

Embassy cinema: what WikiLeaks reveals about US state support for Hollywood

Media, Culture & Society

2017, Vol. 39(7) 1063–1077

© The Author(s) 2017



Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0163443716686673

journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs**Paul Moody**

Brunel University London, UK

Abstract

In an article for Foreign Affairs at the outbreak of the World War II, film producer Walter Wanger referred to Hollywood movies as ‘120,000 American ambassadors’. The preeminence of Hollywood in presenting US ideology to the world has been asserted ever since. Yet the relationship between Hollywood and America’s actual ambassadors, employed by the global network of American embassies, has rarely been investigated, despite the key role that this often overlooked aspect of the state apparatus plays in the maintenance of Hollywood’s commercial interests and American cultural hegemony. The release by WikiLeaks in November 2010 of over 250,000 diplomatic cables has provided an opportunity to address this gap, by offering researchers an unparalleled insight into the worldwide network of American embassies. This article employs these documents to explain how these embassies have influenced global film policies since early 2003, and the implications they have for conceptions of American power in the wake of the ‘War on Terror’.

Keywords

cultural diplomacy, Hollywood, soft power, US Embassies, US State Department, WikiLeaks

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, several detractors sought to distinguish, in the words of former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, ‘real Americans’ from ‘celluloid Americans’ (Gingrich and Schweizer, 2003), arguing that the attacks on the World Trade Center were emblematic of a reaction to the pervasive Hollywood

Corresponding author:

Paul Moody, Brunel University London, Kingston Lane, Uxbridge UB8 3PH, UK.

Email: paul.moody@brunel.ac.uk

construct of America. Yet despite these reservations, Hollywood's relationship with Washington has, in recent decades, strengthened to such a degree that the epithet 'Washwood' is now frequently used to describe the industry (Lewis et al., 2002: 130), which, it is argued, regularly functions as a tub-thumper for the American military industrial complex. While there have been a number of significant recent studies that place this relationship in a fuller socioeconomic context (Jenkins, 2012; Jenkins and Alford, 2012; Kellner, 2010; Miller et al., 2004; Robb, 2004), the importance of the global network of US embassies in this system, and their role in Hollywood's cultural hegemony, is often overlooked. Until recently, this involvement has been examined only in a handful of articles, which focus on the years immediately following the Second World War (Colman, 2009; Jarvie, 1990; Lee, 2008; Swann, 1991; Trumbour, 2007). Yet, the release by WikiLeaks in 2011 of a tranche of over 250,000 US embassy cables has provided an opportunity to explore how this process operates in the 21st century.

Using these documents, this article will explore the role of American embassies in global film policy from 2003 to 2010 and examine how the US State Department sought to use Hollywood to support American foreign policy aims. In so doing, I argue that not only does Hollywood rely on the network of US embassies to extend and maintain its global dominance, but also that at the turn of the century, it became a more important agent than it had ever been before in the wider pursuit of America's international interests. After outlining a brief history of the interactions between US embassies and Hollywood, the article will explore how from 2001 onward, the US State Department and its global network of embassies facilitated this gradual shift in the nature of Hollywood's relationship with Washington and will assess the implications of this development for conceptions of the nature of American power.

A brief history of US embassy involvement in Hollywood

As early as 1916, US embassies were reporting to the State Department on the opportunities for American movies in the world film market, with the advent of the First World War realizing Hollywood's global importance in terms of both its economic and political impact. This information would in turn be relayed to the Hollywood studios (Lee, 2008: 379), a practice that was part of a wider governmental strategy to establish Hollywood's international dominance, which by the 1920s was firmly entrenched (Thompson, 1985). With its financial advantage confirmed, the Department of Commerce, led by Herbert Hoover, sought to capitalize on its cultural reach. Hoover had appointed Dr Julius Klein as head of the department's Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce (BFDC), which provided commercial attachés to US embassies, and by 1926 Klein had established a Motion Picture Section managed by Clarence Jackson North (Bjork, 2000: 577). It was North who was to further embed the work of the department with America's global embassies, operating as a conduit between the consulates and Hollywood's commercial interests. North received regular reports from the Department of Commerce's attachés, asking them to 'report changes in overseas demand that could be attributed to motion pictures' (Trumbour, 2007: 64), and while these activities were in essence fairly inconsequential monitoring of international business, they laid the foundations for more significant interventions during the Second World War.

By 1942, Roosevelt had established the Office of Wartime Information, which soon began taking an interest in Hollywood productions, primarily as a state censor (Nye, 2008: 98), but by 1944 a US State Department memorandum, 'American Motion Pictures in the Post-War World', marked a shift toward a more proactive approach to Hollywood. The document urged foreign ambassadors to provide advice and assistance to the Hollywood studios, asserting that the State Department 'desires to cooperate fully in the protection of the American motion picture industry abroad' (Jarvie, 1990: 280). In return, the memo's author, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin American Affairs Adolf A Berle Jr, requested that 'the industry will cooperate wholeheartedly with the government with a view to ensuring that the pictures distributed abroad will reflect credit on the good name and reputation of this country and its institutions' (Trumbour, 2007: 89).

Berle's edict marked a major ideological shift in Hollywood's relationship with the US government after the Second World War, by presenting the primary importance of American film exports as their ability to create goodwill toward America, with their depictions of in vogue notions of democracy and anti-communism (Jarvie, 1990: 278). This change from the notion of film as merely a harbinger of commerce to the enhanced status of that of a cultural ambassador was prompted by the tenure of Eric Johnston as the head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) trade body, who had replaced Will Hays in 1945. The 'Hays Office' had already created a 'Foreign Division', which was its official conduit to the State Department and the BFDC (De Grazia, 2005: 299), but Johnston immediately rebranded the organization as the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) and formed the Motion Picture Export Association (MPEA) as the department responsible for representing Hollywood abroad. Johnston was President of the US Chamber of Commerce, and his links with the State Department often gave the impression to other countries that his position in negotiations had government approval (Swann, 1991: 4). This perception was not entirely without justification; while the MPAA's former incarnation was close to the US government, under Johnston's leadership this relationship became even more pronounced, and it became an increasingly powerful industry body that lobbied aggressively on behalf of the Hollywood studios, so much so that it earned the moniker 'the little State Department' (Lee, 2008: 376).

The most detailed study of the influence of Johnston's MPAA is Jonathan Colman's (2009) analysis of the London embassy's negotiations over British film policy during 1947–1948. Colman argues that the embassy's intervention was instrumental in the reduction of controls imposed by Britain on foreign film imports, which threatened a number of other reciprocal economic benefits. In fact, the embassy believed that this issue had the potential to destabilize the impending 'Marshall Plan'¹ itself, with Hollywood poised to launch a wave of anti-British propaganda should the export of its films to the British market be restricted further. Johnston personally negotiated on behalf of the MPAA with Don Bliss, Commercial Attaché at the London embassy, and Bliss' remonstrations to the British Board of Trade resulted in an agreement on a screen time quota and removal of the distributors' quota from the upcoming 1948 Cinematograph Films Act (Jarvie, 1990: 281). As Colman (2009) concludes, 'it is clear that the US Embassy had a positive role ... [It] was sensitive to wider foreign policy issues as well as knowledgeable about the complexities of the film trade, and kept Washington informed' (p. 426). Colman regards the

embassy's intervention as one of reasoned broker, mitigating the more aggressive free-market posturing of the Hollywood studios and the staunchly protectionist goals of the British government, and this moment has, until now, been regarded as one of the last times that a US embassy exerted any significant influence over international film policy.

Despite a few sporadic examples of individual ambassadors making personal interventions since the 1950s (such as Clare Booth Luce, Ambassador to Italy, threatening to withdraw from the judging panel of the Venice Film Festival after taking offense at the depiction of the US school system in its planned screening of *The Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, US, 1955)), as Paul Swann argues, 'most US Embassy reports ... dating from the 1950s might be characterized as "damage control" assessments' (Swann, 1991: 14), with hardly any evidence of direct involvement. Yet the cables released by Wikileaks in 2010 demonstrate that, at least during the first decade of the 21st century, embassy collusion with Hollywood was even more prevalent than during the 1940s.

American power and its development in the wake of the 'War on Terror'

Joseph Nye offers one explanation as to why the embassy records depict only a handful of interventions after the Second World War. In his *Bound to Lead*, Nye (1990) argues that the Cold War resulted in the development of a new expression of power, one that differed from traditional military and diplomatic channels and which instead was represented by 'the ability to get what one wants through persuasion or attraction rather than coercion' (Wilson, 2008: 114). This was a 'soft power' that was nebulous and embedded within less tangible concepts, ideas and culture, and crucially, could indirectly co-opt various parties into supporting US policies, by the appeal of the values that underpinned them and the American way of life more broadly. In this reading, the activities of US embassies did not need to be as directly pursued as in the post-Second World War period, as the soft power impact of America's post-war economic support of Western Europe, coupled with the public appeal of its affluent consumerism, ensured that its influence on international affairs was potent and widespread.

The ubiquity of American soft power since the Second World War has led some commentators to argue that it has established a de facto 'imperialist' project, with Victoria de Grazia (2005) arguing that the US

offered a model of informal empire, with its outright colonial adventures aberrant, circumscribed, and generally short-lived. In post-World II [sic] western Europe, to the degree that US power has been characterized as imperial, it has been to distinguish its light touch as befitting an 'empire by invitation', an 'empire by consensus', or an 'empire of fun'. (p. 6)

De Grazia's (2005) preferred term for this form of American post-war power is 'market empire', the roots of which she traces back to Woodrow Wilson (p. 3) and which, fundamentally, involves regarding 'other nations as having limited sovereignty over their public space' – a concept that posits American commercial interests imposing themselves on foreign markets under the auspices of free trade, reasoning that the population would benefit 'not just from the traffic of goods, but also from the principles embedded

in them' (De Grazia, 2005: 6). The example of Hollywood was a case in point: 'its promotion would stimulate not only more trade, but also a lively local market in new identities and pleasures' (De Grazia, 2005: 6).

By 2001, George W Bush's administration, and especially its self-proclaimed 'War on Terror', cemented the long-term interdependence of the 'market empire's' soft power with a number of 'hard' power military offensives, most notably in the invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. Despite these wars following a long line of post-Second World War American military interventions, there was a general agreement among critics that Bush's foreign policy marked a decisive shift in American strategy toward a more traditionally 'hard power' approach, to the detriment of America's international standing. This transition has led scholars such as Hurrell (2005) and Agnew (2005) to describe American power in terms of 'hegemony', rather than empire, which Grondin (2006) argues 'has the capacity to encompass both the Gramscian concept of consensus and persuasion as well as the classical view that highlights the role of military power and coercion in the evolution of US foreign policy' (pp. 1–2). As Dalby (2006) identifies, this approach becomes more persuasive in the wake of the Bush administration's response to the attacks on the World Trade Center, which was presented in 2002 as part of the 'National Security Strategy of the United States of America' (NSS) and effectively acted as a 'codification of the "Bush doctrine"' (Dalby, 2006: 42). The NSS and the subsequent National Military Strategy (NMS) in 2004 asserted 'preemptive action against "rogue states" and threats to the US' (Dalby, 2006: 43) and stated that 'US military power must be ready to serve at any time if it is to have an impact' (Grondin, 2006: 16).

One of the fiercest critics of the 'Bush doctrine', the former lead US representative to the UN General Assembly Suzanne Nossel, summed up the prevailing mood in *Foreign Affairs* in 2004, in which she argued, 'September 11 transformed Bush's foreign policy. Channeling outrage over the attacks, the administration shifted from a detached to a defiant unilateralism. Bush adopted an evangelical, militarist agenda' (Nossel, 2004: 134). In Nossel's (2004) analysis, this shift in focus toward a hard power approach was fruitless and had led to the United States being 'seen as an oppressor, hungry for oil and power' (p. 134), and several critics started to lament the decline of America's soft power as a result. Authors such as Nye (2004c) and Kurlantzick (2005) have identified the roots of this retrenchment in the preceding Clinton administration, in which a gradual shift from funding soft power initiatives (from reducing the budget of the United States Information Agency through to the failure to arrest a decline in listeners to the *Voice of America*) first began (Kurlantzick, 2005: 420). In Kurlantzick's (2005) analysis, the crisis had become self-propagating, with the decline in spending and interest in public diplomacy (itself due partly to an overconfident belief in the permanence and international dominance of America's soft power) leading to a relative deterioration in America's influence, which in turn had forced the Bush administration to resort to hard power alternatives, as it was unable to achieve its foreign policy aims via diplomatic means (p. 423). In this context, the failure to achieve widespread international agreement on action against Iraq was an inevitable consequence of this atrophy, and in turn, the subsequent US-led invasion generated further anti-American sentiment, leading to an even greater reduction in America's international standing and once again serving to reinforce the primacy of America's hard power policy options (Nye, 2004a: 255).

Kurlantzick and Nye believed that this shift had to be halted in order to preserve America's position in international relations, arguing that America's success will 'depend upon our developing a better balance of hard and soft power in our foreign policy' (Nye, 2004a: 270), a concept that he and Nossel would label 'smart power'.² Nossel (2004) defined this alternative as 'knowing that the United States' own hand is not always its best tool: U.S. interests are furthered by enlisting others on behalf of U.S. goals, through alliances, international institutions, careful diplomacy, and the power of ideals' (p. 134). By 2007, Nye would become Co-Chair of The Center for Strategic and International Studies' 'Commission on Smart Power', which argued for the United States to implement a smart power strategy, by 'once again investing in the global good' and taking the lead in global development and public diplomacy (Armitage and Nye, 2007: 1). It echoed Nossel's (2004) arguments by asserting that

Washington is currently creating new sources of friction, turning friends into antagonists, damaging once-valuable policy tools, and impairing its own ability to harness the power of its citizenry, bureaucracy, and allies. It must reverse course and embrace a smarter, less draining brand of power guided by a compelling and coherent conception of national interest. (p. 134)

Nossel and Nye's rebranding of US foreign policy has been criticized (Lane, 2010), yet it was extremely influential on State Department thinking in the final years of the Bush administration, and especially on how the subsequent Obama government conceptualized its foreign policy in public, with Hillary Clinton referring explicitly to the term in her confirmation hearing as US Secretary of State (Nye, 2009: 160). Yet neither Nossel nor the many authors to have discussed American power during this period were to know that the State Department had been pursuing 'smarter' methods all along, using its extensive network of embassies throughout the duration of the Bush and Obama administrations to provide a link between the government's 'hard' and 'soft' power initiatives. This data came to light in 2010 as part of the release by WikiLeaks of a large tranche of American embassy cables, and these documents not only reveal the extent of the State Department's collusion with Hollywood but also provide a unique insight into the nature of American power during this period.

The WikiLeaks cables

Initially, only a small selection of embassy cables relating to Icelandic politics was made public, primarily through major international news outlets, with the original copies hosted on WikiLeaks' own website. However, it was the publication of 220 redacted cables via WikiLeaks' media partners from 28 November 2010 that first began to detail the correspondence that had been sent to the US State Department from 274 consulates and embassies around the world. A steady stream of revelations followed each subsequent disclosure, but after numerous attacks on the WikiLeaks site, and the publication of passcodes and decryption keys to the material that in principle made all of the unredacted cables available online, WikiLeaks took the decision to release the full tranche of 251,287 cables on 1 September 2011.

The website *Cablegate* (<https://cablegatesearch.wikileaks.org>) had by this point already created a searchable database of the 2000-plus redacted cables that had been released, and soon after WikiLeaks uploaded the entire cache, *Cablegate* made all of these documents fully keyword searchable. I used the *Cablegate* website for my research,³ focusing on keywords such as ‘cinema’, ‘film’ and ‘Hollywood’, among others, re-referencing key names if they appeared in any of these more generic searches. There is a vast amount of material – a search for ‘Hollywood’, for example, retrieves 207 cables, and a search for ‘cinema’ 390. While some cables stretch back to 1966, the majority are from 2002 onward, and while this is partly due to the limitations of the tranche released, the tone of the cables suggests that there was an increase in the frequency of documents referring to films and filmmaking in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Cables discussing cinema were sent from most major industrialized countries, to varying degrees. Cables from the Middle East and Australasia tended to focus on more cultural concerns and were less frequent than the cables originating from South America and Europe, where economic issues, mainly regarding intellectual property rights (IPR), appeared to be more pressing. By far the greatest concentration of cables originated from Canada, which was roughly equally divided into cultural and economic matters. The close proximity of Canada to the United States is one obvious reason as to why there was a greater number from this region, but the content also suggests that this focus on Canada was as much to do with the American belief that IPR violations were especially prevalent there.

Much of the material is of a mundane, prosaic nature, related to simple discussions of rumors relating to local film censorship, through to gossip about discussions with various foreign dignitaries and their cinematic tastes.⁴ By far the most commonly discussed issue was that of IPR, specifically those relating to copyright violations, or in the parlance of the US embassies, ‘piracy’. Many of the countries that were deemed to be persistent offenders were placed on the Office of the United States Trade Representative’s (USTR) ‘Special 301 Report’ list,⁵ published annually to identify countries whose IPR enforcement (or more precisely, lack of enforcement) was perceived to harm US trade. Over 970 of the cables published by WikiLeaks referred to the term ‘Special 301’, and several of these reports dealt directly with IPR relating to Hollywood. This article will not address the cables that deal with IPR violations, although reference to the sheer volume of these documents serves to provide a context for the use of Hollywood as a vehicle of America’s foreign policy in the period. Instead, I have focused on the material that directly addresses cultural concerns in areas of strategic importance to US international relations, as an indication of how American culture in general, and Hollywood in particular, was employed by embassies to support America’s national interests.

International perception and anti-Americanism

Cables from the first few years following the 9/11 attacks often present what might be regarded as a ‘soft power’ approach, in response to a perceived increase in anti-Americanism after the start of the ‘War on Terror’. This is in line with the appointment of Charlotte Beers, a former CEO of several high-profile advertising firms, to Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department in October 2001. Beer’s objective, supported by US\$15 million of government funding,

was to take 'market shares away from Jihad' by targeting 'disaffected populations', especially in the Middle East and South Asia, 'where a poor perception of US (sic) leads to unrest, and unrest has proven to be a threat to our national and international security'. (De Grazia, 2005: 474)

In a cable from 2005, Linda Jewell, the US Ambassador in Quito, Ecuador, provided a succinct summary of why film screenings were a vital element of these 'cultural diplomacy' measures, arguing that

[Cultural programs help] create a more receptive environment for the completion of Mission goals by deepening understanding of US society and exposing audiences to aspects of American culture that they perhaps had not experienced before ... A well-selected series of independent and less-commercialized US films would be a powerful way to refute misconceptions and stereotypes about the US. (WikiLeaks, 22 December 2005: 05QUITO2920)

The cables show that this approach was adopted widely across China. For example, the Shanghai consulate showed American films to university audiences across the country, followed by a discussion by an embassy official about American society and politics (WikiLeaks, 22 June 2009: 09SHANGHAI271), and met with students at Nanjing University to discuss the release of *Nanjing! Nanjing!/City of Life and Death* (Lu Chuan, China, 2009), as part of a wider investigation into Sino-Japanese relations in the wake of the controversial film's release.⁶ In Beijing, the embassy's Center for Educational Exchange ran a question and answer session with Chinese director Li Yang, after a screening of his film *Mang Shan/Blind Mountain* (China, 2007) to 80 university students. The film covered the issue of human trafficking in China, and some of the audience criticized Yang for 'showcasing China's failings', arguing 'that it was "embarrassing" for China to be "exposing" its problems to the world' (WikiLeaks, 27 May 2009: 09BEIJING1404). However, several students were more positive about Yang's critique, and the embassy took the opportunity to present the measures undertaken by the United States to combat trafficking throughout the world (WikiLeaks, 27 May 2009: 09BEIJING1404). Of course, these cultural programs have always been a consistent feature of embassy activity, but what is interesting from the WikiLeaks cables is how often this activity was framed as a response to anti-American sentiment, which the embassies, acting on instructions from the State Department, were eager to dispel. Jewell, writing about her attempts to establish a cultural program in Ecuador's universities, claimed that this was especially challenging because they contained 'significant currents of anti-Americanism [which made] policy-based programming difficult' (WikiLeaks, 22 December 2005: 05QUITO2920), and it appears that universities were explicitly targeted as sites where anti-American views could be challenged. Jewell's conclusion was not an isolated one; by 2003, Beers had resigned from her role, and in her final testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee she argued that the 'gap between who we are and how we wish to be seen, and how we are in fact seen, is frighteningly wide' (De Grazia, 2005: 475).

One region that was perceived to be especially anti-American was Canada, and the extant cables depict a tense, fractious association between the two countries, and a Canadian government that sought to enhance the protection of its culture rather than erode it. These

tensions increased in the early 21st century, near the end of the final term of office for Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and in light of a government review into the cultural support for Canada's film industry, *Canadian Content in the 21st Century* (Canadian Heritage, 2002). Its recommendations sought to uphold the principle that 'Canadian content can be created only by Canadians ... The mere fact of being very largely created by Canadians is what gives an audiovisual work its unique Canadian identity' (WikiLeaks, 25 June 2003: 03OTTAWA1797). The report also recommended that the distribution of Canadian feature films in Canada be reserved for Canadian owned and controlled companies, as well as proposing a readjustment of the funding eligibility rules that would see minimum expenditure requirements applied to four key 'creative costs': authors, creative collaborators, performers and technicians. Of additional concern to the United States was the proposal that advertisements for Canadian feature films could be exempted from the country's statutory 12-minute-per-hour TV advertising limit, thus providing prominence to these productions over US films (WikiLeaks, 25 June 2003: 03OTTAWA1797). The assessment of the Ottawa Ambassador, Paul Celluci, in cables from the start of the decade, was that while opinion in Canada tended toward upholding these cultural protection measures, there were changes on the horizon, most notably the impending retirement of Prime Minister Chrétien, which suggested potential for a policy more favorable to the United States in the future (WikiLeaks, 25 June 2003: 03OTTAWA1797).

However, the story told in the cables is one of increased antipathy toward the United States and a strengthening of protectionist measures over the remainder of the decade. By 2005, US consulates were reporting on initiatives like the enhanced tax credit offered to filmmakers in Nova Scotia, from 30% to 35% within Halifax and 35% to 40% for productions in areas 30 km or more from the city centre, along with similar measures undertaken in Ontario in 2004, and British Columbia in 2005 (WikiLeaks, 18 April 2005: 05HALIFAX101). Likewise, within 5 years of Celluci's assessment, the Ottawa embassy would report that 'Canadian content' was rapidly becoming 'anti-American' content, arguing that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) had, in its current season, presented 'a number of programs [that] offer Canadian viewers their fill of nefarious American officials carrying out equally nefarious deeds in Canada while Canadian officials either oppose them or fail trying' (WikiLeaks, 25 January 2008: 08OTTAWA136). The cable, signed by Ambassador David Wilkins, suggested that

the degree of comfort with which Canadian broadcast entities, including those financed by Canadian tax dollars, twist current events to feed long-standing negative images of the U.S. – and the extent to which the Canadian public seems willing to indulge in the feast – is noteworthy as an indication of the kind of insidious negative popular stereotyping we are increasingly up against in Canada. (WikiLeaks, 25 January 2008: 08OTTAWA136)

Wilkins' main concern was the new CBC show, *The Border* (CBC, 20082010), which premiered on 7 January 2008 and depicted the dilemmas faced by Canadian customs officers on the US–Canada border. However, the criticisms even extended to the sitcom, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (CBC, 2007–2012), which also portrayed border relation problems, and the *H2O* (CBC, 2004) mini-series which, after presenting a scenario where the US engineered Canadian citizens to vote in favor of becoming part of the

United States, featured a union between Canadians and Europeans in ‘an attempt to end America’s hegemony’ (WikiLeaks, 25 January 2008: 08OTTAWA136). The cable concluded that ‘We need to do everything we can to make it more difficult for Canadians to fall into the trap of seeing all U.S. policies as the result of nefarious faceless US bureaucrats anxious to squeeze their northern neighbor’ (WikiLeaks, 25 January 2008: 08OTTAWA136), and while the Canadian cables demonstrate long held rivalries between the two nations, they also speak of America’s increasing paranoia about its international perception during this period.

Embassy interventions

These fears fueled increasingly interventionist attempts to control the portrayal of the United States throughout the globe from the middle of the decade onward, in line with America’s increasingly expansive military endeavors. The earliest explicit example of this type of intervention is recorded in a cable from the Wellington Embassy in 2004, which outlines an account of direct US interference in a New Zealand Cabinet Minister’s fundraising event. In a partial extract of the original cable, it reported that Marian Hobbs, New Zealand Minister for the Environment, was due to host a screening of Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (US, 2004) as part of a Labor Party fundraiser. The Deputy Chief of Mission at the Wellington embassy, David Burnett, contacted the offices of both Prime Minister Helen Clark and Hobbs, and while he was declined a meeting with Hobbs, she withdrew from hosting the fundraiser shortly afterwards (WikiLeaks, 30 July 2004: 04WELLINTON647). The comment from the Ambassador, Charles Swindells, opined that ‘There’s a reason this particular Minister is nicknamed “Boo Boo” Hobbs ... it is probable that this potential fiasco may only have been averted because of our phone calls’, before explaining that he would use a scheduled meeting with Clark, to ‘remind her that we would really rather not get dragged into internal NZ political issues’ (WikiLeaks, 30 July 2004: 04WELLINTON647).

As the decade developed, interventions also began to take the form of support for the expansion of Hollywood production and distribution into markets that had strategic international significance, such as Bulgaria. In January 2006, a cable from the Sofia embassy recounted the ongoing negotiations over the privatization of Bulgaria’s Boyana Film Studios. Dating from the 1950s, Boyana had been responsible for about 25 Bulgarian features per year, although after struggling in the early 1990s it became focused on servicing national television productions (Iordanova, 2007: 105). In addition, The American film company Nu Image had located the majority of its productions there since 1997, all of which had created a number of jobs for Bulgarians and provided a boost to the local economy. Despite this, by 2002 the Bulgarian government had instigated measures to privatize the studio, setting a valuation of 50 million Lev, roughly equivalent to 25 million Euros (Iordanova, 2007: 105). By the time bids had been invited in 2004, the asking price had dropped to only 5 million Euros, and four offers had been received, from the German Bavaria Film, the British Ealing Studios, an international consortium called Dragon International and finally, the American company with a strong historical connection to the studio, Nu Image (Iordanova, 2007: 105). Nu Image won the process with a bid of 6.25 million Euros for 95% of the shares (Iordanova, 2007: 105), but despite its success, plans to sell the studios to the company were not popular, with the studio’s managing

board firmly against the move and a number of Bulgarian filmmakers objecting to the low-budget action films that Nu Image was at that time associated with. Others questioned the criteria for the bidding process, arguing that the requirement to have produced over 100 films favored companies like Nu Image, precisely because it had made such a large number of films at low cost (Roth, 2004).

However, what these individuals did not know was that a series of cables from the Sofia embassy pointed to the close involvement of official US representatives throughout the procedure, mounting sustained pressure to ensure that Nu Image was successful. This is first documented in 2005, when Ambassador Beyrle met with Roumen Ovcharov, the new Bulgarian Minister of Economy and Energy, and ‘raised the need for Bulgaria to finalize the sale of Boyana film studios to American film producer Nu Image’, with Ovcharov noting that the sale was ‘currently tied up in the judicial system’ (WikiLeaks, 15 September 2005: 05SOFIA1597). The embassy acknowledged its close involvement in the negotiations from the start of the bidding, arguing that it ‘provided advocacy support at every stage of the process by pressing the Government to follow its own procedures under [its] Privatization Law’ (WikiLeaks, 19 January 2006: 06SOFIA80), and aside from the obvious economic benefits for the American industry to have a stake in Boyana, the intensity of the embassy’s lobbying was also a response to the State Department’s desire to expand its influence in the region. This interest in Bulgaria was dictated by the American view of the country as a strategic territory, demonstrated by then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signing a Defense Cooperation Agreement between the United States and Bulgaria in April 2006, which established four Bulgarian-American Joint Military Facilities in the country (Rice, 2006). This engagement, and the presence and interest of the Secretary of State, increased the pressure on Beyrle to complete the Boyana deal swiftly, and by July 2006 he had met with Bulgarian President Georgi Parvanov to discuss what he believed to be the country’s prohibitive business culture, once more mentioning the ‘long battle to conclude the privatization of the Boyana Film Studio as a conspicuous bad example in this regard’ (WikiLeaks, 3 July 2006: 06SOFIA918). At the meeting’s conclusion, he had secured an agreement that Parvanov would ‘check on the state of play of the “notorious” Boyana deal’ (WikiLeaks, 3 July 2006: 06SOFIA918), and 4 months later, 95% of Boyana Studio’s shares were transferred to Nu Image. Beyrle regarded the completion of the deal as the result of ‘sustained embassy pressure in the face of strong-arm tactics from special interests’ (WikiLeaks, 17 November 2006: 06SOFIA1575), and it is no surprise that a few years later, a board member of Nu Image, Dimitar Dereliev, would be recorded in an embassy cable as being ‘committed to forging a cooperative relationship with industry and the US government to address IPR concerns’ (WikiLeaks, 26 October 2009: 09SOFIA603), cementing the US ‘piracy’ agenda into Boyana’s business culture.

Post-Bush

After the election of Barack Obama in 2008, there was a subtle, but distinct change in the nature of the correspondence between the embassies and the US State Department. With the US government’s defense strategy moving toward withdrawal from its major military endeavors, the cables depict a subtler approach to its soft power initiatives in its strategically important regions, especially the Middle East. Interestingly, several accounts

recorded in the cables suggest that this ‘softening’ of international relations was often a two-way process, such as in Iran, where the United States had begun soliciting views from local filmmakers. The director Gholam Reza Siamizadeh described to the Baku embassy how Hollywood films were ‘very popular’ locally and stated that while most were not shown in Iranian cinemas, they were widely available on DVD (WikiLeaks, 4 March 2009: 09BAKU172). In addition, he asserted, ‘80-90 per cent of the Iranian people have no problem with America’, and they had a ‘good feeling’ about Obama (WikiLeaks, 4 March 2009: 09BAKU172).

Likewise, cables from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, depict a country that was gradually becoming more receptive to an increase in the number of American programmes that were beginning to feature on Saudi TV networks, and the cultural changes that were perceived to be resulting from this. Chargé d’Affaires David Rundell recounted meetings with Saudi industry contacts, who argued that ‘the American programming on Channels 4 and 5 were proving the most popular among Saudis’, with Arabic subtitled versions of *The Late Show With David Letterman* (CBS, 1993–2015), *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004–2012) and *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) among the most popular programs (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651). One of Rundell’s contacts suggested that this was part of a general Westernization in ‘remote, conservative corners of the country’, where ‘you no longer see Bedouins, but kids in western dress’ (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651). Other notable mentions were given to the films *Michael Clayton* (Tony Gilroy, US, 2007), for its illustration of ‘heroic honesty in the face of corruption’, and *Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan, US, 2002), for the depiction of ‘respect for the law over self-interest’ (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651). However, in Rundell’s estimation, what was important was not the content of these films, but the fact that these types of commercial productions were penetrating the Saudi market much more effectively than existing US government-funded broadcasting, including its Arabic-language news channel *Alhurra*, formed in 2004. As another of Rundell’s contacts would elaborate,

It’s still all about the War of Ideas [sic] here, and the American programming on MBC [Middle East Broadcasting Center] and Rotana is winning over ordinary Saudis in a way that ‘Al Hurra’ [sic] and other US propaganda never could. Saudis ... are fascinated by US culture in a way they never were before. (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651)

According to this contact, the proliferation of American programmes and movies led many Saudis to believe that there was a direct intervention by the US government in all of the country’s television broadcasting, a suspicion exacerbated by the existence of *Alhurra*. Likewise, it was commonly believed that Rupert Murdoch’s relationship with Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, Saudi royal family member and the main shareholder of the Rotana media group (which broadcasts Fox and Fox Movies in Saudi Arabia), had a ‘clear ideological motive behind it’ (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651). While Rundell viewed their relationship as more of an economic than an ideological proposition, he recounted the screening of two films during the Eid holiday on the free-to-air Fox Movie Channel, which depicted ‘respectful, supportive American husbands’ and argued that these depictions were helping to have a ‘profound effect on the values and worldviews of Saudi audiences’ (WikiLeaks, 11 May 2009: 09RIYADH651). It is clear

from the Riyadh cables that the embassy believed that market forces were leading to a gradual penetration of American culture into the public consciousness, if this at present only manifested in changes in the way that some people dressed, rather than any hard evidence that suggested a wider change in attitude or customs.

Conclusion

Film producer Walter Wanger called American films ‘ambassadors’ (Swann, 1991: 2) for the United States, and it is no surprise that these cultural exports would go hand in hand with their literal governmental counterparts. As Paul Swann observed of the immediate post–Second World War period, ‘it is very easy to portray a situation of cozy collusion between the film industry and the US State Department’ (Swann, 1991: 5), and the Wikileaks cables certainly support the notion that the State Department and its network of international embassies were intimately involved with Hollywood during the early 21st century. However, the cables also speak of the nature of American power in the early 21st century. Douglas Kellner argues that ‘the intersection of film and politics during the Bush-Cheney era documents the end of an era of American unilateralism and imperialism and the collapse of the Republican Party administration and its rightwing supporters’ imperial dreams’ (Kellner, 2010: 258). But the evidence presented by these documents suggests the opposite conclusion; namely, that American ‘imperialism’ was alive and well during this period, with Hollywood providing an ideal example of what de Grazia defines as America’s ‘market empire’.

But what is most striking about American power in the 21st century is that its expression is increasingly clandestine. Whether ‘hard’, ‘soft’ or ‘smart’, current conceptions of American power are all predicated on being *public* – for without a public expression and awareness of these powers, they cannot be exerted with any potency. On the contrary, the activities depicted by the tranche of Wikileaks documents reveals an approach that was in essence clandestine, conducted by embassies away from the public gaze. While a detailed theoretical exploration of the nature of this power is beyond the scope of this article, the cables make it evident that the covert support provided by US embassies was less an expression of ‘soft’ or even ‘smart’ power, but of a distinctly surreptitious power that was deployed with abandon, and without scrutiny, and grew in pervasiveness during the Bush administration. It appears that there was a subtler approach to the use of this power after Obama’s election as President, and one can only speculate as to the interventions that have taken place in the years since the cache of leaked cables was published. It is the role of future papers to investigate how some of the issues identified by the WikiLeaks releases have developed since 2010, and how the new dimension to American power that they suggest can be theorized further. However, in a decade in which American values and interests appear to be under even greater threat, it is likely that the actions documented in the extant WikiLeaks cables have become even more prevalent.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. The first payment to Britain as part of the Marshall plan was made in April 1948.
2. Joseph Nye (2004b) had also used the phrase ‘smart power’ in his book of the same year, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, but Nossel’s article was the first to articulate this approach as a distinctive development of ‘soft’ power.
3. Cablegate has now been subsumed into the main WikiLeaks website, but the embassy cables can now be searched at <https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/>
4. See for example, Zhejiang Province Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping’s assertion of his love of American cinema to US Ambassador Clark T Randt Jr in 2007 (WikiLeaks, 19 March 2007: 07BEIJING1840).
5. See <http://www.iipa.com/pdf/2013SPEC301HISTORICALCHART.pdf> for a full list of countries that have been placed on the Special 301 list since 1989. Copies of each report from 1989 onward can be found at <http://keionline.org/ustr/special301>
6. The film was a depiction of the Nanjing massacre and was controversial for portraying the event through the eyes of a sympathetic Japanese soldier (WikiLeaks, 12 June 2009: 09SHANGHAI258).

References

- Agnew J (2005) *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Power*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple Press.
- Armitage R and Nye JS (2007) *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Safer, More Secure America*. Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Bjork UJ (2000) The US commerce department aids Hollywood exports, 1921–1933. *The Historian* 62(3): 575–588.
- Canadian Heritage (2002) *Canadian Content in the 21st Century*. Montréal, QC, Canada: Canadian Heritage.
- Colman J (2009) The US embassy and British film policy, 1947–1948: a ‘lesser but highly explosive question’. *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 7: 413–430.
- Dalby S (2006) Geopolitics, grand strategy and the Bush doctrine: the strategic dimensions of US hegemony under George W Bush. In: David C and Grondin D (eds) *Hegemony or Empire? The Redefinition of US Power under George W Bush*. Oxford: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 33–50.
- De Grazia V (2005) *Irresistible Empire: America’s Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gingrich N and Schweizer P (2003) We can thank Hollywood for our ugly-American image. *LA Times*, 21 January. Available at: <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jan/21/opinion/oe-gingrich21> (accessed 16 February 2015).
- Grondin D (2006) Coming to terms with America’s liberal hegemony/empire. In: David C and Grondin D (eds) *Hegemony or Empire? The Redefinition of US Power under George W Bush*. Oxford: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 1–20.
- Hurrell A (2005) Pax Americana or the Empire of Insecurity? *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5(2): 153–176.
- Iordanova D (2007) Bulgaria. In: Hjort M and Petrie D (eds) *The Cinema of Small Nations*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 93–112.
- Jarvie I (1990) The postwar economic foreign policy of the American film industry: Europe 1945–1950. *Film History* 4: 277–288.
- Jenkins T (2012) *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*. Austin, TX: University of Texas.

- Jenkins T and Alford M (2012) Intelligence activity in Hollywood: remembering the 'Agency' in CIA. *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 23: 1–19.
- Kellner D (2010) *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Kurlantzick J (2005) The decline of American soft power. *Current History* 104(686): 419–424.
- Lane C (2010) The unbearable lightness of soft power. In: Parmar I and Cox M (eds) *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, pp. 51–82.
- Lee K (2008) 'The little state department': hollywood and the MPAA's influence on US trade relations. *Northwestern Journal of International Law & Business* 28(2): 371–397.
- Lewis J, Maxwell R and Miller T (2002) Editorial. *Television & New Media* 3: 125–131.
- Miller T, Govil N, McMurria J, et al. (2004) *Global Hollywood 2*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nossel S (2004) Smart power. *Foreign Affairs* 83: 131–142.
- Nye J (1990) *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York: Basic Books.
- Nye J (2004a) Soft power and American foreign policy. *Political Science Quarterly* 119(2): 255–270.
- Nye J (2004b) *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Nye J (2004c) The decline of America's soft power: why Washington should worry. *Foreign Affairs* 83(3): 16–20.
- Nye J (2008) Public diplomacy and soft power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 616: 94–109.
- Nye J (2009) Get smart: combining hard and soft power. *Foreign Affairs* 88(4): 160–163.
- Rice C (2006) Remarks after signing defense cooperation agreement. In: *Speech presented at NATO informal meeting of foreign ministers*, Sofia, 27–28 April.
- Robb D (2004) *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Roth P (2004) UFO and Boyana film studios. *The Sofia Echo*, 1 July. Available at: http://sofiaecho.com/2004/07/01/636414_ufo-and-boyana-film-studios (accessed 14 March 2016).
- Swann P (1991) The little state department: hollywood and the state department in the postwar world. *American Studies International* 29: 2–19.
- Thompson K (1985) *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market, 1907–1934*. London: BFI.
- Trumpbour J (2007) *Selling Hollywood to the World: US and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920–1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson EJ III (2008) Hard power, soft power, smart power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 616: 110–124.