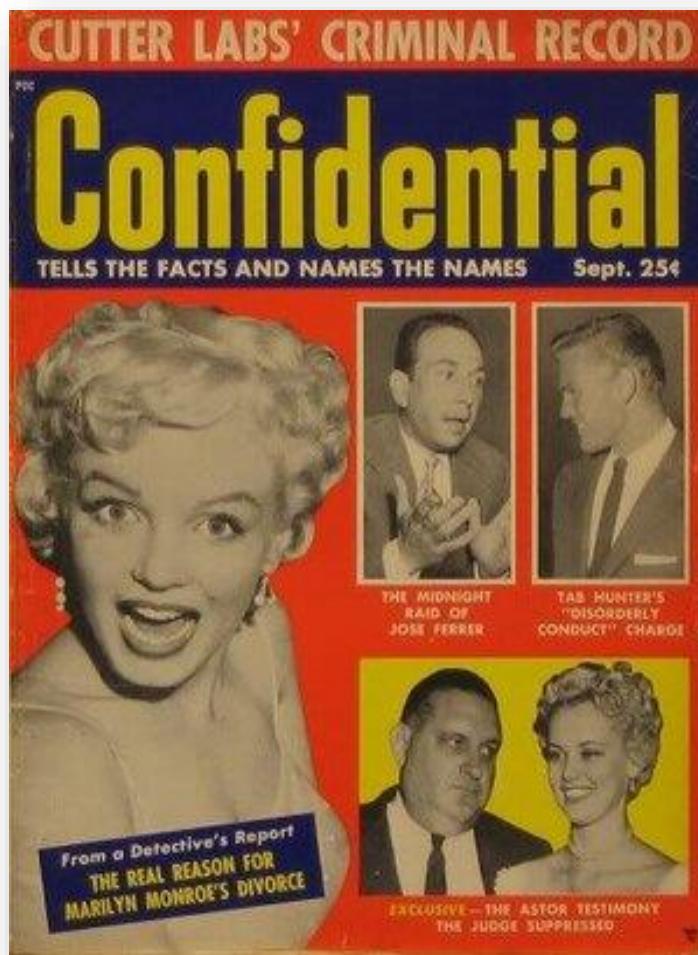


STARS – THEY'RE JUST LIKE US!: CONFIDENTIAL MAGAZINE
AND THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC



BY RENEE ONG, YALE UNIVERSITY

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Renee Ong is currently a senior at Yale University majoring in Political Science. At Yale, she has been primarily involved in undergraduate organizations concerned with international relations, student government, and non-profit giving. Outside of university, Renee has worked for various financial institutions and elected officials on Capitol Hill.

During her time at university, Renee took a well-known and well-loved lecture class taught by Professor Camille Thomasson called Classical Hollywood Narrative. Long a secret fan of films from the Golden Age of Hollywood and contemporary gossip rags, Renee explored the intersection between these two interests in Thomasson's class, producing this essay in the process.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though Confidential magazine now languishes among the many small publications of yesteryear, it was once considered one of the controversially popular darlings of the American fan magazine scene. To those unaware of its small, yet unmistakable impact, the tale practically reads like David and Goliath: on one side, the unparalleled power of the Hollywood studio system over the industry and its roster of stars, and on the other, scrappy newcomer gossip rag Confidential magazine brazenly attempting to challenge this very control by harnessing the power of the public. During the Golden Age of Hollywood, the studio system consisted of a small number of studios that vertically integrated the production, distribution, and exhibition aspects of the moviemaking business, thus achieving near-total domination of Hollywood. Between 1930 and 1948, the eight major studios of Hollywood together produced almost ninety-five percent of motion pictures exhibited in the United States; perhaps unsurprisingly, they also maintained absolute domination over the images of the actors and actresses that drove legions of adoring fans to the movie theaters.¹ Given this monopoly, it was astounding that Confidential magazine, the forefather of gossip journalism, would eventually disrupt their iron grip on stars' public personas. Though the studios exerted a heavy hand on stars' images through strict oversight of the media in- and out-of-house, Confidential undermined this control by using media oversight against the

¹ Frank Grady, "The Studio Era," University of Missouri-St. Louis, <http://www.umsl.edu/~gradyf/film/STUDIOS.htm>.

studios and empowering the public with the moral authority to judge stars themselves. In doing so, Confidential transformed the relationship between stars and the public by fully subjecting celebrities' images and careers to the court of public opinion.

2. STUDIOS AND CONTROL OF THE MEDIA

Studios' extensive control of the media began with their in-house publicity departments, which allowed them to actively create and manipulate actors' images. In particular, these publicity departments strove for harmony between a star's public persona and the on-screen characters they played, expertly concealing any potentially career-damaging aspects of stars' private lives by issuing "phony, laudatory biographies and news releases that portrayed actors as upstanding, wholesome, and moral."² Publicity agents dutifully disseminated these sanitized, feel-good stories of stars' home lives to the media and their unsuspecting audiences. As added security, studios further strengthened their internal oversight of the media through the creation of the Motion Picture Industry Council (MPIC) in 1948, a trade organization that used the collective powers of the publicity departments to ruthlessly kill any negative publicity; in essence, "whenever anything negative was printed about stars, the MPIC would rush out press releases championing the good work being done by the movie industry."³

² Samantha Barbas, "The Most Loved, Most Hated Magazine in America: The Rise and Demise of Confidential Magazine," *William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal* 25, no. 121 (2016), 131.

³ Samantha Barbas, *Confidential Confidential: The Inside Story of Hollywood's Notorious Scandal Magazine* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2018), 65.

Needless to say, studio publicity departments wielded near complete authority in crafting the careers of their respective celebrity rosters.

Bolstering the already intimidating influence of their publicity departments, studios often coerced media outlets into bending to their will by exploiting the dependence of fan magazines on the studios, and the media's self-censorship. As fan magazines heavily relied on the studios for access to the stars (and thus, their very existence), many had no choice but to serve as thinly veiled press releases. The studios were not shy in abusing this asymmetrical relationship, as evidenced by an article from fan magazine *Film Daily* titled "Fan Writers on Coast Sign Pledge of Purity": "Following a meeting called by John LeRoy Johnston of Universal, all fan magazines representatives here signed a pledge to adhere to a policy of clean and constructive material."⁴ This "pledge" to publish only "clean and constructive material" entailed consenting to submit all content to studio publicity departments for their approval; in the same vein, celebrity interviews were only allowed in the presence of a studio publicist.⁵ Put bluntly by Metro Goldwyn Mayer publicist Esme Chandlee, "we controlled the fan magazines."⁶ Indeed, the studios also controlled magazines and newspapers through self-censorship of the media. Other media outlets were not only similarly reliant on the

⁴ The *Film Daily* (Jul-Dec 1934): "Fan Writers on Coast Sign Pledge of Purity," *Film Daily*, August 23, 1934." Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/filmdailyvolume666newy/page/364>.

⁵ Barbas, "The Most Loved, Most Hated Magazine in America," 131.

⁶ Henry E. Scott, *Shocking True Story: The Rise and Fall of Confidential, America's Most Scandalous Scandal Magazine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 40.

studios for access and therefore revenue, but also constrained by their “conservative business backers and the norms of polite society,” taking care not to “[offend] the sensibilities of the average reader and the advertisers who courted those readers.”⁷

Not satisfied to rely on the tenuous non-binding nature of media self-discipline, the studios decided to cement their power over the wider press industry by forcing journalists to comply with the studios or risk losing their livelihood altogether. More specifically, major studios established a credentialing system by which all reporters covering Hollywood would first require approval from the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), a trade association that imposed harsh guidelines on film content: “fan magazine writers were required to obtain identification cards from the MPPDA, a badge of recognition that became known as the Hays Card... writers with cards were described as being on the ‘white list,’ consisting of some fifty or so individuals.”⁸ Failure to adhere to the studios’ rules by publishing negative press would entail a revocation of the Hays Card, rescinded access to the studio lots, an end of invitations to press conferences, and essentially a complete blackballing from the industry. Thanks to heavy-handed supervision of the publicity machine both in- and out-of-house, the studios held the media under their thumbs.

These internal and external tactics of media oversight paid off immensely, granting studios the unchallenged ability to shape the image of stars according to their whims.

⁷ Barbas, Confidential Confidential, 24.

⁸ Anthony Slide, *Inside the Hollywood Fan Magazine: A History of Star Makers, Fabricators, and Gossip Mongers*, (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), Google Books, 88, https://books.google.com/books/about/Inside_the_Hollywood_Fan_Magazine.html?id=5hDG6auRCJ4C

The success of this publicity system was undoubtable, and actor Ricardo Montalbán even compared the ruthless efficiency of these publicity departments to General Motors: “they could project the product, and the product was not any individual movie, it was the actor. They created a persona that they thought the public would like; they tailor-made the publicity to create a persona throughout the world.”⁹ More often than not, men were portrayed as “strong, solid, exemplifying the integrity and rightness of America itself,” while women “ran the narrow gamut from... beauty, integrity, and wholesomeness on one end of the spectrum, to beauty, integrity, and sexiness on the other.”¹⁰ Fans idolized stars who were at once untouchably flawless icons of success and yet “ordinary folks” who lived morally upstanding lives. Studios, the true masterminds behind image-making, more than delivered on providing ample fodder for this lucrative adoration.

3. PRIORITIZING THE PUBLIC

However, this oppressive media environment also left an unfulfilled public desire for sensational Hollywood stories and a seemingly endless amount of potential content, which Confidential magazine eagerly exploited by upending the conventional magazine business model. Confidential did not need studio-permitted access to studio stars to produce content, nor was it financially dependent on studio advertising

⁹ Barbas, Confidential Confidential, 62.

¹⁰ Scott, 7.

revenue.¹¹ In fact, the unabashedly brazen gossip rag thrived off of the exact opposite. Confidential's content was crafted by going behind the backs of studios to write about how stars' images clashed with information from their vast network of secret informants, while its main income was derived from its newsstand sales.¹² Though Confidential was not the first exposé publication by any means, this clear market differentiation and the radical business strategy that purposefully catered to public demand for salacious tales enabled it to become the first fully mainstream gossip magazine.

As the magazine's success soared, Confidential further emphasized its prioritization of the public by staying true to its unique market positioning as the self-proclaimed purveyor of "truth." As Confidential was largely unpolluted by studio manipulation, many of its wild claims had basis in fact, and the magazine's moments of devastating accuracy were a breath of fresh air in the stuffy media industry. While Confidential reported its fair share of untruths and exaggerations, the scandalous magazine still "stood out in a business characterized by inaccurate reporting, puffery, and collusion with sources."¹³ Confidential thus positioned itself as a publication that truly served the public by delivering the "facts" to its readers, no matter how gruesome or implausible. Furthermore, as Confidential grew in popularity and strict studio oversight prevented

¹¹ Scott, 35.

¹² Barbas, Confidential Confidential, 144.

¹³ Scott, 119.

traditional media outlets from publishing such vulgar stories, it used its unique market positioning to heighten its status as the preeminent source of intrigue. For instance, the January 1955 Confidential article “Does Desi Really Love Lucy?” detailing the marital woes of “I Love Lucy” stars Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball came out the same week as Look magazine’s picture-perfect cover story “Lucy and Desi, TV’s Favorite Family.” In highlighting this juxtaposition, Confidential again emphasized how it “served” the public by supposedly exposing the artificiality of other publications. Confidential had clearly crowned the average reader as king in its business model. Soon, its visual and narrative content would reflect the importance of the reader as well.

4. CONFIDENTIAL EMPOWERS THE READER

Confidential’s deliberate photo choices, as well as its sparing and deliberate use of color, visually implied that readers had the authority to expose and judge the moral depravity of stars. The September 1955 cover of Confidential featuring Marilyn Monroe¹⁴ is a particularly excellent example of how the magazine used photo choice to visually debase stars, thus implicitly granting the moral high ground to the reader. Confidential often used grainy black-and-white photos with such stark contrast that subjects appeared unbecoming at best and ghastly at worst. Monroe’s treatment was no different, as she looks directly at the reader with wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and

¹⁴ "Err Raid: Vintage Cover of Confidential from September 1957 with Marilyn Monroe," Pulp International, September 25, 2013, <http://www.pulpinternational.com/pulp/entry/Vintage-cover-of-Confidential-from-September-1957-with-Marilyn-Monroe.html>.

her mouth wide open. Her expression gives the impression that the reader has caught her in the midst of a socially unacceptable act. Furthermore, Monroe's photo is taken from an elevated viewpoint, such that the reader is literally (and morally) looking down upon her. Color was similarly used to place the reader in the position of moral authority over the stars. Though Confidential used garish shades of yellow, blue, and red, it was the third that was particularly potent, as the color often evokes strong emotion. On the cover of the January 1957 issue of Confidential,¹⁵ the most prominent use of red was on a giant red circle behind a headshot of the actress Joan Crawford. The red circle resembles a target trained on the seemingly nervous Crawford, who bites her own finger while worriedly avoiding direct eye contact with the reader. This selective use of red not only forces the reader's eye to zero in towards Crawford's face, but also suggests she has been caught red-handed by the reader themselves. By employing these visual techniques, the reader was no longer a passive consumer of content, but an active contributor to the judgment of stars' actions.

The moral authority of the reader over stars and Confidential's role in serving the reader was further reinforced in the magazine's narrative conventions. In many of its articles, Confidential achieved this by using vague, suggestive language, such as in its March 1956 article "Have You Heard the Latest About Sammy Davis, Jr.?" concerning entertainer Sammy Davis Jr., actress Ava Gardner, and pinup model Meg Myles:

¹⁵ Wilson, Frank. "Lowdown on Hollywood High Society... Joan Crawford and the Handsome Bartender!" The Best of Everything: A Joan Crawford Encyclopedia. <https://www.joancrawfordbest.com/magconfid.htm>.

“Sammy’s a sensation these days — in more places than on stage... There were even published photos showing Sammy and Ava [Gardner] as a cozy twosome... he’s picking off movieland’s snappiest sirens. By no means all of these cozy conquests reach the public print... The lowdown is that, when she wasn’t on camera, [Myles] was steaming it up with Sammy.”¹⁶

Nowhere in the above excerpt did it plainly state that Davis slept with Myles or Gardner, nor did Confidential offer a clear moral judgment. However, in referring to Davis’s past “cozy conquests” and stating Davis and Myles were “steaming it up” in “more places than a stage,” Confidential left it up to the reader to read between the lines and formulate their own thoughts. Confidential also reinforced the notion that the magazine itself is “on the reader’s side,” so to speak, revealing the “lowdown” on affairs that fail to “reach the public print.” Apart from using suggestive language, Confidential would also directly question the reader to form a moral opinion. The magazine used this technique in its July 1955 article “The Wife Clark Gable Forgot!” which covered the neglected state of Clark Gable’s first wife and his supposed indifference towards her plight:

¹⁶ Scott, 72.

“Is it wrong to ignore the woman who launched you on your way to the top, while showering gems, furs, gowns and money on a little French model? Is it wrong to hand one wife a million-dollar settlement — and let another grub to pay the grocer?”¹⁷

Here, Confidential again “present[ed] the facts” by selectively mentioning Gable’s actions that would obviously sway one’s opinion, but stopped short of stating an explicit judgment. Instead, Confidential directly asks the reader if Clark Gable’s actions are “wrong,” thus transferring the responsibility of moral judgment and reinforcing the notion that even Gable is subject to the court of public opinion. The power of the reader as moral judge was even more unmistakable in Confidential’s September 1954 article “How Rita Hayworth’s Children Were Neglected!” which ended with the unnamed author questioning “were Rita Hayworth’s children neglected? You’ve seen the pictures, you’ve read the facts. Now, you be the judge!”¹⁸ By presenting itself as the faithful collector of damning “pictures” and “facts” while imploring the reader to “be the judge,” Confidential empowered the reader to assume the role of definitive moral authority on stars’ misbehavior.

¹⁷ Scott, 111.

¹⁸ CONFIDENTIAL MAGAZINE, September 1954, “Where Danger Lives,” May 29, 2012, <http://wheredangerlives.blogspot.com/2012/05/confidential-magazine-september-1954.html>.

5. A NEW ERA

In encouraging the reader in this manner, Confidential harnessed the power of the public to overcome the studios' grip on stars' images. To illustrate this phenomenon, we may turn to Confidential's March 1955 article "What Makes Ava Run for Sammy Davis Jr.?" which implied a sexual relationship between Gardner and Davis. Though their supposed romance was actually an outright lie on Confidential's part, the very thought of an interracial romantic affair enraged the public. Studios did their best to stem the backlash via their trusty in-house publicity departments and loyal fan magazines. Modern Screen's July 1955 article "Everywhere That Ava Goes" claimed exclusive knowledge of Ava's secret relationship with the Earl of Granville, a distinguished and very much Caucasian member of the English aristocracy.¹⁹ Their efforts were to no avail, as the public had decided that such an affair was morally despicable and deserved to be met with professional retribution. Following the (fabricated) unveiling of their personal lives, Gardner and Davis's careers suffered from public backlash, particularly in the conservative South. Gardner was hit particularly hard, as towns angrily boycotted and banned her current and future films, Gardner's own hometown in North Carolina "took her name out of its publicity brochure," and Gardner-Davis photos "were even used as campaign material by Southern bigots against integrationist candidates."²⁰ Confidential clearly damaged the studios' iron grip on

¹⁹ Modern Screen (Dec 1954-Dec 1955): "Everywhere That Ava Goes," Modern Screen, July 1955." Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/stream/modernscreen49unse>.

²⁰ Barbas, Confidential Confidential, 115-126.

shaping stars' images by disguising figurative participation as morally offended judgment.

Through flipping the script and giving agency to the public in this way, Confidential's irrevocably transformed the relationship between the public and stars by vigorously legitimizing the court of public opinion. Studios catered towards the public desire that stars be both unattainable idols and the best kind of "ordinary folk." However, with the rise of Confidential, stars could no longer hide behind the bulletproof walls of studio publicity departments and were instead held accountable for their actions in private and professional life. Confidential enabled the public to approach stars as regular people whose highs and lows were simply magnified by wealth and fame. Though its methods were oftentimes cruel, Confidential truly humanized stars by destroying the pedestal on which they were placed; they had marital issues, drinking problems, family fall-outs, and unrequited love affairs, just like any other person. In other words, stars were "just like us," and therefore were not exempt from the judgment of the wider community.

By taking advantage of studios' strict oversight of the media and empowering the public, Confidential both broke the studio monopoly on stars' images and forever changed how celebrities were perceived and treated by the public. Confidential eventually met its demise following a 1957 grand jury case that ended in mistrial, after which it agreed not to publish exposés on stars' private lives to avoid retrial. Though the magazine ceased publication in 1973, its successors – including well-known

contemporary names like the National Enquirer, TMZ, Access Hollywood, E! News, and countless others – certainly live on. On one hand, Confidential’s methods and content represent media at its worst: openly prejudiced, merciless in their pursuit of scandal, and unforgivingly invasive. On the other, Confidential is media at its best, challenging the audience to seek out and confront the truth for themselves. Either way, Confidential’s rise reflects the intoxicating power that comes with handing out judgment at no personal cost. Whether the public deserves this power, and what this power entails, remain open questions.

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