

The US embassy-Hollywood complex: The Sony Pictures hack and 21st century media imperialism

Abstract

This chapter examines the integral role played by US State Department embassies in serving American media imperialism around the world. Through a close analysis of emails hosted by WikiLeaks and released as part of a 2014 hack of Sony Pictures, the chapter demonstrates a mutually beneficial relationship between the network of global US embassies and global Hollywood, arguing that this connection provides substantial evidence for a continuance of US media imperialism in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Media imperialism, US embassies, Sony Pictures, Sony hack, WikiLeaks, Hollywood.

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On November 24th, 2014, one of Hollywood's biggest movie studios, Sony Pictures Entertainment, had its computer system compromised in what would become the largest hack of an entertainment company to date. The architects of this intrusion, the so-called 'Guardians of Peace', appeared to be acting in retaliation to the impending release of Sony's latest comedy, *The Interview* (Seth Rogen & Evan Goldberg, 2014), in which Seth Rogen and James Franco play two journalists who are travelling to North Korea to interview the country's leader, Kim Jong-un, but are intercepted by the CIA on-route and tasked with assassinating him instead. The film's content and original release schedule¹ were perceived to be provocative by the North Korean government, and after threats of retaliation if the film was released, eventually hackers uploaded several unreleased Sony films for free on the Internet, and then deposited tens of thousands of private documents online, which revealed personal details of Sony employees and full transcripts of a large amount of their email correspondence from 2013-2014. By April 2015, WikiLeaks had acquired this material and placed over 30,000 documents and 174,000 unredacted email transcripts on its website.

While screenwriters such as Aaron Sorkin protested that there was not 'even one sentence in one private email that was stolen that even hints at wrongdoing of any kind' (Sorkin 2014), the fallout led to Sony Pictures' then Chairperson, Amy Pascal, losing her job after a series of casually racist email exchanges with producer Scott Rudin were revealed² and the vast discrepancies in pay between men and women at the company were made public, leading to an industry-wide recalibration. Apart from these high-profile examples, there was little else from the hack that attracted serious media interest. However, this chapter argues that, in contrast to Sorkin's protestation, the leaked documents provide a unique insight into the relationship

between a Hollywood studio and the US Department of State, revealing how the US State uses its global network of embassies to geopolitically support the economic interests behind its most lucrative and recognisable cultural export: the Hollywood film. The leaked documents are analytically useful to this study, as they represent unguarded communications between US government officials and Hollywood business elites that are not normally circulated to the public and infrequently open to public scrutiny. I argue that these leaked documents highlight a symbiotic relationship between the US State and Hollywood, revealing examples of modern media imperialism in action and providing vital evidence in support of a theory that has often been criticised for lacking any empirical foundation.

Media imperialism revisited

Media imperialism emerged in the late seventies out of the pioneering work of Herbert Schiller (1969), whose concept of cultural imperialism was designed as a way of explaining the relationship between various cultural industries and the US state. As Sparks (2012) observes, Schiller claims that, first, “the media and cultural apparatuses of the USA, aided by the government, dominate the international trade in media” and, second, the “result of the continual consumption of this US-made material is effective propaganda for the ideas and values of the USA” (Sparks 2012, 284). These two propositions are at the core of most concepts of media imperialism, defined by Oliver Boyd-Barrett as

the process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial external pressures from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected (Boyd-Barrett 1977, 117).

After the end of the Cold War, new theories of globalization attempted to posit a post-imperial world and downplay the importance of nation states in the wake of new international media conglomerates (see Appadurai 1997, Straubhaar 1991, Thompson 1995, and Tomlinson 1991). However, this chapter argues that the key proposition of globalization is overstated, and instead, that the Sony hack clearly outlines how the US state and Hollywood remain closely entwined in a mutually beneficial relationship in the twenty-first century. Importantly, whereas most research on these state-corporate links has focused explicitly on Hollywood's connections to the US Department of Defense and US intelligence services (see Alford 2010, Jenkins 2012, Robb 2004, and Valentin 2005), this chapter extends the media imperialism thesis by exploring the symbiotic relationship between the US State Department and Hollywood, and the diplomatic agenda which has often been obscured by the focus on Hollywood's military connections.

I previously explored the geopolitical and economic relationships between the US state and Hollywood companies with an analysis of a cache of diplomatic cables from US embassies, released by WikiLeaks on November 2010. My first article focused on how the US State Department uses its embassies to monitor and challenge negative media portrayals of the US and to establish film production bases in foreign countries which will serve its political agenda (Moody 2017a). My second article demonstrated how the US State Department's embassies are used to monitor alleged breaches of Hollywood's intellectual property rights, enforce Free Trade Agreements which are often detrimental to the countries with which they are ratified, and pursue punitive measures against countries that do not comply with its edicts (Moody 2017b). Together, these two articles provide a significant counterpoint to post-imperial globalization theory by empirically demonstrating that a modern form of US media imperialism is in operation on a vast scale, and can be placed within a small body of revisionist literature (Boyd-Barrett 2015, Maxwell 2003, McChesney 2001, Mirrlees 2016a, 2016b, Morley 2006,

Murdock 2006) which in recent years has sought to engage with Schiller's original concept and reignite the wider projects of cultural and media imperialism for the 21st century. Thus, this chapter concurs with Mirrlees' restatement of the key claims of media imperialism in 2016, to the effect that

the US culture industry is tremendously significant to the US empire as an engine of capitalist growth, a tool and source for PR, a space of war, a means of building a national identity inside the US territory and projecting it to the world, a shaper of public opinion, and a source of the strategic imagination.

(Mirrlees 2016a, 63)

To make this case, this chapter takes the broad themes and methodology established in my earlier work and applies it to a case study of a modern Hollywood studio; albeit one that has a transnational dimension as part of Japan's wider Sony enterprise.³ Of the 174,000 emails released by the hackers, 206 specifically mention the word 'embassy', and 65 the word 'consulate'. I have reviewed all of these for this chapter, along with several hundred emails from specific US ambassadors to key Sony executives, in order to ascertain the level and variety of engagement between the US government and the company. I have not revealed any personal details in my analysis of the correspondence, nor have I named anyone who is not a senior Sony executive or US ambassador; although the references to the original documents may inevitably lead some readers to these details. By reviewing this material, I will produce an inside look at the mutually beneficial relationship between the US State department and one of the 'Big Six' Hollywood studios, and this specific case gives insight into the nature of media imperialism that is often not even captured in the classified embassy cables that comprised the sources for my earlier work. As Tony Shaw and Tricia Jenkins argue:

While most American government agencies today have entertainment liaison offices that work formally with Hollywood studios, the Sony emails suggest that, as was the case with the “state–private network” during the Cold War, a significant amount of the political messaging that occurs in US popular culture is accomplished outside this framework, namely through the private communications of well-placed individuals with shared interests who prefer to hide their connection lest they be accused of propaganda or censorship (Shaw & Jenkins 2017, 3).

Sony has many overt connections with the US government. Its then Chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment, Michael Lynton, was a member of two influential political think tanks: The Council of Foreign Relations and the RAND Corporation (Shaw & Jenkins 2017, 11), and Sony itself is a member of the Motion Picture Alliance of America (MPAA), which has a long history of lobbying of the US government. However, as Shaw and Jenkins demonstrate, Lynton would also regularly seek the advice of the US State Department when debating the release strategy for *The Interview*, the film which precipitated the eventual hack of Sony’s data, and this relationship was reciprocated on several occasions with the US Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Richard Stengel (Shaw and Jenkins 2017, 13). This chapter will now outline how this type of relationship extended further and reveal how embedded Sony is with the US State Department and its global network of embassies.

Evidence from the Sony emails

What is striking on initial viewing of the Sony emails, is the picture they paint of the cosy relationships between the company and the US government. While this type of connection has been hypothesised since Schiller starting writing in the late 1960s, evidence of this to date has

been derived primarily from government archives, released after many decades have passed and the issues depicted have ceased to have any political import. With this release, a significant realignment has taken place, with the documents providing insight into this process from the perspective of the media company itself, rather than the official government record, and via a more informal form of communication. As such, what is most significant about this release, is the cumulative picture it provides of how this relationship operates on a day to day level, and how frequent these communications are. One of the earliest emails from the release identifies how Sony's promotional activities for its film products were supported by US embassies, establishing one of the key themes of this relationship that would be developed throughout the period covered by the hack. An email from April 2014 outlines how a special preview of *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Mark Webb, 2014) was held at the residence of the US ambassador in Madrid for several invited dignitaries (WikiLeaks Sony Files email ID#189008). While US embassy screenings like this might add some Hollywood glamour to an otherwise drab event, they also subtly promote US brands and interests. Other embassy film screenings were more overtly political. In January 2014, John B. Emerson, the US ambassador to Germany, wrote to Lynton to suggest that the German embassy could host an event 'in honor' of *The Monuments Men* (George Clooney, 2014), a World War II film which was due to screen at the Berlinale festival in February that year. Emerson said:

we do a traditional brunch on the 8th at the Embassy for a couple of hundred folks, and we could turn that into a Monument Men [sic] event. Fyi, I have already agreed to host a screening of the film for students on Feb 19th, the day before its official opening here. (WSF #119931)

It is clear from this example that *The Monuments Men*, a story of sacrifices made by a group of US soldiers to save notable artworks from the Nazi regime during World War II, was

perceived to be a particularly important example of the US heroic image that the State Department wanted to promote widely. So much so in fact, that Sony's Vice-President for Worldwide Government Affairs, Keith Weaver, was arranging for *The Monuments Men* to be screened to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel that February (WSF# 122601), and Sony provided it for discussion at a summit featuring Barack Obama and King Abdullah of Jordan (WSF #116653). *The Monuments Men* was a US-German co-production, and its part-funding by the German Federal Film Fund explains the German embassy's enthusiasm to some degree. But as I have noted previously (Moody 2017a), US embassies use film screenings to inculcate students and much of the local populace with US foreign policy ideas, and the German embassy screenings of Hollywood films like *The Monuments Men* suggest that this practice is still widespread. In fact, email correspondence from Chris Dodd, Chairman of the MPAA, outlines exactly that, recounting the success of its 'Innovating Contest' at the US embassy in Brazil, a competition in which Brazilian university students worked on a project focused on understanding the importance of intellectual property rights. The email from Dodd states explicitly how the MPAA and, by implication, Hollywood and the US State Department, will benefit from the program, calling it a 'moment of discoursing about MPA's [sic] mission, its position on intellectual property and on the importance of working along with the [sic] academia' (WSF #199911). Similar US embassy uses of Sony's films for "educational" purposes can be found in Weaver's correspondence, in which he would outline his various contacts with government officials in regular emails to Sony's General Counsel, Leah Weil. For example, Weaver told her of his plans for the premiere of another World War II drama, *Fury* (David Ayer, 2014) at the Newseum in Washington D.C., where he prioritised a meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs, Charles Rivkin, who would be in 'India in November, so a good opportunity to brief him on our interests in the region' (WSF #107549). The marketing manager for Monolith Films, who were handling *Fury*, had already discussed with Sony in an earlier email that they were 'negotiating US embassy

support' for the film's release (WSF #196032), again presenting a pattern of behaviour that suggests embassy engagement was a regular part of the company's release strategy.

This activity was also supported by the actions of the MPAA. Like Weaver, Dodd was in contact with Rivkin, emailing to thank him for hosting a screening as part of Rivkin's *Exploring a Dynamic U.S.-China Film Relationship* event in Beijing that he had organised, which focused on creating 'open markets' and 'robust intellectual property rights' between the two countries (WSF #131509).⁴ Likewise, in an email from Dodd to Weaver in December 2013, he would boast of his friendship with senator Max Baucus, who was due to become the US Ambassador to China. Dodd believed Baucus would be supportive of the 'multitude of issues' that the MPAA had with China, mainly around perceived abuses of intellectual property rights (WSF #101532). But a series of emails starting in October 2013 provide the clearest example of how the MPAA would leverage government support for its agenda, when it informed its members of a substantial increase on customs duties in Kenya for the importing of Digital Cinema Packages (DCPs), the protected digital movie files that distributors send to exhibitors for screenings (WSF #192896). The revised duties, if levied, would result in US distributors being charged \$40,000 per DCP, a figure that could have resulted in costs for the distributor of hundreds of thousands of pounds for a large-scale release in the country. By January 2014, the MPAA would report that "sustained efforts last November through the US State Dept. [and] the US Embassy in Nairobi" had led to an agreement on a reduction in this fee, but that some customs officers were continuing to request the full amount, which the MPAA would challenge by "ramping up pressure through State in DC/US Embassy in Nairobi to find a more robust and permanent solution" (WSF #192896). By April, the MPAA was able to announce that 'following added MPA [sic] pressure through the US Embassy in Nairobi and the US State Dept...the [Kenyan authorities] held a meeting with Embassy officers, licensees, and (essential) customs officers' and that the duties had now been rescinded (WSF #192896). It is

clear from these exchanges what the benefits of US embassy support for Hollywood were, and how vital the US State Department's network of embassies had become for Hollywood's global business.

Likewise, the advantages for US embassies partnering up with Sony was stated explicitly by the Ambassador to France and Monaco, Jane Hartley, who would write to Lynton in October 2014 to acknowledge that they had discussed over the summer how they could work together over the next few years. In this message, Hartley discusses how the mission of embassies could be supported by Sony's film celebrities:

We have already started to think through ways your superstars could potentially help amplify some of the great work US Embassy Paris is doing. We'd love to include Sony names in events here, either as guests or performers, and would love the opportunity to leverage their popularity to promote the President's priorities and agenda overseas. (WSF# 122518)

Hartley's email highlights the quid pro quo at the heart of the Hollywood/US State Department relationship, and to emphasise her enthusiasm further, she would inform Lynton that she was already finalizing plans for a party in December that year at which elite French government and business figures would be attending, and that if Lynton knew of any Sony stars who would be in Paris on that date or who would be willing to travel for the event, to 'let her know' (WSF #122518). Emails from Hartley's predecessor as US ambassador to France and Monaco, the aforementioned Charles H. Rivkin, reveal that he would also dine with the Lyntons on a regular basis (WSF #119053).

Lynton's close relationships with various ambassadors and US government officials, and the requests he received from international embassies, is detailed in a series of emails he received over the period covered by the hack. For example, Lynton would decline a meeting in December 2013 at the Canadian consulate in Los Angeles, to discuss 'what Saskatchewan has to offer as a filming destination' (WSF #138405), although he would attend a meeting with the new UK ambassador, Sir Peter Westmacott, in October 2014 (WSF #134463). He was also personally invited to present the Sony film *Captain Phillips* (Paul Greengrass, 2013) at a summit of US and Chinese ambassadors and military leaders, because of its 'compelling story that details global challenges and cooperation' (WSF #130794), and after the screening, Lynton was informed that it was a 'huge hit' with the American and Chinese delegations (WSF #116653). In May 2013 Lynton would host a fundraising event for Congressman Karen Bass (WSF #130193; WSF #112092), and for Senator Jack Reed at Lynton's own house in February 2013 (WSF #113001), with Reed repaying the favour by sponsoring Lynton for appointment to the Smithsonian Institution's Board of Regents in 2014. Regular communication can be seen between Lynton and the US ambassador to Prague, Norman Eisen, first recorded in the releases via an affectionate seasonal greeting to Lynton on December 26th, 2013,⁵ suggesting a longstanding connection between Lynton and the Prague embassy (WSF #116957). Eisen would reach out to Lynton to arrange to meet when Eisen was next in Los Angeles in January 2014 (WSF #121368), and then the following month, Eisen arranged a call between Lynton, himself and film director Wes Anderson (WSF #118426), who he was in touch with as part of Anderson's research on what would become *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014). By May 2014, Eisen would put Lynton and his wife in contact with ambassadors in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, after Lynton, who was visiting there in July that year, had asked for travel tips (WSF #117286). Again, while nothing untoward is suggested in this correspondence, the frequency of the contact and the camaraderie expressed, is indicative of a longstanding and mutually beneficial relationship.

On the one hand, Lynton's connections to ambassadors and government officials may not appear to be unusual. Lynton came from a background in finance and had already established contacts within America's political elite before taking on his role at Sony, dating back to his time at his alma mater, Harvard. His friendliness with Rivkin was also partly due to the fact that Rivkin was Lynton's cousin, although this familiar relationship was noted as of potential benefit to Sony by Weaver (WSF #107549). However, other emails released suggest that these connections were cultivated for his role, and extended beyond the US political elite, such as his emails to the publishing magnate David Macmillan, in which he would joke that he would speak with the then UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, about replacing the then UK Culture Secretary, Ed Vaizey, with Macmillan, after first arranging the patronage of Charles Dunstone, the founder of Carphone Warehouse and prominent Conservative Party donor (WSF #129285). Other emails describe Lynton's lobbying of Vaizey in 2013 via email and telephone, in the wake of UK government proposals to install in UK law a private copy exception, which would have effectively enabled individual UK citizens to make copies for home use of any movies that they had legally purchased (WSF# 138229; WSF #106890) – a measure that was ultimately not pursued, much to Sony's delight (WSF #108689). Lynton was part of the UK government's Film Policy Review panel, hence his acquaintance with Vaizey, but once again, the correspondence is indicative of the connections that he had developed with governments across the world. Vaizey would also solicit names from Lynton of Hollywood executives who were making significant investment in the UK, to invite to a dinner at Downing Street in May 2014 (WSF #131626), and he clearly was popular at Sony. For example, Weaver would email Lynton and Weil in July 2014 to say 'congrats are in order' for Vaizey's promotion to Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, as this brought issues such as copyright control into his remit, and Sony believed that Vaizey was favourable to their opinion on this issue (WSF #113054).

These types of meetings between US embassy officials and officials representing foreign governments were by their very nature delicate politically, and one of the key insights from the hack is into how these concerns, which normally would have not been formally recorded, would play out. For example, Weaver would prepare briefing notes for Lynton and Sony's Chief Executive, Kaz Hirai, before they met Obama at a roundtable in November 2013, along with other studio heads (WSF #106363). However, Hirai withdrew before the meeting due to concerns about how his involvement would be perceived with regards to US/Japanese relations, especially on the thorny subject of IP issues (WSF #111868). But while Hirai was cautious of being reported attending a public meeting with the US President, he was also in regular and convivial contact with US embassy officials. Lynton would regularly drop in to the US embassy in Tokyo before visiting Hirai for dinner on one of his many visits to Japan (WSF #123249), but in May 2014 Lynton arranged for two other guests to accompany them; the President of Sony Corporation of America, Nicole Seligman, and the US Ambassador to Japan from 2013 to 2017, Caroline Kennedy⁶ (WSF# 117788). A series of email exchanges depict a close personal relationship between Lynton and Kennedy, suggesting that they were in regular contact with their respective families, and their conversation was comfortable enough for her to playfully chide him for not telling her about a promotion that Seligman received (WSF #133308).

The themes and main actors outlined above converged in a series of email exchanges in 2014, which are the clearest indication of how the relationship between Hollywood and the US State Department worked, and the respective benefits for both parties. Weaver would write to Lynton in March 2014 to outline a proposal from Dodd, then still Chairman of the MPAA, to upgrade the screening rooms of several US embassies (naming Germany, Spain, Italy, the UK and Japan as examples), to enable US ambassadors to screen films to dignitaries, with the intention that

this would help to ‘inculcate a stronger will to protect our interests through this quality exposure to our content’ (WSF #110589). However, Lynton declined to proceed for cost reasons (WSF #110589). Weaver would write to Lynton again in July 2014 to repeat the request, copying in Weil, and informing them that Dodd would likely be contacting them on the matter. On this instance, the rationale was expressed as being ‘that key Ambassadors will keep U.S. cultural interests top of mind, as they screen American movies for high level officials where they are stationed’ (WSF #110828). Dodd had suggested Sony to spearhead this operation in Japan, which, as Weaver would put it, was ‘for obvious reasons’, but was also due to ‘Nicole’s longstanding relationship with Ambassador Kennedy’ (WSF #110828). Interestingly, Weaver pointed out that the request was ‘not unusual’, and that Sony had sponsored similar activity in the past during the tenure of former president of the MPAA, Jack Valenti (WSF #110828), although he did not elaborate on what exactly this had involved. The proposal would cost \$165,000 per screening room, although it is not clear whether the mooted scheme was merely for an upgrade to the main US embassy in Tokyo or whether it would include its additional five consulates in that country, which would have potentially taken the spend closer to \$1 million. Lynton replied to Weaver that while he personally was ‘not inclined to do the embassy’, he would discuss the proposal with ‘Nicole’ (WSF #108342). The ‘Nicole’ referred to by Weaver and Lynton was Nicole Seligman, and her ‘longstanding relationship’ with ambassador Caroline Kennedy dated back to their days at college together.

Conclusion

The communications between the US State Department and Sony Pictures Entertainment depicted in the documents released by the Sony email hack cover only a short period – effectively just over eighteen months – and yet they present clear evidence of the types of relationships and symbiotic connections between the global network of US embassies and one Hollywood studio. One can only speculate as to whether this type of activity is replicated at

the rest of the 'big six' Hollywood studios, but the evidence presented in this chapter suggests that similar scenarios are likely and that, contrary to many critics of the media imperialism thesis, the economic interests of Hollywood are in fact still intertwined with the geopolitical interests of the US State. The reasons for this relationship are complex and multifarious, but at their core represent the essential drivers of capitalism playing out in the context of the US cultural industries. On the one hand, the benefits to a company such as Sony of cultivating this relationship are clearly spelled out in this correspondence; from reducing duties levied on their product in international markets through to protecting its intellectual property rights, US embassy support is crucial to the maximising of Hollywood's profits. But as these documents also show, this is a reciprocal relationship, with the US State Department using Hollywood to help promote its foreign policy agenda to elite government officials throughout the world, with the intention of inculcating its cultural perspectives in the process. This chapter's analysis of state-corporate communications documents leaked by the Sony email hack exposes this mutually beneficial relationship, and argues that this US embassy-Hollywood complex is a key example of 21st century media imperialism in action.

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¹ The film was originally scheduled to be released on October 10th, 2014, which is a public holiday in North Korea to commemorate the foundation of the Worker's Party of Korea. It is clear from emails released in the hack that Sony executives were unaware of this coincidence until a few months before the film's release date (WSF #103617).

² The emails mocked then President Barack Obama by suggesting films about the black slave trade that Pascal could ask him about (WSF# 60731).

³ While Sony's multi-national nature may invite the question of why its activities should not be regarded as much a manifestation of Japanese media imperialism as it is American media imperialism, its ownership structure helps to explain the US State Department's enthusiastic support for it. Sony Corporation of America (a subsidiary of Japan-based Sony) is headquartered in New York City, and SCA owns Sony Pictures Entertainment (headquartered in Culver City, California). The company is very much part of global Hollywood's big six, and

its integration and headquartering in Hollywood can be read as evidence of the continuing power of a US-centred but globalizing Hollywood, not of the diminishment of its hold on global studios and screens.

⁴ Rivkin would remain Assistant Secretary of State for Economic and Business Affairs until 2017, after which he succeeded Dodd as Chairman of the MPAA.

⁵ Although it was blind carbon-copied to all respondents, subsequent personal emails to Lynton suggest that he was the recipient at Sony.

⁶ Caroline Kennedy is John F. Kennedy's only surviving child, again suggestive of Lynton and Sony's connection to the US political elite.