* * *

IT is the writer's opinion that "Accessory News" will grow till it rivals—and perhaps outdoes—that part of MOTION PICTURE NEWS which is devoted to pictures and picture making.

The making of pictures is of the utmost importance. But so also is the showing of pictures. The latter problem, however, has fallen far short of the attention it deserves.

* * *

A MAKER of screens has shouted insistently, for the past several years, that what the exhibitor is really retailing to the public is *picture light*.

So he is.

He doesn't merely retail pictures. The best pictures ever produced are of little use to him—they will not gain and hold patronage—unless they are well projected on the screen and well reflected from that screen.

* * *

IN other words, the successful exhibitor is the man who also sells good picture light.

He must sell other things, too, beside pictures.

He must sell an attractive and comfortable interior, which means a great many things, such as ventilation, pleasing lights and decorations, comfortable chairs, excellent music, courtesy from employees—service and efficiency *all along the line*.

And to bring his patrons in, he *must have* an attractive lobby.

THE lack of all this may have been well enough in the days when theatres were only converted shops, when exhibitors were merely speculators with a new and untried amusement; but today these elements of theatre service and efficiency are *necessities*.

The public has been educated up to well-shown as well as well-produced pictures.

They *demand* a pleasing environment. Among the exhibitors of the country, a stern survival of the fittest is in progress of which the mismanaged, poorly-equipped theatre is fast dying and by which the modern picture theatre finely and fully equipped is becoming more and more of a big and important institution.

* * *

A GAIN, there is the growing importance of motion picture technique.

All the faults of projection today are charged upon the projection machine and the screen.

These important facts are not taken into account: that we have no standardized methods of film perforation, camera work, developing and printing, etc.

Until we achieve this standardization, we shall not have perfect picture light.

* * *

THEN, too, among other things, is the question of furnishing and equipment contributing to the comfort of patrons. The right kind of seating has a great deal to do with attendance, and its importance has commanded the attention of manufacturers.

It has been a long way from the crude chairs of the "store shows" to the luxurious upholstered seats of the present motion picture theatre.

* * *

PROPER decoration is now recognized as a big asset in a theatre's popularity. The highest skill is employed in rendering the walls and ceilings pleasing to the most critical eye.

The best carpets and draperies, formerly used only in the more pretentious places of amusement, now grace the temples of the new art.

The demand for furnishings of this character from motion picture theatres has considerably augmented the business of firms in this line, and called upon the services of experts who make a specialty of estimating on the outfitting of photo play houses.

* * *

"ACCESSORY NEWS" aims to take up all these important matters—competently and continuously—for the benefit of the progressive exhibitors and operators, for the prospective theatre builder—and for the betterment, we trust, of the problem of picture exhibition.

WILLIAM A. JOHNSTON.

FIGURE 10. The premiere of "Accessory News," in William A. Johnston's *Motion Picture News*, Nov. 14, 1914, 71, https://lantern.mediahist.org/catalog/motionpicturenews02unse_0489.

Motion Picture News organized market reports by region, with separate headings for Canada, New England, the East, Capitol area, the Southeast, Central states, and the West. Further subheadings reported on the conditions of specific cities. There was "Demand for Genuine Features in Springfield [Illinois]," but Cincinnati was a "Town Too 'Cheap' for Features."⁵⁹ As a preface to the collection of reports, Johnston wrote a one-and-a-half-page summary, synthesizing what he considered to be the key points about contemporary market conditions.⁶⁰

Johnston claimed the special issue was the first of its kind and "of practical value to the exhibitor and to the manufacturer and distributor of films and of theatre equipment and supplies."⁶¹ In reality, though, the market reports were far more valuable to manufacturers, distributors, and equipment suppliers than to exhibitors, who were the customers that the reports were studying. In other words, *Motion Picture News* claimed to be published in the interest of exhibitors, but its most ambitious issue was servicing manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers. Johnston claimed that one of the lessons of the report was that "manufacturers should study local conditions." No film company currently had a system for gathering and analyzing data in a reliable, timely, and comprehensive manner. The implicit suggestion, rendered explicitly in subsequent editorials and special market report issues, was that *Motion Picture News* was the best source available for delivering this vital information.⁶²

Under Johnston's leadership, the volume of advertising in *Motion Picture News* boomed. We can page through *Motion Picture News* and read Johnston's many self-promotional remarks, explaining why manufacturers and distributors should buy space in his paper. What we don't have evidence for—and thus requires some speculation—are the behind-the-scenes maneuverings of Johnston as he sought out the business of Universal, Mutual, Paramount, and the nation's other leading manufacturers and distributors. In an article he wrote more than a decade later, in 1926, Johnston remarked about the importance of the distribution sales chiefs based in New York City who determine "the nature of the advertising to be used, the expenditures, and where the advertising is to be placed," both in the trade papers and in the popular press.⁶³ Although we lack archival memos and restaurant receipts, we can certainly imagine Johnston, who was also based in New York City, visiting with the top distribution executives in 1914 and 1915, offering advice based on his market research and persuading them why they should buy more space in *Motion Picture News*. Johnston seems to have been especially effective at ingratiating himself with Carl Laemmle, the head of Universal. Johnston publicized Laemmle, whose name appears frequently in *Motion Picture News*. Laemmle returned the favor, purchasing considerable advertising and inviting Johnston to attend the March 1915 opening of Universal City in Southern California.⁶⁴

If there was one section of his paper that Johnston cared even more about than the advertising pages, it was his editorial column. Although Johnston had known little about the film industry in early 1913, he spent much of 1914 and 1915 trying

to prove that he was its preeminent thought leader. Like W. Stephen Bush and the other trade columnists, he frequently focused in his columns on the threats posed by censorship bills. Johnston wrote about censorship in *Motion Picture News*, but he also sought a larger stage, publishing articles in popular newspapers and magazines defending the motion picture. In the battle against censorship policies, Johnston became one of the industry's leading diplomats, capable of forcefully arguing against such legislation while retaining a respectful tone.

The most prominent theme of Johnston's editorials across the mid-1910s was the film industry's inefficiency. Writing in an analytical style, Johnston surveyed the industry's "considerable disorder" and offered prescriptions.⁶⁵ In 1914, Johnston argued for the importation of tested management and merchandising techniques from other industries. "Often it is argued that this is an amusement business and so cannot be ruled economically and methodically. Which is *wrong*," wrote Johnston. "Business executives, trained to other and older—if not greater—industries, are entering the ranks here and there and are making themselves felt in no uncertain way. They are patiently introducing system and sense and impatiently crowding out loose action and talk—jealousies, temperament, gossip, exaggeration, *gambling*."⁶⁶ Johnston had modeled *Motion Picture News* on the leading trade papers of American retail. In his columns, he sought to reshape the motion picture industry so that it more closely resembled the orderly convergence of supply and demand that one found in paint shops and grocery stores.

Johnston argued that the intense competitiveness and uncertainties of the exhibition marketplace were slowing the industry's progress. In 1915, he argued against the daily change model of the shorts program. Instead, the industry should embrace the motto, "FEWER PICTURES—BETTER PICTURES—LONGER RUNS."⁶⁷ He was essentially advocating for the feature film distribution model that would catapult Adolph Zukor's Famous Players and Paramount to the forefront of the industry. He also spoke out in support of mergers and consolidations, which he believed would create greater efficiencies and avoid the escalation of a dog-eat-dog, "survival of the fittest" marketplace.⁶⁸ In these columns, Johnston argued that these changes would benefit exhibitors. But the smaller exhibitors who could not afford feature films (or simply did not want them) and who depended on booking programs of short films would have been justified if they felt more threatened than protected by Johnston's plans.

Some exhibitors also doubted the integrity of the film reviews published in *Motion Picture News*. They recognized an inherent tension between pleasing the advertiser and serving the exhibitor. Prior to Johnston's acquisition of the paper in 1913, *Moving Picture News* did not have a review section at all. Instead, there was a list of "Manufacturers' Synopses of Films."⁶⁹ Johnston had turned a transparent system (reprinting synopses prepared by manufacturers) into something much more murky and opaque (printing reviews trying to balance the exhibitor's and

advertiser's interests). Film historian Alan Gevinson has called the reviews the "worst part" of the publication: "In most cases reviewers merely retold the plot and either waxed enthusiastically about the production or tactfully avoided any negative judgment."⁷⁰ Although *Motion Picture News* was developing the reputation as the most manufacturer-friendly paper, the reviews in *Moving Picture World* and *Motography* largely followed the same approach. In contrast, *Variety* tore apart weak films, but it had little in the way of film advertising in the mid-1910s and therefore fewer advertisers it needed to worry about offending.

Exhibitors needed reliable information about upcoming films, but they could not fully trust the reviews published in their trade papers. In response, exhibitors sought out alternatives and exercised critical reading practices. In 1915, two new publications that specialized in offering independent reviews sprang into existence. Wid Gunning's journal, *Wid's*, is best remembered as the industry's first daily paper and the basis for *Film Daily*. But *Wid's* originated as a weekly reviewing service for exhibitors.⁷¹ Similarly, B. P. Fineman launched *Exhibitor's Film Review Service* for the "purpose of supplying exhibitors with unbiased, impartial, conscientious, and thoroughly dependable reviews."⁷² Because they lacked the advertising revenue of *News* and *World*, both magazines charged substantially higher subscription prices than the leading weekly trade papers. Clearly, though, some exhibitors considered the service worth the price. Neither *Exhibitor's Film Review Service* nor this iteration of *Wid's* lasted beyond the decade. But a film reviewer for *Motion Picture News* named P. S. Harrison would soon break free from Johnston and launch his own magazine that, for forty years, delivered reviews to exhibitors that were "free from the influence of film advertising."⁷³

NEWS, PUFF, AND INDUSTRY DISCORD

Motion Picture News published special issues, equipment sections, editorials, reviews, and lots of advertising. But what about the more routine news gathering and reporting of the paper? When we think of news, we tend to think of a reporter, notepad in hand, breaking a story, asking different sides to comment, typing it all up under deadline. But the reporter model was not common in industrial journalism in the 1910s. Instead, *Motion Picture News* generated a great deal of news content from the same network of field correspondents who contributed to the market reports. The correspondents mailed, telegraphed, or hand delivered their news to a midlevel editor. An exhibitor correspondent in Cleveland, for example, might have news to share about an upcoming convention. If the editor chose to use the item, he would edit it and, frequently, rewrite it in the process. The result was the collage of news items that one finds in these papers. Many individual events are described, but they are presented in clipped fashion rather than as part of a synthetic, coherent whole. In many ways, this further enhanced the importance of

Johnston's editorial page, which became the site for drawing broad generalizations from the multitude of smaller industry news items.

In generating news, *Motion Picture News*' office managers in Chicago (Theodore S. Mead) and Los Angeles (J. C. Jessen) also played important roles. They needed to keep their relationships strong with correspondents and sources in their territories. But they also had to be jacks-of-all-trades—paying solicitation calls to advertisers, finding new subscribers, collecting money from advertisers, and reporting on local events. In a sign that some things about Los Angeles culture never change, Jessen posed for a photograph next to his automobile. The image was printed in a 1916 issue of *News* with the caption, "The Los Angeles Manager of Motion Picture News and His Traveling 'Office.'"⁷⁴ Jessen and Mead both compiled two- to four-page sections of news content each week focused on developments in their cities.

Johnston proudly called attention to his network of correspondents and office managers based in Chicago and Los Angeles. But his paper's fastest growing supply of news items came from sources he was more reluctant to acknowledge: publicists and advertisers. Ironically, despite all his rhetoric about "quality circulation" and improving the professional conduct of trade papers, Johnston became the film industry trade press's worst violator of publishing press releases as news. To be clear, all of the film industry trade papers engaged in this practice. But *Motion Picture News* became the most visible offender, especially in 1916, as the advertising pages swelled and a growing number of exhibitors perceived Johnston as a mouthpiece for the manufacturers.

The Federation of Trade Publishers Associations of the United States had been trying to discourage its members from publishing publicity items. The federation believed that valuable news could come from advertisers, but editors needed to sift between items of genuine news value and those intended simply for private promotion and gain. The following litmus test was put forward: "If the publicity sought is in the nature of a social service, for the good of the general public or the trade as a whole, and not to boost some private enterprise, or for personal gain, then it is all right to print it. Otherwise, it should be paid for at regular space rates."⁷⁵ Most of the news items in *Motion Picture News* concerning the activities of manufacturers and distributors failed to meet this standard.

The testimonies of industry insiders and a close reading of the trade papers both suggest that there was a well-understood *quid pro quo* agreement at play. Leander Richardson, publicity director of World Film Corporation and formerly the editor of the *Morning Telegraph*, confronted Johnston on the matter:

Probably you have noticed, Mr. Johnston, that the reading pages of the motion picture trade papers are loaded with press matter from the various manufacturers, closely balancing the volume of their advertising. That is to say, the company carrying two pages of paid space gets at least twice as much free notice in the reading part of the paper as the company buying a single page. The corporation carrying ten pages

of advertising receives fully ten times as much reading matter as the one that runs a single page—and so on. This is the fact.⁷⁶

If you read an issue of *Motion Picture News* from 1915 or 1916, you can quickly reverse engineer the *quid pro quo* described by Richardson. Start at the front of the magazine. After turning the cover, you will find thirty-six pages of advertising—all of them full-page ads, often laid out in two- or four-page spreads, promoting the feature releases of Paramount, VLSE, Mutual, Metro, Triangle, and other leading distributors. Turn past the two editorial pages and you will get into the forty- to fifty-page news section, which will include a couple of full-page original articles but mostly a mixture of news items supplied by correspondents and publicists. Like a child playing a matching game, one can spot the publicity pieces—“Essanay in Throes of Moving into New Quarters,” for example, or “Mutual Cameraman Gets Striking European Scenes”—then flip through the advertisements that appear in the front and find those same companies.⁷⁷ If you don’t find the company’s advertisements in the front section (which permitted four-color printing), then keep looking through the additional black-and-white ads in the middle and back of the paper until you find the company.

Exhibitors in the 1910s were very much playing this very game—cross-referencing ads, reviews, and news for signs of bias. These exhibitors engaged in what media scholar John Caldwell has called a *critical industrial practice*—applying an interpretive scheme within a particular industry context as part of one’s work.⁷⁸ Writing nine decades before Caldwell, W. Stephen Bush understood this on some level, observing that exhibitors “are watching the motion picture journals more or less critically.”⁷⁹ Readers might scan a film review, then check the advertising pages to gauge the likelihood of bias. Importantly, the trade paper’s reputation influenced how exhibitors interpreted what they read. Was a trade paper credible and independent, or did it kowtow to the demands of advertisers? As the new year of 1916 dawned, the exhibitor perception was increasingly that a new rift was forming between them and manufacturers. They brought their critical eyes to bear on the Board of Trade updates and manufacturer announcements that William A. Johnston called “news.”

In the spring of 1916, some exhibitors found new reasons to be suspicious of the Board of Trade and *Motion Picture News*. Johnston frequently reminded readers that he was a director of the Board of Trade, and he insisted that the board represented all branches of the industry.⁸⁰ The New York branch of the Motion Picture Exhibitors League disagreed. In March 1916, the league’s members voted overwhelmingly to pull out of the ambitious May convention that the Board of Trade was planning for New York City’s Madison Square Garden.⁸¹ Much of the dispute came down to money. Like a trade paper, a trade convention made money from charging manufacturers, distributors, and equipment suppliers for space (in this case, the space of a booth on the convention floor rather than the space on a page). The Board of Trade offered the exhibitors 25 percent of the convention’s net

profits, an amount that they considered insultingly low. The New York Exhibitors League perceived the board as attempting to take over the yearly convention it hosted, which financially supported its state organization.

Ultimately, the board and exhibitors decided to each hold their own conventions, the Exhibitors League of New York's running from May 1–6, 1916, and the Board of Trade's from May 6–13.⁸² Johnston characterized the whole situation as a “regrettable misunderstanding,” and the Board of Trade tried to offer the reassurance that it “seeks harmony with exhibitors.” But irreparable damage had already been done. One manufacturer, Metro, quit the Board of Trade over the incident. In a maneuver apparently calculated to curry favor with exhibitors, Metro claimed it would not belong to an organization that employed a policy intended to “throttle the exhibitor.”⁸³ Because Famous Players and its distributor, Paramount, had never agreed to join the Board of Trade, Metro's quitting meant that the board lacked two of the industry's most important manufacturer-distributors.⁸⁴

An ambitious New York City exhibitor also used the controversy to rise in prominence within the industry. Lee A. Ochs was a Brooklyn theater owner and president of the New York Exhibitors League. In March 1916, he and Samuel Rothafel had been two of only five New York exhibitors to vote in favor of the joint trade convention with the Board of Trade, losing to 185 against it.⁸⁵ Two months later, Ochs became the most vocal exhibitor in the country to denounce the Board of Trade. He characterized the board as unrepresentative of exhibitors and, what's more, as “a rank failure in the fight against censorship.”⁸⁶ Because of the controversy and the withdrawal of support from Famous Players, Metro, and the leading exhibitor organizations, the Board of Trade dissolved itself in June 1916. The following month, exhibitors gathered in Chicago from across the country and voted Ochs president of the Motion Picture Exhibitors League of America (MPELA). He would lead the national organization to which his New York branch belonged. Ochs also became a director of the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), an organization launched within weeks after the Board of Trade's dissolution, which promised to be more inclusive of exhibitors.⁸⁷

At a dinner hosted in New York on the eve of the Chicago convention, W. Stephen Bush was one of several prominent industry figures to speak in favor of electing Ochs to the MPELA presidency. According to *Motography*, Bush “spoke of his friendship for Mr. Ochs and that gentleman's splendid qualifications.”⁸⁸ Bush also supported Ochs in his *Moving Picture World* columns, much more so than he ever publicly supported the Board of Trade. Bush commented that “the idea of giving the exhibitors a representation of two on a board of directors of ten was among the causes fatal to the Board of Trade.”⁸⁹ In that same August 12, 1916, issue, Bush unleashed a thinly veiled attack on the trade paper editor who had occupied one of those ten board of directors seats. “The race for publicity in the motion picture journals begins to resemble a speed contest in a psychopathic ward,” wrote Bush. “There is nothing that provokes and irritates the average reader more than piles

upon piles of puffing. . . . It is only the paper with either no circulation at all or with a pitifully small circulation which can afford to open its news and editorial columns to every demand of the publicity man and press agent.”⁹⁰ Bush’s reference to “piles of puffing” and “a pitifully small circulation” were digs at Johnston’s *Motion Picture News*, which had fewer subscribers than *Moving Picture World* and *Motography* but more advertiser-planted news pieces.

William A. Johnston, for his part, gave it right back to his critics. “You, as a producer, would scarcely admit to yourself that a competitor’s product were better because it had been made longer,” he wrote, addressing his advertisers, in reference to Bush’s longer running *Moving Picture World*.⁹¹ Amid his success in growing *Motion Picture News*’ advertising pages, Johnston’s typical analytical editorial style gave way at times to a more petulant and cavalier tone, particularly in his discussions of exhibition. At the height of the Board of Trade Convention controversy in April 1916, Johnston wrote, “Thanks! To the New York exhibitor who cancelled his subscription to MOTION PICTURE NEWS both by telephone and letter—so great was his anxiety to be sure that his cancellation was known—we return thanks.”⁹² As for the accusations of puff, Johnston framed the matter differently. “The advertisers, by custom, expect editorial notice.” As long as the news items had some value to the reader, Johnston had no objection to the custom.⁹³

Johnston’s defense of publishing large quantities of publicity matter as news content did not placate his enemies. To them, the ocean of press notices in *Motion Picture News* only confirmed Johnston’s obsequious personality and lack of integrity. Additionally, in their eyes, his emphasis on “quality circulation” reflected his arrogance and bias in favor of manufacturers and distributors instead of exhibitors. Johnston’s appeal to industry custom would have also failed to meet the standards of the Federation of Trade Press Associations. The whole point of Horace Swetland’s decrying “the ‘puff’” was that the American trade press needed to move beyond this custom because “the editorial department of a proper industrial publication is absolutely divorced from its advertising department. In many cases it does not know the names of its important advertisers.”⁹⁴ Clearly, Johnston was playing by a different rulebook.

In fairness to Johnston, though, most of the leading trade papers also failed to live up to these standards. What’s more, they had something that Johnston did not: a near monopoly over their respective industry’s trade publishing. In contrast, the film industry trade papers suffered from what Martin Quigley later called “diffusion.” If advertising dollars were diffused across a dozen papers, then it meant none of them could afford a large staff of reporters and editors. As a result, Johnston had to operate in somewhat slapdash fashion—focusing on selling ads and writing attention-grabbing editorials, hastily piecing together the “news” from whatever correspondence he received that week from readers, exhibitor organizations, and advertisers. Furthermore, the importance of staying in the good graces of the US Post Office should not be overlooked. Because the Post Office demanded

a significant amount of nonadvertising content to obtain the second-class subsidy, his advertisers were doing him (and themselves) a favor by supplying news content. The goal of stopping the diffusion, consolidating the film trade papers into one, and producing a new type of business publication would come to define the industry's next fifteen years.

CONCLUSION

The time was ripe in the mid-1910s for the film industry trade papers to grow in size and importance. The rise of the feature film, the power vacuum that formed from the decline of the MPPC, and the industry's need to organize in opposition to censorship all offered new opportunities for the trade press. The most successful editors, William A. Johnston and W. Stephen Bush, seized on these conditions and transformed themselves into influential industry figures. They were active participants and leaders within the motion picture industry, not merely chroniclers of it.

William A. Johnston and his *Motion Picture News* left an especially influential mark. Although he invented very little himself, his importation of practices and ideals from the growing field of industrial journalism changed the film industry's trade press. Data aggregation and market reports, a separate magazine for theater equipment, and an emphasis on circulation quality rather than quantity all became integral parts of the motion picture trade press for the next century. Johnston, however, proved unwilling to follow the calls of industrial journalism to stop printing publicity announcements for advertisers. His continuation of this practice—which grew at a parallel pace to his booming pages of advertising—earned him enemies, particularly among small exhibitors and the trade paper editor who understood them and spoke to them directly. When the Board of Trade came under fire and collapsed in spring 1916, the perception among small exhibitors that Johnston represented the interests of manufacturers, and not theater owners, only increased.

As Johnston's competitor, *Moving Picture World*, reported on these strains within the industry and advocated for the leadership role of exhibitors, internal strains were occurring at the paper's offices. W. Stephen Bush was *Moving Picture World's* most famous columnist and one of the paper's editors. But unlike Johnston, he did not manage the publishing side of the paper or retain a major ownership stake in it. Since the death of *Moving Picture World's* cofounder, J. P. Chalmers, in 1912, the paper had been owned and published by Chalmers's father and brother. These two men were the primary beneficiaries of Bush's tireless activities as a film reviewer, censorship watchdog, and exhibitor advocate. And, ultimately, it was the Chalmers clan, not Bush, who controlled the paper's direction.

What if Bush could edit and own a large stake in a new trade journal, one unquestionably devoted to the American exhibitor? It is unclear who first hatched the idea. But what is clear is that by the fall of 1916 Bush was plotting with MPELA

president Lee A. Ochs and Merritt Crawford, former assistant editor of *Motion Picture News*, to launch a new trade paper. The new publication, *Exhibitor's Trade Review*, prompted, in the words of *Variety*, “the war of the motion picture trade journals”—with libel lawsuits, accusations of blackmail, and a growing perception that the trade press had become an industry problem.⁹⁵