

Jennifer Frost. *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood: Celebrity Gossip and American Conservatism*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. Pp 304. Cloth \$35.00.

Hedda Hopper's Hollywood: Celebrity Gossip and American Conservatism by Jennifer Frost examines journalist Hedda Hopper and the influence her conservative politics had on the American public from 1938 to 1965. Frost, a Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Auckland, explains that Hopper's eccentric appearance and public persona as a "gargoyle of gossip" has belied both her cultural and political significance in shaping conservative thought in the U.S. Hopper combined gossip with politics to create an engaging hybrid style of journalism allowing her to reshape public opinion and reinforce her own conservative values among her vast readership.

Hopper, born Elda Furry in 1885, was a semi-successful actress who turned to gossip journalism as her acting prospects began to wither. In 1938 the *Los Angeles Times* began publishing her column, leading to syndication in 110 national newspapers and giving Hopper a following of approximately 22.8 million people. The staunch Republican used her entertainment industry connections to become a formidable force, quickly ascending to the ranks of more celebrated gossip columnists such as Walter Winchell and longtime rival, Louella Parsons. Because of her vast readership, Hopper was able to establish a stranglehold on both the film industry and American journalism allowing her to freely promote what Frost describes as "superpatriotism," an American fundamentalism steeped in a Republican cold war morality.

Using Hopper's private papers (housed in a Beverly Hills archive) including the correspondence she received from her readership, Frost analyzes how Hopper shaped public ideas regarding American morality and politics. According to Frost, Hopper believed that she represented "real" Americans and anyone who opposed her ideas or challenged her beliefs was, by default, un-American and subversive. Hopper used her column to attack celebrities who espoused progressive thought, engaged in sentiments that she deemed unpatriotic, immoral or promoted values that clashed with her own. She and her readers engaged in an exchange of information to identify "disloyal" citizens, eradicate them from public space and ensure that their efforts were enforced by studio administration and government agencies. Hopper's ideological war of words against Charlie Chaplin exemplifies how this exchange worked. By making Chaplin's private actions a public concern, Hopper turned the British Chaplin into a feasible public threat. Hopper's readers agreed with her and responded by condemning Chaplin for his "moral turpitude." The campaign resulted in Chaplin having his re-entry permit to the United States cancelled by federal authorities. Chaplin, exhausted by the matter, broke all ties to the U.S. and did not return for several decades.

Frost explains that Hopper believed intervention in WWII, civil rights activism, labor unions, communism, and sexual deviance were all means to undermine the American moral fabric, and she sought to curtail them through her column. Celebrities that chose to reinforce Hopper's

conservative ethics were commended for helping her re-instate “values and verities of an earlier age.”

In the final chapter, Frost explores how the shifting cultural morality of the 1960s and the evolution of celebrity gossip turned Hopper into a pariah of journalism. The power that the column had given Hopper was undermined by a new, more liberal, social consciousness among her audience as well as changing expectations for gossip journalism. As Hopper entered a new decade rife with celebrity tabloids and paparazzi, her brand of gossip had become stale; her old-fashioned morality was outdated and letters from her readers reflected this change. Audience correspondence began to challenge Hopper’s conservative ideas and her readership distanced itself from her, leading Hopper to close her column in 1965.

The book is engaging, insightful, and a solid example of how to undertake cultural analysis in history. Frost wisely uses audience reception to support her thesis but, as she herself notes, the audience correspondence was likely edited by Hopper and her editorial staff to select items that were more agreeable with Hopper’s politics. This, by no means, undermines Frost’s analysis, but it does create an obstacle when trying to understand ideological dissent among Hopper’s audience. The book should appeal to historians of popular culture and anyone seeking to understand how journalism shapes public discourse.

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