The Most Loved, Most Hated Magazine in America: The Rise and Demise of Confidential Magazine

Samantha Barbas
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Samantha Barbas*

INTRODUCTION

Before the National Enquirer, People, and Gawker, there was Confidential. In the 1950s, Confidential was the founder of tabloid, celebrity journalism in the United States. With screaming headlines and bold, scandalous accusations of illicit sex, crime, and other misdeeds, Confidential destroyed celebrities’ reputations, relationships, and careers. Not a single major star of the time was spared the “Confidential treatment”: Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, Liberace, and Marlon Brando, among others, were exposed in the pages of the magazine.¹ Using hidden tape recorders, zoom lenses, and private investigators and prostitutes as “informants,” publisher Robert Harrison set out to destroy stars’ carefully constructed media images, and in so doing, built a media empire. Between 1955 and 1957, Confidential was the most popular, bestselling magazine in the nation.²

Confidential, published under Harrison’s direction between 1952 and 1958,³ marked a watershed in the history of American media and celebrity culture. Confidential also played an important, little-known role in legal history and the history of freedom of the press. In the mid-1950s, the provocative, highly sexualized magazine became the subject of a nationwide campaign to eradicate it from the nation’s newsstands. These efforts culminated in obscenity, criminal libel, and conspiracy charges

* Associate Professor of Law, State University of New York at Buffalo Law School; J.D. Stanford Law School; Ph.D., University of California, Berkeley. Many thanks to the archivists and researchers who assisted me with this project, at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; the Rare Books Library at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign; the Mudd Library at Princeton University; the National Archives; the Popular Culture Archives at Bowling Green State University; Beinecke Library at Yale University; and the UCLA Special Collections Library.

¹ See, e.g., infra notes 23, 44, 423, 478 (discussing Liberace, Monroe, Brando, and Presley respectively).

² See infra notes 25–28 and accompanying text.

brought by the state of California, and a star-studded 1957 Los Angeles trial, described as the “O.J. Simpson trial of its time.” The extensive litigation against Confidential killed the magazine, and Robert Harrison ceased publishing in 1958. Only sixty years ago, at a time when First Amendment protections for speech were fairly well-developed, the most popular magazine in the country was effectively run out of business by the law. How and why this happened is the subject of this Article.

Confidential magazine has been written about extensively in the context of celebrity history and film history, but its legal history has yet to be documented. Drawing on unpublished legal and archival sources, this Article tells the story of the rise and fall of Confidential between 1955 and 1957, and in so doing, illuminates a significant and transformative episode in the history of freedom of the press.

The decade after the Second World War was a time of uncertainty and tension around the meaning of freedom of the press and the legal limits of public expression. The 1950s were a crossroads in First Amendment history, a time when liberalizing trends of earlier decades were in retreat, and moral and political panics in the early Cold War years led to widespread support for official measures suppressing allegedly immoral and subversive publications. Censorship became a contested issue, pitting conservative social reformers against a coalition of publishers, journalists, and civil libertarians.

Wildly popular and at the same time reviled for its salacious content, Confidential became a focal point in the debate over censorship and government restraints on

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4 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 172.
5 See infra Part V.
6 For books and chapters on Confidential magazine and celebrity culture, see BERNSTEIN, supra note 3; MARY R. DESJARDINS, RECYCLED STARS: FEMALE FILM STARDOM IN THE AGE OF TELEVISION AND VIDEO (2015); SAM KASHNER & JENNIFER MACNAIR, THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: HOLLYWOOD IN THE FIFTIES (1st ed. 2002); SCOTT, supra note 3; Mary Desjardins, Systematizing Scandal: Confidential Magazine, Stardom, and the State of California, in HEADLINE HOLLYWOOD: A CENTURY OF FILM SCANDAL (Adrienne L. McLean & David A. Cook eds., 2001); Anne Helen Petersen, The Gossip Industry: Producing and Distributing Star Images, Celebrity Gossip, and Entertainment News, 1910–2010 (May 2011) (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, Austin) (on file with author). The dearth of scholarship on Confidential’s legal battles may result, in part, from a mistaken assumption that the trial records do not exist. See BERNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 11 (“[N]o copy of the transcripts seems to have survived anywhere . . . .”). Records of the Confidential trial exist in the archives of the Los Angeles County Superior Court and also at the University of Illinois Urbana–Champaign Rare Books Library.
7 See infra Part II.
While commentators across the political spectrum agreed that *Confidential* was trash and should be eliminated from newsstands, *how* to get rid of the magazine became a matter of dispute. Reformers proposed an array of restrictions on the magazine, including outright bans on *Confidential*. Civil libertarians denounced such measures as censorship—as unconstitutional prior restraints.

At the same time, the dialogue around the “*Confidential* problem” elicited consensus on fundamental points. Civil libertarians and conservative reformers agreed that freedom of speech was not absolute, and that the law had an important role to play in regulating publishing content. Both sides agreed that legal procedures resulting in civil and criminal liability were preferable to prior restraints, and supported existing libel and obscenity laws as limitations on injurious speech. This consensus would soon unravel, as civil libertarians and the Supreme Court moved towards more absolutist positions on speech in the 1960s. The *Confidential* episode marked the beginnings of a transition in freedom of speech—a moment when older views of the First Amendment, in which authorities had greater latitude to restrain and punish offensive material, were beginning to be eclipsed by a more modern, civil libertarian framework.

*Confidential* was not the first “scandal magazine,” nor the first to write about Hollywood gossip. Sensational, tabloid-style magazines focusing on crime, immorality, and celebrity romances existed since the early twentieth century. But *Confidential*, with its revelations of homosexuality and interracial sex, may have been “the most scandalous scandal magazine” to that time. Part I explains the origins of *Confidential*, the career of publisher Robert Harrison, and the magazine’s inner workings. Part II describes the debate over censorship in the 1950s, and Part III the legal campaign against *Confidential*.

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9 See infra Part I.B.
10 See infra Part III.
11 See infra notes 294–99 and accompanying text.
12 See infra Part II.C.
13 Id.
14 See infra notes 651–59 and accompanying text.
15 See BOYER, supra note 8, at 155. Paul Boyer writes of the “frankly erotic and sensational magazines” that became big business in the 1920s, among them *True Story Magazine*, “devoted to repentant tales of sexual misdeeds”; *True Confessions; Screen Secrets*; and *Modern Romance*; and newspaper tabloids “with lurid and prurient coverage” of high-profile divorce and murder trials. *Id.;* see also THEODORE PETERSON, MAGAZINES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 339 (1956) (noting magazines from earlier decades trafficking in “uncomplicated sex and unsophisticated smut”).
Part IV focuses on California’s war on Confidential. The State’s attack was a direct result of film industry pressure, and also the political ambitions of Attorney General Edmund “Pat” Brown, soon-to-be governor. Following a state congressional investigation of Confidential’s newsgathering methods, Brown sought criminal charges against Confidential for violations of obscenity and criminal libel laws. Part V details the spectacular trial of Confidential in 1957 and public reactions to it. Despite Brown’s obvious political motivations, the pressures of the film industry, and the vagueness of California’s criminal libel and obscenity laws, the trial was celebrated as a triumph of democracy and the legal process over more overt and authoritarian censorship methods.

Not long after the trial, Confidential disappeared from the scene. In the end, it was not criminal charges, postal bans, or “anti-scandal” legislation that did it in, but rather the collective toll of the litigation it faced—in particular, staggering attorneys’ fees. The Conclusion contemplates the legacy of Confidential and its legal travails. However brief its scandalous life may have been, Confidential had an enduring impact on freedom of the press, the cult of celebrity, and popular publishing.

I. Confidential

The 1950s saw the rise of the “scandal magazines.” Featuring celebrity gossip, shocking, breathless headlines, and titles like Dynamite, Exposed, Hush-Hush, The Lowdown, Private Lives, Suppressed, Top Secret, and On the QT, the staple of the scandal magazines was sin and sex: sexual transgressions and other misconduct by actors and other prominent persons. Articles were short, had glamorous pictures, and were easy to read. Typical stories included exposés that “[a] singing star is wire-tapped and found to be constantly entertaining her ostensibly estranged husband. . . . A Hollywood ingenue is shown to be a nymphomaniac. . . . A wealthy heiress may be addicted to artificial stimulants[,]” in Newsweek’s words. In 1955, the sale of the scandal magazines reached around ten million copies per issue. The leading scandal magazine was Confidential, the biggest newsstand seller in American history to that time, with a per issue sale of 4.6 million in July 1956.
the mid-1950s, around sixteen million Americans read *Confidential* each week.27 Its nearest rival on the newsstands, *TV Guide*, could boast only about 2.3 million, and *Life* magazine, around 900,000.28 “What our readers want is facts, gossipy facts, that they don’t get elsewhere,” publisher Robert Harrison told the *Wall Street Journal*.29 Said a former editor of *Confidential* who became editor of *Suppressed Magazine*, “[w]hat we give them is what they can’t get on television.”30

A. The Magazine

1. Origins

*Confidential* publisher Robert Harrison was no stranger to the world of sleazy publishing. Born in 1904 in New York, Harrison got his start in the publishing industry in the 1920s when he worked on the tabloid the *Evening Graphic*, and after that, a series of movie industry trade publications.31 In the early 1940s he started the first of his several “girlie” magazines, *Beauty Parade*, in his two-room apartment in New York.32 By the end of the forties, he had five such magazines.33 His reign as the “Cheesecake King”34 was short-lived, however. In 1952, his accountant informed him that his company was broke, and he began searching for a new concept.35

Harrison got the idea for *Confidential* when he saw the public response to the televised 1951 Senate hearings on organized crime led by Senator Estes Kefauver.36 Millions of Americans abandoned their work to watch gangsters and prostitutes testify against each other.37

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28 Id.
30 Curious Craze, *supra* note 24, at 51 (internal quotation marks omitted).
31 Gehman, *supra* note 25, at 144.
32 SCOTT, *supra* note 3, at 15. It was a “‘fetishist magazine.’ It featured nothing but pictures of almost-undressed girls, wearing very high-heeled shoes, threatening each other with whips . . . .” Gehman, *supra* note 25, at 145.
33 Gehman, *supra* note 25, at 145.
34 Rutledge, *supra* note 29.
36 Gehman, *supra* note 25, at 145.
37 On the Kefauver hearings, see Thomas Doherty, *Frank Costello’s Hands: Film, Television, and the Kefauver Crime Hearings*, 10 FILM HIST. 359, 368 (1998) (“During the two-week run of the Kefauver Committee in New York, most of [New York City] stopped to watch the riveting real-time, real-life television drama. . . . [T]axi drivers cruised deserted streets, housewives neglected housework, and apartment dwellers held ‘Kefauver block parties’. [sic]”).
When the Kefauver Committee was conducting its TV hearings . . . people were nuts about it. . . . [E]verybody[—]office workers, housewives, average people[—]were . . . wrapped up in watching characters they’d read about—thieves, prostitutes, racketeers—get up on the stand and be questioned. I figured if that’s what they wanted—real facts about people they constantly read about—something about their personal lives—I’d give it to them[,]” Harrison explained.38

Six months later, Confidential hit newsstands. The name Confidential came from a series of recent, bestselling “exposé books” by journalists Lee Mortimer and Jack Lait, titled New York Confidential, Chicago Confidential, Washington Confidential, and U.S.A. Confidential.39 Harrison intended Confidential to be a “fact magazine,” a muckraking news publication that would “expose rackets, phony consumer products, corrupt public officials, Reds, and show-business people who are fakes”40—an exposé type of magazine . . . that told the stories that the newspapers did not tell, or other magazines did not tell.”41 As Harrison promised in Confidential’s first issue:

The lid is off! The bunk is going to be debunked! In this, its first issue, CONFIDENTIAL will open your eyes and make them pop. It pulls the curtain aside and takes you behind the scenes, giving facts, naming names and revealing what the front pages often try to conceal!

You’ll get plain talk without double-talk. You’ll get what you’ve always wanted to get—the real stories behind the headlines—uncensored and off the record!42

When the first few issues of Confidential had disappointingly low circulation, Harrison decided he needed “more and hotter stories on Hollywood personalities.”43 In 1953, he hit upon a new formula when he published a sensational article on the

39 See JACK LAIT & LEE MORTIMER, CHICAGO CONFIDENTIAL (1st ed. 1950); JACK LAIT
& LEE MORTIMER, NEW YORK CONFIDENTIAL (1st ed. 1948); JACK LAIT & LEE MORTIMER,
U.S.A. CONFIDENTIAL (1st ed. 1952); JACK LAIT & LEE MORTIMER, WASHINGTON
CONFIDENTIAL (1st ed. 1951).
40 Howard Rushmore, I Worked for Confidential, CHRISTIAN HERALD, Jan. 1958, at 32,
36 (internal quotation marks omitted).
41 2 Transcript of Record (Aug. 9, 1957), supra note 27, at 125.
43 2 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 127.
breakup of Joe DiMaggio’s marriage to Marilyn Monroe titled *Why Joe DiMaggio Is Striking Out with Marilyn Monroe*. When it became apparent that the magazine would sell out, Harrison launched a new policy. “[W]e needed hot, inside stories from Hollywood,” he told his staff. He wanted readers to say, “[w]e never knew that before.” The new criteria for running a story was, “is the star’s name big enough and well enough known to sell the magazine?” The plan worked. At the height of the magazine’s success in 1956, Harrison was earning a profit of over $350,000 per issue, making him one of the most successful magazine publishers in American history.

2. ‘Nothing But Smut’

Each issue of Confidential had around fifteen articles presenting “inside stuff” on entertainment celebrities, mostly having to do with sex. Some of the magazine’s most famous articles included a story alleging that Frank Sinatra ate Wheaties while lovemaking to enhance his sexual prowess, an article on actress Maureen O’Hara engaging in romantic activities with a lover in the back of a movie theater, and a piece on a failed “raid” of the apartment of Marilyn Monroe’s lover by Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra. Exposés revealed negligent parents, drug addictions, and extramarital affairs, with titles like *How Rita Hayworth’s Children Were Neglected*, *Gary Cooper’s Lost Weekend with Anita Ekberg*, and *Caught—Guy Madison in Barbara Payton’s Boudoir*. For the most part, news reporting on celebrities had been tame and sanitized—a product of Hollywood’s power over the publishing industry, conservative social morals, and mainstream journalism’s tendency to shun risqué

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45 2 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 130.
46 *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).
47 Rushmore, supra note 40, at 36.
48 Gehman, supra note 25, at 143.
50 See Gabler, supra note 35.
matter in order to court “respectable” audiences.\textsuperscript{56} For their time, \textit{Confidential}’s articles were truly shocking and groundbreaking.

The magazine featured what one writer described as a “neo-tabloid” style, with “screaming headlines,” “innuendo-laden blurbs,” and “smoking-car tone” writing.\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Confidential}’s language was “sexist, homophobic, and reactionary,” in the words of writer Steve Govoni.\textsuperscript{58} “Women were referred to as \textit{sirens, beauties, dishes, lassies, wenches, chicks, or pigeons}.”\textsuperscript{59} “Prostitutes were called \textit{chippies, play-for-pay honeys, love-for-loot dates, or cuddle-for-cash cuties}.”\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Confidential} was obsessed with interracial relationships,\textsuperscript{61} socially taboo at the time. The black women allegedly involved in such relationships were “\textit{tan tootsies, chocolate bon-bons or night-blooming sepias}.”\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Confidential} played on the public’s fear of, and fascination with, homosexuality.\textsuperscript{63} Gay men were described as “\textit{limp-wristed}” or “\textit{lavenders}.”\textsuperscript{64} Harrison was said to be obsessed with “outing” actors and other public figures.\textsuperscript{65} A 1954 article revealed that

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\textsuperscript{56} See generally John Summers, \textit{Whatever Happened to Sex Scandals? Politics and Peccadilloes, Jefferson to Kennedy}, 2000 J. Am. Hist. 826 (discussing norms of professional journalism that mandated concealing the sexual affairs of public figures). Before the 1950s, the primary publications featuring news about film celebrities were fan magazines, with titles like \textit{Photoplay} and \textit{Modern Screen}. See generally \textit{Slide}, supra note 3. The fan magazines were essentially extensions of Hollywood studio publicity departments, presenting false and highly glorified descriptions of celebrities as upstanding, wholesome and moral. See generally \textit{id.}; Petersen, supra note 6, at 46–53 (describing the editorial collusion between Hollywood and magazines to maintain stars’ images). Gossip columnists writing for major newspapers, such as Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, occasionally broke celebrity scandals, but like the fan magazines, these writers were generally beholden to the Hollywood studios and loath to print anything that might turn public opinion against the film industry. See generally \textit{Samantha Barbas, The First Lady of Hollywood: A Biography of Louella Parsons} (2005); Petersen, supra note 6, at 53–69 (explaining the close relationships between gossip columnists and Hollywood studios).

\textsuperscript{57} Gehman, supra note 25, at 67.


\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Id.}


\textsuperscript{64} Govoni, supra note 58, at 30.

\textsuperscript{65} Gabler, supra note 35. See generally \textit{Scott}, supra note 3, at 80–94 (detailing Harrison and \textit{Confidential}’s rigorous pursuit of stories about homosexual stars in Hollywood).
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actor Van Johnson was gay.\textsuperscript{66} An article titled \textit{Why Liberace’s Theme Song Should Be . ‘Mad About the Boy’} claimed that the pianist Liberace was gay and had been making advances on a male press agent.\textsuperscript{67} “The Untold Story of Marlene Dietrich” reported that many of “Dietrich’s dalliances . . . were not with men!”\textsuperscript{68} “Dietrich going for dolls? Her adoring fans the world over will shriek, ‘Impossible!’ It’s the truth, though. In the game of amour, she’s not only played both sides of the street, but done it on more than one occasion.”\textsuperscript{69} The magazine also outed several prominent public officials. In 1956 \textit{Confidential} published a story that outed President Eisenhower’s former Appointments Secretary, Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr.,\textsuperscript{70} under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles was outed by the magazine in May 1956.\textsuperscript{71}

In between these tawdry stories were so-called “public service exposés.”\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Confidential} described children being poisoned by aspirin and household insecticides, the dangers of smoking, and other risks to society.\textsuperscript{73} Screaming headlines alerted the public to \textit{THE ONE-HOUR PREGNANCY TEST!}, \textit{DANGER—BORIC ACID AS A POISON!}, \textit{SURGERY’S NEWEST BUST MIRACLE}, \textit{NEW TWO-WEEK ULCER CURE}, \textit{NOW—HOMOSEXUALS CAN BE CURED!}, \textit{SURGERY CURES FRIGID WIVES}, \textit{CIGARETTES DO NOT CAUSE CANCER}, \textit{and Warning! Coffee CAN Make You Fat.}\textsuperscript{73} Harrison would use these “public service” articles to defend himself against charges that the magazine was nothing but “smut.”\textsuperscript{82}


\textsuperscript{67} Streete, \textit{supra} note 23, at 17.

\textsuperscript{68} Kenneth G. McLain, \textit{The Untold Story of Marlene Dietrich}, \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, July 1955, at 22.

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{70} Truxton Decatur, \textit{Why Ike Bounced Arthur Vandenberg, Jr.}, \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, Nov. 1956, at 22.

\textsuperscript{71} Truxton Decatur, \textit{We Accuse . . . Sumner Welles}, \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, May 1956.

\textsuperscript{72} KASHNER & MACNAIR, \textit{supra} note 6, at 19.

\textsuperscript{73} See \textit{id.} at 19–20.

\textsuperscript{74} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, Nov. 1955.

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, July 1955.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, Jan. 1956.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, July 1956.

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, May 1957.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, July 1957.

\textsuperscript{80} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, Nov. 1957.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{CONFIDENTIAL}, Jan. 1958.

\textsuperscript{82} Harrison said,

\begin{quote}
[I]n each issue there are frequently one, two, three articles that are of a crusading type. For example: aspirin. . . . We found out that aspirin was the greatest number one killer of children. . . . Now to me that was doing a great deal of good. I can tell you this very frankly that if we didn’t put our spicy stuff in there no one would ever read that.
\end{quote}

Gehman, \textit{supra} note 25, at 143 (internal quotation marks omitted); see also John Sisk, \textit{The Exposé Magazines}, \textit{COMMONWEAL}, June 1, 1956, at 223, 223 (“These magazines may conduct
3. How It Worked

Commentators speculated on the reasons behind Confidential’s success. Some saw the popularity of the magazine as an indication of a decline in social morals—“widespread emotional and spiritual immaturity.”83 Others saw the rise of the scandal magazines as a sign of Americans’ growing boredom at the workplace.84 Ray Fiore, the vice-president of the company that distributed Confidential, offered perhaps the most trenchant explanation: a cynical, world-weary public.85

This is the age of cynicism. Right? Trace it back. Up to 1929 Americans had credulous minds. They believed everything they read in the papers and the magazines.

Then came the crash [of 1929]. Then came 12 years of hunger, people selling apples. Then six, seven years of war, and six, seven years of cold war.

So pretty soon the people begin to realize that life is tough. And they start not believing what they’re told. About two, three years ago they reach a pinnacle of cynicism and doubt.

Along comes Confidential. It tells the people about crime, filth, vice, corruption. Just what the people want, just what they suspected was going on.86

84 Design Jobs for Workers, Executive Says, DAILY REG., Apr. 5, 1956, at 4 (“People aren’t getting the satisfaction they used to from their work, an insurance company personnel director said today, because their jobs are boring. Workers are turning to TV, movies and scandal magazines . . . and the result is ‘creative sterility.’”).
85 Jack Olsen, Titans of Trash, SUNDAY HERALD, Nov. 6, 1955, at M2; see also Curious Craze, supra note 24, at 50–51:
The U.S. public is the most communication-glutted group of people in world history. Daily bombarded by “facts” which conflict, daily told opposite versions of the same incidents, hopelessly incapable in this complicated world of sorting out the truth, a great many Americans have undoubtedly built a thick shell of skepticism around themselves.

Understandably, the shell often hardens into cynicism. Having seen more than his share of legitimate scandals and exposures, the reader begins to think that every story must have some kind of a “lowdown” beneath the surface, some “uncensored” facts known only to a “confidential” few.

86 Olsen, supra note 85, at M2 (internal quotation marks omitted).
Confidential also rose to prominence because Harrison was able to play on the public’s penchant for celebrity gossip. The magazine promised to explode the pristine celebrity narratives that had long circulated in popular culture and to reveal that sexual and moral deviance ran rampant in Hollywood. The rise of Confidential “bespoke a hunger for this type of coverage,” wrote historian Anne Helen Petersen.  

Harrison capitalized on recent developments in the film industry: the decline of the studio system and with it, Hollywood’s tightly controlled system of celebrity publicity. Since the 1920s, the film industry had been organized into a “studio system.”  

In 1948, the Supreme Court, in United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., declared that the studios held a monopoly over film production, distribution, and exhibition.  

The studios sold off their theater chains. This spelled financial disaster for the studios, since exhibition had been their primary source of profit.  

Hollywood was also undermined by the rise of television, which reduced film attendance.  

The demise of the studio system transformed celebrity publicity. Under the studio system, studio publicity departments had been responsible for publicizing actors who were under contract to the studios. To conceal stars’ “sexual preferences, illicit sexual dalliances, and illegal activities,” publicists issued phony, laudatory biographies and news releases that portrayed actors as upstanding, wholesome, and moral.  

Magazines showed actresses “in [their] kitchen[s], dicing carrots, and spouting . . . thoughts about motherhood, the sanctity of marriage, and the intrinsic goodness of God.”  

Writers for fan magazines were required to submit all articles to the studio publicity departments before publication, and interviews with celebrities had to be conducted with a studio publicist present.  

Journalists who violated these rules were banned from studio lots. “The Hollywood press corps . . . was about as autonomous as TASS, the Soviet news agency,” observed journalist Sam Kashner. “If you printed

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87 Petersen, supra note 6, at 118.  
89 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 34–35.  
90 334 U.S. 131 (1948).  
91 Id. at 152.  
92 MICHAEL CONANT, ANTITRUST IN THE MOTION PICTURE INDUSTRY: ECONOMIC AND LEGAL ANALYSIS 107 (1960).  
93 See generally id. at 129–35 (explaining the result of Paramount for studio profits).  
94 See Petersen, supra note 6, at 144–45.  
95 Id. at 121.  
98 Petersen, supra note 6, at 51.  
99 Sam Kashner, Confidential, GQ, Mar. 2000, at 218.
something about, say, Rock Hudson that wasn’t approved by Universal Pictures, you didn’t get invited to press conferences anymore. You were blackballed from the Hollywood beat.  

After the Paramount decision and the divestment decree, many stars were no longer under contract to the studios. Publicity came increasingly from the press agents that stars hired on their own. “Without studio mediation, a star’s actions became increasingly transparent,” wrote Petersen. If a star was arrested or caught in a tryst, the studio’s “fixers” were no longer available to cover up for them. “The gossip floodgates were essentially opened.”

Confidential played on these vulnerabilities. With the help of his lawyers, Harrison devised an elaborate system for cultivating, channeling, and verifying gossip from anonymous Hollywood informants, who were paid between $100 and $1,000 for “tips.” “[C]ops, private detectives, prostitutes, B actors,” and “friends of celebrities, enemies of celebrities . . . disgruntled discharged maids and butlers . . . press agents who formerly worked for celebrities and even press agents who currently work for celebrities” were happy to have a lucrative outlet for the tips they picked up. Actors would rat on their colleagues when they were short of cash, and mainstream journalists were paid to “pass along gossip that their own newspapers deemed too hot to handle.” Informants reported to Confidential’s Hollywood agents or sent tips to the magazine’s offices in New York, often in plain envelopes. Harrison paid his sources in cash, or

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100 Id. In the words of Time, Inc.’s Hollywood writer Ezra Goodman, “The studios and the press agents have never favored an independent press. All they want from the journalists is panegyrics of praise and a constant quota of sweetness and light. . . . The resultant blackout on fact and truth has made the celluloid curtain as impenetrable as any supposed iron curtain.” EZRA GOODMAN, THE FIFTY-YEAR DECLINE AND FALL OF HOLLYWOOD 41 (1961).

101 See Petersen, supra note 6, at 78–80.

102 Id. at 68.

103 Id.

104 Id.

105 Gehman, supra note 25, at 139.

106 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 36.

107 Gehman, supra note 25, at 142.


109 Gehman, supra note 25, at 142. Harrison told a potential contributor:

Look, you don’t have to do the work. You don’t write the story. You just type the idea on a piece of paper. We got men in the office that will write it up. Or you can telephone it in if you got an idea for a story. Nobody will know you gave us the idea. We could pay you in cash so no checks will be traced back to you.

Don’t worry about nothing. We put private detectives on the trail to make sure the facts are right. I have spent thousands of dollars checking on a story. All we want is the tip. You hear a good rumor, you phone it in to me personally and you got yourself five hundred dollars.

Maurice Zolotow, Confidentially, It’s Pay Dirt, DETROIT FREE PRESS, Nov. 13, 1955, at 4-C (internal quotation marks omitted).
checks signed to fictitious names, to protect their identities. Sometimes Confidential threatened actors and studio personnel, practically forcing them to divulge secrets. The Universal-International studio gave Confidential information about actor Rory Calhoun’s jail record in exchange for Confidential’s agreement to withhold articles outing a star, Rock Hudson, who was more important to them than Calhoun.

In 1955, Harrison opened Hollywood Research Incorporated, a “research bureau” headquartered in Hollywood. Hollywood Research became a clearinghouse for tips. It coordinated the gathering of data, payment to informants, and fact-checking—the important “authentication” or “verification” process. The bureau was run by Harrison’s niece, Marjorie Meade, and her husband Fred. Harrison provided the Meades with $5,000, bought them an expensive home for entertaining in Beverly Hills, and the Meades worked their way into Hollywood social circles. In 1955, the Meades pursued over 750 story leads.

Established freelance writers were hired to turn the raw data into finished stories. Freelancers were often “rewrite men and reporters on the New York dailies who [were] looking to supplement their incomes; [or] former first-rate writers . . . who, for some reason, generally involving temperament or booze, can no longer work for the popular family magazines,” noted Esquire. The articles, published pseudonymously, were edited and polished by Confidential’s small in-house staff of four writers and freelance writers. The editors put the articles into Confidential’s trademark “toboggan ride” style—as Harrison described it, “racy and free of embroidery, [which] keeps the reader on the edge of his seat.”

4. The Legal Department

Knowing the wrath his exposés would likely incur, Harrison structured Confidential’s operations around the possibility of legal threats and legal retribution. Though based in New York, Confidential had no corporate or jurisdictional connection to its printer, wholesaler, distributor, and sellers. The magazine was printed in

110 Gehman, supra note 25, at 142.
111 GOODMAN, supra note 100, at 52.
112 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 125.
113 See id.
114 Id.
115 See id. at 125–26.
116 Gabler, supra note 35.
117 Gehman, supra note 25, at 139.
118 Rutledge, supra note 29, at 15.
119 HOLLEY, supra note 108, at 28.
120 Rutledge, supra note 29, at 15 (internal quotation marks omitted).
121 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 125–26.
122 Giesler Heads Committee to Protect Stars, Denounces Industry, SAN BERNARDINO DAILY SUN, Apr. 19, 1957, at 8.
Illinois, by an independent publisher called the Kable Company, and its entire press run was purchased by a wholesale distributor, The Periodical Distribution Company, which sold the magazine to distributors in other states.\(^{123}\) Most of the magazine’s five million copies were sold at newsstands, rather than by subscription; newsstand copies were distributed by truck, rather than mail, to head off potential problems with the Post Office.\(^{124}\)

Harrison paid the small New York law firm Becker, Ross and Stone $100,000 a year to advise him on *Confidential*.\(^{125}\) Lawyers Daniel Ross and Albert DeStefano sat in on editorial conferences, read text, and consulted with staff writers.\(^{126}\) *Confidential*’s lawyers read every word of every issue, considering the legal ramifications of each sentence, article, and photograph.\(^{127}\)

To head off libel lawsuits—*Confidential*’s primary concern—articles often implied, rather than stated, scandalous facts.\(^{128}\) Many *Confidential* stories were based on so-called “composite facts.”\(^{129}\) While the basic core facts of an incident might have occurred, such as an actor’s past arrest, those facts were often juxtaposed with unrelated facts and sensational headlines and captions.\(^{130}\) “Incidents having no causal, temporal or other significant relationship” to the event were “skillfully arranged to insinuate relationship.”\(^{131}\) “By sprinkling grains of fact into a cheesecake of innuendo, detraction and plain smut,” noted *Time* magazine, “Confidential creates the illusion of reporting the ‘lowdown’ on celebrities. Its standard method: dig up one sensational fact and embroider it for 1,500 to 2,000 words. If the subject thinks of suing, he may quickly realize that the fact is true, even if the embroidery is not.”\(^{132}\)

\(^{123}\) SCOTT, supra note 3, at 167–68; Giesler Heads Committee to Protect Stars, Denounces Industry, supra note 122, at 8.

\(^{124}\) Harrison’s years as the “Cheesecake King” made him sensitive to the legal risks involved in magazine publishing. On one project for one of his girlie magazines in the 1940s, Harrison had driven a carload of models to a golf course and took pictures of them running across the fairways half-nude. SCOTT, supra note 3, at 17. Police arrested him for taking pornographic pictures. *Id.* Later, a “postal inspector [threatened] to rescind Harrison’s second-class mailing privileges on the grounds that his magazines were obscene. Called in to advise him, the prominent civil-rights attorney Morris Ernst suggested that Harrison change the format and eliminate the semi-nudity. He did,” and circulation declined. Gabler, supra note 35. The magazines “may be mailable,’ he joked, ‘but they aren’t salable.’” *Id.*

\(^{125}\) Gabler, supra note 35.

\(^{126}\) 2 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 281.

\(^{127}\) *Id.*; Gabler, supra note 35.

\(^{128}\) Gabler, supra note 35.


\(^{130}\) *Id.*

\(^{131}\) *Id.*

\(^{132}\) *Success in the Sewer*, *Time*, July 11, 1955, at 92. Harrison’s “specialty is printing scandalous personal material, as libellous [sic] as he can make it while still including an admixture of provable fact, as a precaution against being sued,” observed one critic. *Dancing on a Tightrope*, LINCOLN EVENING J. (Neb.), July 12, 1955, at 4. “[H]e and his lawyers] . . . figure
Confidential’s lawyers also checked the magazine for potentially obscene material, although they were less concerned with obscenity than libel. The magazine did not explicitly describe sexual acts, and there were no nude images; there was nothing pornographic about it.

Harrison employed informants, including prostitutes and private detectives, to confirm every statement in the magazine. “We have to have the exact time, exact date, the bungalow number, everything documented, just in case,” Harrison boasted. “There is not one word that goes into this book that is not thoroughly authenticated and documented.” DeStefano refused to approve any story with facts that could not be verified.

Using the latest surveillance technologies such as hidden cameras and miniature recording devices, Confidential’s informants bugged offices and homes to check facts. Ronnie Quillan, a prostitute working in Hollywood, alleged that Harrison asked her to go to lunch with actress Lizabeth Scott, who was an alleged homosexual, and to use a concealed recording device to get “verification.” “Some of my exclusives cost me $5000,” Harrison said.

I can’t just take the word of a maid or a butler—who would believe them in court? I got to get additional stuff. Why, I’ve sent people to Morocco to get stuff I needed. I sent a lawyer to Europe to check something on Marlene Dietrich—I spent $7000 on that story alone.

DeStefano required affidavits from participants in, or witnesses to, the incidents described in a story. The affidavits read, “I swear that all the events described in that a few actual facts stirred into the scurrilous mixture will be enough to persuade the victim that he had better just squirm and take it.” Id. Harrison described it this way: Once we establish the star in the hay and that’s documented, we can say anything we want and I think we make [the stories] a hell of a lot more interesting than they really are. What’s a guy gonna do, sue us and admit he was in the hay with the dame, but claim he didn’t do all the other things we dress the story with?

Conrad, supra note 16, at 99 (internal quotation marks omitted).

133 See generally Desjardins, supra note 6, at 208–10 (comparing the state of libel and obscenity laws and their relationships to scandal magazines).

134 Gehman, supra note 25, at 142.

135 Curious Craze, supra note 24, at 51 (internal quotation marks omitted).

136 Between You and Me, supra note 38, at 25 (internal quotation marks omitted).

137 Scott, supra note 3, at 40.

138 Desjardins, supra note 6, at 210; Govoni, supra note 58, at 29.

139 Scott, supra note 3, at 98.

140 Gehman, supra note 25, at 143 (internal quotation marks omitted).

141 See Scott, supra note 3, at 40 (noting that sworn affidavits “provided further legal protection”).
the above story are true and that I was a participant in these events."142 The affidavits were kept in a locked file cabinet in the Confidential office.143 Until 1957, Confidential had an impressive track record when it came to libel. After five years of existence, Confidential had racked up only a dozen libel lawsuits out of 450 articles—"an imposing batting average," according to Esquire.144 Before 1956, Harrison could proudly claim that he never paid out a cent in libel suits.145 It was not only Harrison’s lawyers who kept him out of court; Confidential’s greatest protection was the subjects’ natural disinclination to sue. Many who were smeared in the magazine did not want to draw attention to the accusations with a lawsuit.146 Some worried that if they sued, Confidential would respond with more damaging disclosures in court.147 “Confidential’s main leverage over celebrities was fear,” recalled the son of one of Confidential’s editors.148 “The editors were convinced that . . . you could keep people from suing because there was always more dirt to be discovered.”149

B. Responses

1. The Film Industry

Confidential hit the film industry at a time when it was vulnerable, and the magazine’s success struck terror in Hollywood.150 “The effect [of Confidential] among

142 CONRAD, supra note 16, at 98–99; 2 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 140–41. Working from a tip, the magazine . . . put a private investigator on the story, tailing the subject over a period of time. When a sufficiently detailed and documented dossier had been compiled, complete with vouchers from witnesses, the magazines would run a portion of the story, holding the rest of the evidence in abeyance should there be any kickback.

GOODMAN, supra note 100, at 51.
143 See CONRAD, supra note 16, at 98.
144 Gehman, supra note 25, at 142.
145 See Ssh!, TIME, Apr. 2, 1956, at 86, 86. Observed Newsweek: The impressive thing about Harrison’s current operation, apart from his sales, is that he has never been brought to court for libel. One reason: While Confidential often, and artfully, stretches small facts into huge insinuations, the facts he uses are painstakingly checked by detective agencies, by his excellent lawyers, by his own photostating service, and by other more intimate methods.

Sin, Sex, and Sales, supra note 49, at 88.
146 Success in the Sewer, supra note 132.
147 See id.
148 Govoni, supra note 58, at 43.
149 Id.
150 GOODMAN, supra note 100, at 50–51 (“[T]he scandal magazines were feared—and also held a horrible fascination for most everyone.”).
Hollywood notables . . . amounts to general fright,” *Newsweek* reported in 1955.151 “Overnight, some of Hollywood’s biggest stars have been tagged as deviates, rakes, nymphomaniacs, lunatics, drunks and hopheads[,]” and the result was immediate havoc on relationships and careers.152 Theater bookings were cancelled because of *Confidential* exposés.153 At least one star had no job offers after being featured in *Confidential*.154 There was talk in the South of banning the films of a white actress who had been linked with a black actor in the magazine.155

Fearing that any actions against the magazine would lead to reprisals, film executives at first did nothing.156 “[T]hese are individual problems; it is up to the individuals whether they want to take action,” a spokesman for the Motion Picture Producers Association told the press.157 Actors balked. “What do they mean by that double talk?” asked Humphrey Bogart.158 “Actors belong to the movie industry; they’re products of the industry, and they should be backed up by the industry. If somebody kept writing that Cadillacs had lousy brakes, wouldn’t the Cadillac company take some action? The industry needs some guts.”159 Eventually realizing “that the vast circulation of the magazines” would have “the cumulative effect of convincing the public that Hollywood is wild and wicked,” the film industry launched a campaign against *Confidential* in 1955.160 The Motion Picture Industry Council, the industry’s public relations arm, set up a committee to run counter-publicity and combat attacks by scandal magazines.161 Hollywood created a list of writers and tipsters who supplied *Confidential*.162 Everyone on the list was to be blacklisted, banished from Hollywood socially and professionally.163 Producer-director Mervyn LeRoy contacted a private detective, who said he would need $350,000 to recruit former F.B.I. agents to investigate *Confidential*...
and prove its articles false. The project was dropped when the studio heads became apprehensive, fearing that an attack would have a “boomerang” effect.

In 1957, Hollywood fought back against Confidential with a film. MGM released Slander, a movie about a sleazy, fictional magazine called Real Truth. The story revealed the blackmail and extortion that scandal magazines used to get their stories. In the end, the villainous publisher—based clearly on Robert Harrison—is murdered in cold blood. The film not only took a swipe at Harrison, noted Time, but also at his many “accomplices”: “the readership which settles in cloudlike millions on the garbage which the scandal sheets provide.”

2. The Public Response

Among the reading public, Confidential struck a nerve. The magazine’s gritty exposés were wildly popular and, at the same time, denounced and deplored. “[E]verybody reads it, but they say the cook brought it into the house,” Humphrey Bogart remarked famously. Subscription orders asked that Confidential be sent “in plain wrapper.” A Chicago society woman summarized the simultaneous disgust and attraction that she felt for the magazine: “I’ve read it from cover to cover, and I think it ought to be thrown out of the house.”

At a time of nationwide concerns with juvenile delinquency, critics worried about the effects of Confidential’s highly sexualized content on teenagers, children, and

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165 Id.
166 Slander (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 1957).
168 Slander, supra note 166. “Scandal . . . Smear . . . Slander: See how careers are blasted and lives are broken by the yellow reporting in the vicious scandal magazines!” read an advertisement for the film. See, e.g., Scandal! . . Smear! . . Slander! . ., GLOBE-GAZETTE (Mason City, Iowa), Mar. 29, 1957, at 6; see also The Screen, COMMONWEAL, Feb. 8, 1957, at 488.
170 Haney, supra note 8, at 84.

Many adults would doubtless be regular readers of the cheap magazines if they did not fear the social stigma that would result. They pass by Confidential in favor of Reader’s Digest because they demand reading that will bolster their social standing. . . . The pulp magazines, on the other hand, sell primarily to people who like such trash and don’t care who knows it.

Id. (internal citations omitted).
171 Success in the Sewer, supra note 132 (internal quotation marks omitted).
172 Rushmore, supra note 40, at 38.
173 Success in the Sewer, supra note 132 (internal quotation marks omitted).
other suggestible persons. The scandal magazines “[were] dangerous because they encourage[d] unstable individuals to express sexual deviations and . . . provide[d] even average persons with ‘an extra incentive to practice adultery or promiscuity,’” noted one critic.174 “[L]urid stories about the actions of . . . rich and beautiful people, invariably hint[ ] broadly that they have done something thrilling and against social mores—and gotten away with it.”175 “One cannot but wonder how much of this sensational junk is taken into U.S. homes by mothers of families.”176

By 1955 there was a broad consensus that Confidential should be eradicated from the nation’s newsstands—the question was how.177 Some advocated bringing social pressures against the magazine—protests, boycotts, and moral suasion.178 “The best . . . pressure that can be brought [on Confidential] . . . is moral condemnation by private groups,” wrote one commentator.179 The answer to the Confidential problem is “educating the public against buying scandal magazines. If people could be made aware of how damaging such magazines can be[,] . . . [it] might dictate the best remedy—refusal to pay money to enrich the smut peddlers.”180

Others sought government bans on Confidential. In 1957, the Los Angeles Sentinel published “man on the street” interviews with residents of the city, who agreed that “scandal magazines” should be “outlawed.”181 “All scandal magazines should be taken off the market. They are a menace to society. They carry nothing but trash and that is no good for our youth,” stated one observer.182 “Scandal magazines and the derogatory, vicious material they carry interfere with a person’s private and personal

174 Roosevelt, supra note 83, at 36.
175 Libel is Mudslinging, PANAMA CITY NEWS, Sept. 4, 1957, at 4.
176 Women Are Expose Fans, AMERICA, Feb. 11, 1956, at 520; see also Rushmore, supra note 40, at 38 (“Several surveys taken by Confidential’s circulation department showed that about 75 per cent of the magazine’s readers were women. . . . I am sure that only a tiny percentage of Confidential’s readers are teen-agers, and a minority are men. Its appeal is directed primarily at feminine readers.”); Gehman, supra note 25, at 143 (according to Harrison, “the majority of our readers are women”) (internal quotation marks omitted). Complaining to a local newspaper about the “scandal magazines,” one Los Angeles resident observed that “42% of all major crimes are committed by young people under 18” and “J. Edgar Hoover has called lewd literature an ‘important contributory factor in juvenile delinquency.’ . . . It is about time we took some preventive measures before well over [1 million] delinquents grow to [2 million] by 1960, as has been predicted,” he advised. A.M. McMahon, Letter to the Editor, Corrupting Influences, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 4, 1957, at 46.
177 A rare few praised Confidential’s exposés: “These magazines tell us many things, for instance the real story behind the cancer drug[,] . . . These scandal magazines expose rackets and tell us how to protect ourselves from them. The popularity of these magazines is caused by the fact [that] the people believe they are getting the truth.” M. A., Letter to the Editor, The Real Scandal, DECATUR SUNDAY HERALD & REV. (Ill.), Oct. 6, 1957, at 47.
180 To Deflate Scandal, supra note 178, at 4.
182 Id.
business.”183 “Yes, I certainly feel their publication and sale should be outlawed,” said another.184 The Reverend Billy Graham, addressing a public rally in 1957, complained “that our laws are so lenient as to allow the scandal magazines . . . to be sold in almost every part of the United States.”185 “I believe in freedom of the press but the law should be changed to protect individuals . . . from this type of journalism,” actress Joan Bennett told reporters.186 A ban on Confidential did not violate freedom of the press, Confidential’s opponents argued, because the First Amendment did not protect “smut publishers.”187

II. CENSORSHIP

The idea of a government ban on Confidential was not as jarring then as it would be today. In the 1950s, many believed that free speech rights could be sharply limited in the interest in enforcing public morals, and that governments could restrain or suppress publications that had the potential to create social discord or promote unrest.188 As Better Homes and Gardens magazine opined in 1957, “the framers of the Constitution never meant the First Amendment to protect filth peddlers who poison minds.”189 “[W]e are not ready to accept such junk as . . . the smut magazines as any part of the [constitutionally protected] press.”190

Popular support for official restraints on publishing,191 and increased government restraints on publishing in the 1950s, marked something of a reversal in free speech trends.192 On the whole, the trend in free speech law between the early 1900s and 1950 had been in the direction of liberalization.193 “An evolution” of free speech that began in the 1920s “amounted to a revolution” by the 1940s, one legal scholar observed.194 By World War II, there was a “tendency on the part of . . . [the] courts to grant to the

183 Id.
184 Id.
186 Curious Craze, supra note 24, at 52 (internal quotation marks omitted).
188 See, e.g., id.
189 Id.
190 Cleanup Needed, REDLANDS DAILY FACTS (Cal.), Feb. 20, 1957, at 12 (“Perhaps we should define the meaning of the word ‘Press,’ and decide if these sex and bedroom magazines can truly be considered a part of the press as it is properly conceived.”).
191 See, e.g., Newsstand Filth, supra note 187, at 197.
193 See, e.g., Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697 (1931) (holding that prior restraints on the press were generally unconstitutional); Gitlow v. New York, 268 U.S. 652 (1925) (incorporating the First Amendment’s free speech principles to the states).
194 MURPHY, supra note 8, at 101.
press an ever increasing freedom to print and publish.” One critic, writing in the early 1950s, claimed that “sex censorship was almost passé.” That would soon change.

A. A ‘Moral Panic’

The resurgence of legal restraints on publishing was spurred, in part, by an increase in mass communications. In the 1950s, newspaper circulation reached historic highs; by 1960, there were 1.3 newspapers per American. Television was introduced, and by the end of the decade eighty-eight percent of Americans owned a television set. In the 1930s, a paperback revolution made books available for as low as twenty-five cents, and in 1953 a quarter of a billion paperback books were published. During the 1950s, Americans were spending $18 billion annually on recreational pursuits, including books, magazines, and newspapers.

Encouraged by a climate of greater sexual openness after the war, popular media featured sensational and suggestive themes. Pulp magazines and girlie publications, including Playboy, flooded newsstands. Comic books, many violent and sadistic, became nearly $100 million a year business, and “lurid designs and suggestive copy” were prevalent in paperback books. Once limited to all-male environments such as “barbershops, saloons and Army posts,” suggestive material was being distributed to a mass audience through mainstream outlets such as drugstores, newsstands, dime stores, confectionaries, and supermarkets.

The proliferation of racy publications contributed to the era’s moral panic. In the 1950s, there were deep anxieties in the culture around the effects of World War II on

195 Frederick S. Siebert, Legal Developments Affecting the Press, 219 ANNALS OF AM. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. 93, 93 (1942).
196 MURPHY, supra note 8, at 101 (citing Eric Larrabee, Morality and Obscenity, in FREEDOM OF BOOK SELECTION 25 (Frederick J. Moshner ed., 1954)).
198 Id.
199 Id. at 156.
201 BARBAS, supra note 197, at 160.
202 MURPHY, supra note 8, at 82 (“The World War II era saw paperback and pocket-size books, comic books, girlie and picture magazines become big business. A significant portion of the new publications brought in its wake a widespread and critical public reaction.”).
203 D’EMILIO & FREEDMAN, supra note 63, at 280.
205 D’EMILIO & FREEDMAN, supra note 63, at 280 (“After World War II, pornography, as well as other media products that titillated males by [sexualizing] women’s bodies, moved beyond their customary place in a marginal underground world. Soldiers who had graced their barracks . . . with photos and drawings of ‘pin-up’ girls returned . . . with pornography obtained abroad.”).
family life, sexual attitudes, and gender norms. Women had entered the workforce during the war, sexual activity became freer, cities expanded, and with them came rising crime. Communism was linked in the popular imagination to promiscuity and sexual deviance, and concerns with juvenile delinquency heightened the public’s fear of suggestive books and magazines. The 1950s saw an alleged “epidemic” of juvenile delinquency. In 1954, one million youths were said to be involved with the police. A Chicago police commissioner claimed that the influence of “lurid magazines and books” contributed to the “recent increase in rape and sex crimes.” FBI director J. Edgar Hoover alleged that racy periodicals “play[ed] an important part in the development of crime among the youth of our country.”

These developments led to a series of efforts to suppress publications. A “purity movement” battled against the public display of sexuality, and by 1951, books

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209 D’Emilio & Freedman, supra note 63, at 242.

210 See generally Barry Latzer, The Rise and Fall of Violent Crime in America 75–78 (2016) (describing the increase in urban crime in the 1950s).


212 Fred Millett, The Vigilantes, 40 AM. ASS’N PROFESSORS 47, 54–55 (1954). In the view of one critic, one of the most “immediate” causes of censorship was the: general atmosphere of hysteria and fear of communism that [was] being systematically engendered in America . . . . The conversion of communism into the national bogey-man [had] encouraged the transference of distrust, hostility, and fear to a great many other entities than communism. . . . The irrational fear that [made] it impossible for people to study or discuss communism dispassionately quickly spill[ed] over and inundat[ed] any other product of contemporary culture that for some reason seem[ed] strange or baffling or threatening to the half-educated mind.

Id.

213 Murphy, supra note 8, at 92.

214 Banning, supra note 206, at 116.


217 D’Emilio & Freedman, supra note 63, at 280 (“Every step toward greater [sexual] openness was matched by renewed efforts to hold the line against ‘filth.’”).
radio, television, magazines, and newspapers were “all feeling increased pressure from advocates of censorship,” noted the New York Times.218 “A recrudescence of Puritanism is . . . epidemic in the United States,” observed two critics in 1955.219 “As in the years following both the Civil War and World War I,” printed matter was “under general attack because of [its] alleged” immorality.220 Lawmaking bodies were “passing censorship laws so fast that it [was] difficult to make an accurate count.”221

By the middle of the decade, state legislatures were inundated with demands for new laws against obscene literature.222 Several cities and states passed laws regulating the sale and distribution of violent comic books.223 Some criminalized what they characterized as lewd and indecent publications, and even all material “inimical to the public health, safety and morals.”224 Some proposed measures that “declare[d] the newspaper, magazine and periodical publishing business [to be] ‘clothed with a public interest and subject to [content-based] regulation.’”225 These measures generated widespread support. Sixty percent of Americans in one poll believed that “police and other groups should have the right to censor or ban books and movies.”226 Less than half of students at Purdue University thought that “[n]ewspapers and magazines should be allowed to print anything they want except military secrets.”227 A Gallup poll found that half of Americans were in favor of “freedom of speech for everybody,” but that forty-five percent would seriously limit or qualify that right.228


220 Id.; see also Eric Larrabee, The Cultural Context of Sex Censorship, 20 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 672, 676–77 (1955) (questioning the decade’s association between obscenity, moral decay, and crime).

221 Lewis C. Smith, Jr., The Truth Beaten Down, 4 C. COMPOSITION & COMM. 138, 139 (1953).

222 Newsstand Filth, supra note 187, at 205 (discussing that there were proposals for “stricter, tougher, clearer, more enforceable anti-obscenity laws,” with heavier fines and jail terms). In 1953 alone, “fifteen state legislatures considered bills to control, penalize, or change the penalties for the distribution of literature.” James Rorty, The Harassed Pocket-Book Publishers, 15 ANTIQUES REV. 411, 422 (1955).


225 Bill Sent to Florida Aims at Ruling Press, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 8, 1951, at 46.

226 Leslie G. Moeller, Dir., Sch. of Journalism, State Univ. of Iowa, How Free is the Press?: the Proper and Judicious Use of Freedom (Sept. 9, 1957), in 23 VITAL SPEECHES 750, 751 (1957).

227 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

In some jurisdictions, official “review boards” were set up to screen and ban publications offered for sale. In Detroit, the police department and its review board vetted all material on newsstands; if they found a publication objectionable, it was submitted to the district attorney, who pressured the vendor to remove it under threat of prosecution under obscenity laws. In 1956, Georgia established a “state literature commission” to study “questionable literature” “violating normal, traditional and contemporary patterns of decency” and to make reports to the state solicitor general for prosecution for obscenity. The St. Cloud, Minnesota City Council passed an ordinance creating a “board of review” to screen literature sold in the city and to order distributors and newsdealers to cease selling material condemned by the board.

Citizens’ committees for “decent literature” sprung up across the country. The National Organization for Decent Literature, a Roman Catholic group, was described as “the most potent force against comic books, paper-bound books, and pulp magazines in America.” Along with women’s clubs, veterans’ organizations, PTA groups, and other civic associations, NODL branches pressured newsstands and booksellers to remove books and magazines. Citizens’ committees provided lists of disfavored publications to police, who warned vendors that material they were selling was objectionable and must be removed from sale. Implicit in these requests were threats.

229 See, e.g., Indiana Governor Backs Smut Drive, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 30, 1959, at 45 (discussing “literature review boards” in Indiana).
233 Hempel & Wall, supra note 230, at 992; Censorship of Obscene Literature, supra note 192, at 220–21. See generally Arthur E. Farmer, Pressure-Group Censorship—and How to Fight It, 42 AM. LIBR. ASS’N BULL. 356 (1948) (distinguishing public review boards from private interest groups who sought to ban publications).
234 HANEY, supra note 8, at 88. On the NODL, see generally Rorty, supra note 222.
235 Slugging the “Exposé” Magazines, NEWSWEEK, June 1955, at 75.

In most cases the group conducting a drive against literature it deems objectionable is one informally organized by local citizens who are supported by no outside organization. Sometimes, however, the campaign is either initiated or supported by influential national organizations, or their local branches, whose main function is unrelated to the control of literature. . . . [such as] the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, and various P.T.A. groups.

Hempel & Wall, supra note 230, at 992–93 (internal citations omitted).

236 One police chief sent a letter: “Enclosed is a list of objectionable or obscene magazines which you are requested to remove permanently from sale by local output . . . I would like this to become effective immediately upon receipt of this communication.” HANEY, supra note 8, at 87. Certificates were given to newsdealers who complied, and boycotts threatened against those who resisted. In some communities, signs were placed in store windows calling attention to dealers who cooperated in magazine clean-up drives. William B. Lockhart &
that noncooperation would produce “trouble,” including prosecution under obscenity laws or visits by building and health inspectors.237 “[W]ithout judicial determination of obscenity” or other criminal violations, noted one critic, “a sizable number” of publications disappeared from public consumption.238

B. Freedom of Speech

1. Prior Restraints

The constitutionality of these measures was unclear in most cases, generally untested, and often dubious.239 Although many areas of First Amendment law were still poorly defined and had yet to be addressed by the Supreme Court, there were fairly well-developed protections for freedom of publishing within existing First Amendment law.

Since the 1930s, it was a fundamental tenet that the First Amendment prohibited prior restraints.240 A prior restraint, in its most basic form, was an “official restriction[] imposed upon speech . . . in advance of actual publication.”241 The rule against prior restraints, derived from Blackstone’s Commentaries on the English common law,242 became a First Amendment requirement in Near v. Minnesota.243 In Near, the Supreme Court struck down a Minnesota law that prohibited the publication of a “malicious, scandalous and defamatory newspaper, magazine or other periodical.”244 The law provided that all such “nuisances” could be enjoined from further publication.245 The majority in Near characterized the Minnesota law as a prior restraint, “the essence of censorship.”246 The “chief purpose” of freedom of the press, it declared, is “to prevent previous restraints upon publication.”247 The rule against prior restraints

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237 Censorship of Obscene Literature, supra note 192, at 230 (“Police threats need not involve criminal prosecutions under the obscenity laws. . . . The threat ‘to send the inspectors around’ can be extremely effective in any city where there are lengthy, strict, or outmoded health and safety ordinances.”); see also Bolte, supra note 216, at 92 (“The consequence of [noncooperation] is nontrade. Most dealers go along.”).

238 HANEY, supra note 8, at 87 (giving the example of Stamford, Connecticut).

239 See Bolte, supra note 216, at 91.

240 See generally Emerson, supra note 8.

241 Id. at 648.

242 See DAVID M. RABBAN, FREE SPEECH IN ITS FORGOTTEN YEARS 132 (1997).

243 283 U.S. 697, 713 (1931).

244 Id. at 701–02 (quoting MINN. STAT. §§ 10123-1–3 (1927)) (internal quotation marks omitted).

245 Id.

246 Id. at 713.

247 Id.
was not absolute; prior restraints could be justified in “exceptional cases. . . . No one would question but that a government might prevent . . . publication of the sailing dates of transports or the number and location of troops. On similar grounds, the primary requirements of decency may be enforced against obscene publications,” according to the Near majority.248

The prior restraint in Near was a judicial injunction.249 In the 1930s and 40s, the Court applied the concept of prior restraint to provisions other than injunctions, including permit requirements250 and license taxes.251 In Thomas v. Collins,252 the Court held a statute requiring the registration of union organizers before permitting them to carry on solicitation to be an unconstitutional prior restraint.253 In cases involving the proselytizing efforts of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Court said that a tax upon sellers of wares, as applied to purveyors of religious tracts, was a prior restraint.254 Since the early twentieth century, films had been censored in several states; movies could not be exhibited unless approved by a government board of review.255 In Burstyn v. Wilson,256 the Court declared film licensing to be an unconstitutional prior restraint.257

 Though the term was widely used, there was “no common understanding as to what constitute[d] ‘prior restraint,’” observed First Amendment scholar Thomas Emerson in 1955.258 “The term [was] used loosely to embrace a variety of different situations.”259 One distinguishing feature of a prior restraint was that a banned communication never reached the public.260 The decision to ban a publication often “rest[ed] with a single government functionary rather than with a jury”; prior restraints were often determined by administrative rather than criminal procedures, meaning that “[t]he presumption of innocence, the heavier burden of proof borne by the government, the stricter rules of evidence, the stronger objection to vagueness, [and] the immeasurably tighter and more technical procedure” did not apply.261 In Emerson’s words:

248 Id. at 716.
249 Id. at 705.
251 See Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson, 343 U.S. 495 (1952).
252 323 U.S. 516 (1945).
253 Id. at 534.
254 Follett v. McCormick, 321 U.S. 573, 577 (1944) (invalidating a license tax as applied to religious tracts); Murdock v. Pennsylvania, 319 U.S. 105, 108 (1943) (invalidating a law taxing the sale of books or other literature); Lovell v. Griffin, 303 U.S. 444, 451 (1938) (invalidating a municipal law requiring a permit to distribute “literature”).
255 Burstyn, 343 U.S. at 495, 510–11 (Frankfurter, J., concurring).
256 343 U.S. 495 (1952).
257 The “previous restraint” was a “form of infringement upon freedom of expression to be especially condemned.” Id. at 503 (citing Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697 (1931)).
258 Emerson, supra note 8, at 655.
259 Id.
260 Id. at 648.
261 Id.
A system of prior restraint usually operates behind a screen of informality and partial concealment that seriously curtails opportunity for public appraisal and increases the chances of discrimination and other abuse. Decisions are less likely to be made in the glare of publicity that accompanies a subsequent punishment. The policies and actions of the licensing official do not as often come to public notice; the reasons for his action are less likely to be known or publicly debated; material for study and criticism are less readily available; and the whole apparatus of public scrutiny fails to play the role it normally does under a system of subsequent punishment.262

2. Subsequent Punishments

Since the 1930s, subsequent punishments had been governed by a “clear and present danger” standard, as a constitutional requirement.263 When determining whether to uphold punishments for speech, courts had to ask, “whether the words used are used in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about [a] substantive evil[ ] that [the government] ha[d] a right to prevent.”264 The Supreme Court’s adoption of the “clear and present danger” test marked a revolution in First Amendment law. The earlier standard for judging free speech claims had been a “bad tendency” test; governments could employ their police power broadly to punish speech that had a propensity, however slight or remote, to promote unrest or corrupt public morals.265 The Court’s adoption of “clear and present danger” reflected emerging ideals of pluralist democracy—the notion of democracy as a participatory enterprise built on discussion involving all members of society.266 Democracy depended on vigorous debates on “matters of public concern”—“all issues about which information is needed or appropriate to enable the members of society to cope with the exigencies of their period.”267

262 Id. at 658. The line between a prior restraint and subsequent punishment was not always clear. As commentators and the Supreme Court recognized, the threat of criminal punishment could suppress speech as thoroughly as a prior restraint. See, e.g., Paul A. Freund, The Supreme Court and Civil Liberties, 4 VAND. L. REV. 533, 573 (1951). “An injunction running against a particular individual may, to be sure, deter him more sharply than the broad command of a criminal statute; but just as possibly the underlying statutory prohibition, whether enforceable by injunction or by criminal sanctions, may have a deterrent effect,” noted one law review writer. Id. “It will hardly do to place ‘prior restraint’ in a special category for condemnation. What is needed is a pragmatic assessment of its operation in the particular circumstances.” Id. at 539.


264 Id.

265 See RABBAN, supra note 242, at 132.

266 Lester E. Mosher, Mr. Justice Rutledge’s Philosophy of Civil Rights, 24 N.Y.U. L. REV. 661, 666 (1949).

Before the 1960s, the Supreme Court applied “clear and present danger” only to political speech, not morals regulations involving literature or entertainment media. The Court indicated, however, that overly broad, vague, or subjective content-based restrictions on art, literature, and entertainment could potentially violate freedom of the press. Winters v. New York invalidated a New York law that criminalized the publication of material depicting “bloodshed, lust or crime,” holding it to be unconstitutionally vague. The case involved a magazine called Headquarters Detective, True Cases from the Police Blotter, June 1940, containing “a collection of crime stories which portray in vivid fashion tales of vice, murder and intrigue.” While recognizing a state’s interest in “minimiz[ing] all incentives to crime, particularly in the field of sanguinary or salacious publications with their stimulation of juvenile delinquency,” the Court limited a state’s ability to exercise value judgments about the worth of a publication under the guise of the police power.

At the same time, some categories of speech, including libel and obscenity, were said to be entirely unprotected by the First Amendment. "Libelous utterances not being within the area of constitutionally protected speech, it is unnecessary . . . to consider the issues behind the phrase ‘clear and present danger,’” declared the majority in Beauharnais v. Illinois. As the majority wrote in Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire, “it is well understood that the right of free speech is not absolute at all times and under all circumstances. There are certain well-defined and narrowly limited classes of speech, the prevention and punishment of which has never been thought to raise any constitutional problem.” The Court went on to note that:

These include the lewd and obscene, the profane, the libelous, and the insulting or “fighting” words. . . . It has been well observed that such utterances are no essential part of any exposition of ideas, and are of such slight social value as a step to truth that any benefit that may be derived from them is clearly outweighed by the social interest in order and morality.

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269 Winters, 333 U.S. at 515–18.

270 333 U.S. 507 (1948).

271 Id. at 508, 519–20.

272 Id. at 508 n.1.


274 Winters, 333 U.S. at 510.


276 343 U.S. 250, 266 (1952).

277 315 U.S. 568 (1942).

278 Id. at 571–72 (citations omitted).

279 Id. at 572.
C. The Anticensorship Movement

The formal and informal suppression of publications led to a nationwide anticensorship movement. Various organizations denounced “the outbreak of censorship of paper-bound books and other media.” 280 “Slowly, at first, but with increasing vigor, anti-censorship groups have begun a nation-wide fight,” noted the New York Times in 1953. 281 “Industries concerned with movies, books, radio, television, newspapers, magazines have joined with teachers and librarians to help form community groups to combat censorship that they regard as unwarranted.” 282 “The freedom to read is essential to our democracy [and it is] under attack,” the American Library Association announced in a public statement. 283

Private groups and public authorities in various parts of the country are working to remove books from sale, to censor textbooks, to label “controversial” books, to distribute lists of “objectionable” books or authors, and to purge libraries. These actions apparently rise from a view that our national tradition of free expression is no longer valid; that censorship and suppression are needed to avoid the subversion of politics and the corruption of morals. 284

Some of the “decency” reformers, while supporting government restrictions on publications, were uncomfortable with more aggressive forms of official control, such as the “police threat” or review board systems. In the context of the early Cold War, the public was highly sensitive to restrictions on speech that could be seen as totalitarian or undemocratic. 285 Many of the so-called “decency advocates” maintained that bans on publications were a last resort; self-regulation by publishers, liability for libel and obscenity, and pressure on newsdealers were preferred alternatives to “precensorship.” 286 If “good citizens . . . get a cleanup of newsstands without censorship, they will be satisfied,” wrote the author Margaret Culkin Banning, one

280 Censorship Called Threat, N.Y. Times, Mar. 15, 1953, at 54.
281 Schumach, supra note 218, at E7.
282 Id.
283 The Freedom to Read, 47 AM. LIBR. ASS’N. BULL. 481 (1953).
284 Id.
285 In the 1950s, “references to totalitarianism cropped up with particular frequency in the litigation surrounding restrictions on expression,” observed legal historian Reuel Schiller. Reuel E. Schiller, Free Speech and Expertise: Administrative Censorship and the Birth of the Modern First Amendment, 86 VA. L. REV. 1, 82 (2000). Litigants in free speech cases “often reminded the courts that such an action was typical of the behavior of totalitarian governments.” Id.
286 See generally H.R. REP. NO. 2510, at 81–84 (1952) (testimony of Joseph Carlino, Chairman, Joint Legislative Committee to Study the Publication of Comics).
of the leaders of the “decency” movement. Otherwise government restraint “is on its way.”

The desire to restrain objectionable material, and simultaneous concern with more overt forms of repression, can be seen in the work of the Gathings Committee. In May 1952, the House of Representatives created a Select Committee on Current Pornographic Materials “to determine the extent to which current literature—books, magazines, and comic books—containing immoral, obscene, or otherwise offensive matter . . . are being made available to the people of the United States” and the “adequacy of existing law to prevent the[ir] publication and distribution.” In December 1952, the Committee filed its report. It disavowed prior restraints—“[t]here are other means of handling this problem than by the ban of the censor, means which can be applied without danger of infringing on the freedom of the press . . . .” The Committee instead called on publishers to eliminate, on their own initiative, “borderline” and “objectionable” literature, recommended the enactment of federal legislation to prohibit interstate transportation of obscene literature by private carriers, and “[g]ranting authority for the Post Office to impound mail addressed to merchants of pornography and pertaining to the sale of obscene material.”

While some conservative reformers were uneasy about more authoritarian restraints on expression, civil libertarians were not entirely opposed to government restrictions on publishing. The American Civil Liberties Union was the nation’s foremost defender of free speech, noted for litigating the rights of unpopular speakers from socialists and anarchists to nudists. The ACLU opposed prior restraints or “precensorship”—the “essence of censorship”—but it was not yet “absolutist” on speech, as it would become in later years. It accepted the Supreme Court’s position that libel and obscenity were not included in the First Amendment, and political theorist “Alexander Meiklejohn’s distinction between political speech, which enjoyed full protection, and other forms of expression.” Though it discouraged obscenity prosecutions, expressed concerns about vague definitions of obscenity in statutes and judicial opinions, and believed that matters of taste and morals were better worked out in the marketplace of ideas than legislatures and courts, ACLU leaders believed that

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287 Banning, supra note 206, at 119.
288 Id.
289 H.R. RES. 596, 82nd Cong. (1952) (enacted).
290 MURPHY, supra note 8, at 93.
292 Larrabee, supra note 220, at 678.
293 MURPHY, supra note 8, at 94; see also Bernard DeVoto, The Easy Chair: The Case of the Censorious Congressmen, Harper’s, Apr. 1953, at 44.
296 WALKER, supra note 294, at 228; see also H.R. REP. NO. 2510, at 111.
a workable legal definition of obscenity could be achieved and that obscene material deserved less protection than other forms of speech.\textsuperscript{297} The ACLU’s “primary goal” since the 1920s, writes historian Samuel Walker, was to transfer “[e]nsorship powers . . . from government bureaucrats to the courts for a judicial hearing.”\textsuperscript{298} Wrote the ACLU’s Alan Reitman in 1955:

If reading matter is obscene it can be prosecuted under the law, in an orderly manner, and a court and a jury can decide the facts of the case. This is vastly superior to the idea of a single government administrator or agency selecting what magazines should be read by the people.\textsuperscript{299}

“Pressure groups” and government review boards operated without principle or process:

[a]n overzealous American Legion post, a D.A.R. chapter, a religious or national group, or even an individual may feel so antagonistic toward . . . another faith or philosophy that it would deprive everyone else of the opportunity to read about them. They do not apply the “clear and present danger” principle; in fact, they apply no rational principle at all but act from a deeply felt emotion.\textsuperscript{300}

III. THE WAR ON CONFIDENTIAL

By 1955, Robert Harrison and his associates faced a massive, nationwide legal assault. Confidential’s opponents sought postal bans on the magazine, filed lawsuits for libel, brought obscenity prosecutions, and proposed legislation that would criminalize publishing and selling a “scandal magazine.” The attack on Confidential represented one of the most extensive legal campaigns against a magazine in American publishing history.

A. The Post Office

The Post Office Department launched one of the first major attacks on Confidential in 1955.\textsuperscript{301} Under the Comstock Act of 1873,\textsuperscript{302} the Postmaster General had

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[297] See \textsc{Walker, supra} note 294, at 228, 233.
\item[298] \textit{Id}. at 228.
\item[299] Letter from Alan Reitman to the \textit{Reporter} and Confidential (Nov. 1, 1955), ACLU Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University (on file with author).
\item[300] Leon Carnovsky, \textit{The Obligations and Responsibilities of the Librarian Concerning Censorship}, 20 \textsc{Libr. Q.: Info., Community, Pol’y} 21, 25 (1950).
\item[301] Confidential Fights Order Barring Mails to Magazine, \textsc{Hartford Courant}, Sept. 10, 1955, at 8 [hereinafter Confidential Fights].
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the power to prohibit “obscene” or “immoral” publications from the mails. This prerogative, the Supreme Court concluded, did not violate the First Amendment, as Congress’s power to establish a postal system, granted by the Constitution, gave it near-absolute authority of the mails. In the early 1950s, the conservative, hyper-vigilant Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield announced a “‘clean up the mails’ campaign designed to block a rising tide of obscene books, magazines and similar material.” Summerfield claimed that his staff had been recently faced with a seventy-three percent increase in “pornographic magazines and books.” The Postal-Inspection Department was receiving 700 letters a day “from parents protesting the corrupting of their children and demanding [that the Post Office take] action.”306 Summerfield believed that “material should be barred from the mails if it violate[d] . . . ‘the “ordinary standard of common decency of average representative citizens,’” and that “‘abysmal ignorance’ [was] displayed by those who cr[ied] ‘censorship’” when risqué material was banned from the mail.

On August 27, 1955, Summerfield issued a “withhold from dispatch” order barring the November edition of Confidential from the mails. The order instructed the postmaster at Mt. Morris, Illinois, where the magazine was printed, to halt distribution and to send copies to the Post Office Department in Washington for examination. The Department claimed that it had received complaints from concerned citizens alleging that the magazine was “objectionable.” Summerfield had also gotten frantic calls from Hollywood executives, imploring him to take action. No one in the Post Office Department had seen a copy of the November edition before issuing the order. The Department made no official announcement of the order and did not offer Harrison a hearing to contest it.

The Post Office Department had recently come under criticism for its arbitrary mail ban procedures. Under existing procedures, when the Postmaster General

303 Schiller, supra note 285, at 38.
304 Id. at 39 (citing In re Rapier, 143 U.S. 110, 134 (1892)).
305 Id.
306 Schiller, supra note 285, at 38.
307 Id.
308 Rackets: The Spread of Smut, NEWSWEEK, Apr. 27, 1959, at 36, 41.
309 Public Help Sought in Clean Mail Drive, supra note 306, at 6.
310 Confidential Fights, supra note 301, at 8D (internal quotation marks omitted).
311 Id.
312 Magazine’s Suit Seeks to Block Postal Ban, WASH. POST, Sept. 10, 1955, at 40.
313 See, e.g., Gehman, supra note 25, at 146. “Unless they take away that bastard Harrison’s mailing privileges, this industry is done for,” one producer said to him. Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
314 Also see generally ZECHARIAH CHAFEE, JR., GOVERNMENT AND MASS COMMUNICATIONS 276–366 (1947); Edward de Grazia, Obscenity and the Mail: A Study of Administrative Restraint, 20 LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS. 608, 608–09 (1955); James C.N. Paul & Murray L. Schwartz, Obscenity in the Mails: A Comment on Some Problems of Federal Censorship,
determined that material was obscene, he notified the local postmaster not to carry it. The mailer was notified and given a short time to contact the Post Office Department to object. In the meantime, the publication was not delivered. If the sender did protest, he could argue only to the lawyers who had decided initially against him, and there was no appeal. On issues of fact and the application of statutory standards like “obscene” to the facts, the determination of the Postmaster General and his subordinates was treated as final.

In 1945, this practice was deemed illegal by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia. The court held that the Post Office Department must provide open, formal hearings before an adjudicator who had not already decided the case against the mailer. The Post Office ignored the decision. Then, a year later, Congress adopted the Administrative Procedure Act, which required that any agency determination must be preceded by a hearing with notice and opportunity to present evidence and cross-examine adverse witnesses. The Post Office refused to apply the Act’s provisions to postal proceedings, claiming that if it applied, every “disappointed purveyor of obscenity” could force them to undergo a “time-consuming, expensive administrative hearing,” and that if material could still be mailed while a hearing was under way, the effectiveness of a mail ban would be vitiated.

This was where things stood when Robert Harrison called on the famed criminal defense lawyer Edward Bennett Williams, who had recently represented Senator Joseph McCarthy in his Senate censure hearings. In September 1955, Williams,

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316 Id. at 92.
317 Id.
318 Id. at 94.
319 See CHAFFEE, supra note 315, at 316–17.
320 Walker v. Popenoe, 149 F.2d 511, 513 (D.C. Cir. 1945); Zuckerman, supra note 315, at 177–78.
321 Walker, 149 F.2d at 513.
322 de Grazia, supra note 315, at 610.
325 PAUL & SCHWARTZ, supra note 316, at 96.
326 WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 266; Confidential Fights, supra note 301, at 80. Said Williams, It seemed to me that the action of the Post Office Department constituted a shocking abridgement of freedom of expression . . . . If the Postmaster General could bar Confidential from the mails without notice, without charges and without a hearing he could do the
a noted civil libertarian and defender of free speech, helped Harrison file suit against Postmaster General Summerfield, asking for an injunction requiring the Post Office to lift its ban, and claiming that the order violated the First Amendment, the Fifth Amendment, and the Administrative Procedure Act. The First Amendment guarantees one thing minimally, and that is freedom from previous restraint, freedom from prior censorship,” Williams said. The ACLU issued a press release describing the Post Office’s action as “unbridled censorship.”

“We offer no comment on the content of the articles published in Confidential or the kind of journalism it reflects . . . . However, as long as the First Amendment is to have meaning and force with respect to the distribution of published material, the Post Office has no right to pre-censor.”

“If a publication has violated the law, then it should be properly charged and its case heard in a court of law. Under our democratic system, we do not rely on individual Government administrators to decide what material should be read by the public.”

According to Williams, “Harrison swore in his complaint that he would be forced to discontinue publication if the order remained in effect . . . . This claim was not true, since most issues were sold to newsstands and delivered by truck, and only around 30,000 were sold by subscription.

same to any periodical. . . . I respected Arthur Summerfield, but I didn’t think he or anyone else was qualified to be the literary dietitian of America.

WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 266.


329 ROBERT PACK, EDWARD BENNETT WILLIAMS FOR THE DEFENSE 56 (1983) (internal quotation marks omitted). Harrison alleged in his complaint that Confidential “has expended substantial sums of money in carefully building up among the American public a valuable reputation and good will for impartial, objective and fearless reporting of newsworthy events.” Confidential Fights, supra note 301, at 8D (internal quotation marks omitted).


332 WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 266–67.

333 See supra note 124 and accompanying text.

334 Success in the Sewer, supra note 132, at 92.
On October 7, 1955, Judge Luther Youngdahl of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia ordered the Post Office to rescind the order. He declared that “to withhold [the magazine] from the mails without notice, charges and a hearing constituted a violation of due process of law.” Henceforth, if the Post Office considered any issue nonmailable, it would have to notify the publisher, and an administrative hearing would have to be held. In order for the Post Office to bar Confidential from the mails while the hearing was under way, it would have to obtain an injunction. Voluntarily, in response to the Post Office’s request, Confidential agreed to submit each successive issue to the Post Office Department for an informal review, within 24 hours after printing and binding.

Confidential’s lawyers described the decision as a triumph: “If the officials think any particular issue is obscene, they must ask for a hearing and can’t interfere with the distribution of that number,” Daniel Ross told reporters. The victory was short-lived, however. Harrison had just submitted the March issue to the Post Office for review when it declared the issue “obscene, lewd, lascivious . . . filthy” and non-mailable. An article, The Pill that Ends Unwanted Pregnancy—a commentary on a new antileukemia drug, aminopterin, that was being used by some doctors for therapeutic abortions—allegedly made the magazine not only obscene, but unfit for mailing under a law that prohibited from the mails “[e]very paper, writing, advertisement, or representation that any . . . drug, medicine, or thing may, or can, be used or applied for . . . producing abortion . . . .” The Post Office Department, after giving Confidential only one hour’s notice, had gone to the federal district court and asked for a temporary restraining order barring the issue from the mails.

In the hearing before Judge Joseph C. McGarraghy of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia in January 1956, Williams cited Near v. Minnesota, 355 Bingham, supra note 328. 356 WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 267. 357 Id. at 268. 358 Id. 359 Confidential Wins a Round, TIME, Oct. 17, 1955, at 91. Under the agreement, Confidential should not begin to ship the magazine in any way, that is whether by freight, or express, or truck, or mail, until the Postmaster General had . . . opportunity to check it; and if the Postmaster . . . did find any fault with any particular issue, he had to go into court and convince the court to that effect. 3 Transcript of Record (Aug. 19, 1957), supra note 27, at 874. 340 Bingham, supra note 328 (internal quotation marks omitted). 341 PACK, supra note 329, at 57 (internal quotation marks omitted). 342 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 103; Confidential Revisited, TIME, Mar. 18, 1957, at 76, 76. 343 18 U.S.C. § 1461 (1952). 344 The district court issued a restraining order, and the Court of Appeals refused to stay it. “The government came back into court . . . seeking to convert its temporary restraining order into a preliminary injunction.” Confidential Case, Feb. 17, 1956, ACLU Papers, Mudd Library, Princeton University.
prohibiting prior restraints under the First Amendment. 345 For Williams, Near stood for the proposition that “the appropriate remedial action is not injunction, but it is subsequent punishment.” 346 In the point that ultimately settled the case, Williams told McGarraghy that the Post Office was trying to ban Confidential by filing a motion in a case that had been dismissed three months earlier by Judge Youngdahl. 347 McGarraghy turned down the Post Office’s motion for a preliminary injunction. 348 The temporary restraining order lapsed, and Confidential was mailed on schedule. 349 The Confidential decision had impact: in 1959, the Post Office Department promulgated regulations consistent with the decision. 350 The regulations provided that the mailers of allegedly obscene material must receive notice from the Post Office Department of the charges against them, must have the opportunity to answer the

345 PACK, supra note 329, at 57 (citing Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697 (1931)).
346 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
347 “Your honor, . . . I must call your attention to the fact that . . . it is basic hornbook law that one cannot use as a vehicle for obtaining injunctive relief a case that has been dismissed from the dockets of the Court.” Id. at 59 (internal quotation marks omitted).
349 Magazine Wins Round with P.O. on “Obscenity,” supra note 348, at 21. Shortly afterwards, on January 13, 1956, the Post Office tried to appeal “Youngdahl’s order claiming that it [was] inequitable and that the Mailability Section of the Post Office Department cannot live under it.” Confidential Case, supra note 344, at 3. They asked to again be allowed to bar periodicals which they deemed nonmailable without a hearing and a court order. The ACLU sent a letter to postal officials urging them to drop their appeal:

“Under our democratic form of government . . . censorship and denial of due process of law are abhorrent. . . . The reasons for . . . our repeated protests concerning the Post Office Dept.’s power is the concern that a serious abuse of power, which denies civil liberties, results from the Dept.’s action. . . . Pre-publication censorship is the mark of totalitarianism and our country is vigorously challenging this kind of attack on the press in Iron Curtain countries. Yet should we imitate it in our democracy?”

“Our concern about the civil liberties issues in the [Confidential] case should not be construed as support for the content of the magazine or the kind of journalism it represents. We are disturbed only by the wide-reaching implications of the Post Office Dept.’s action, and for this reason we again urge that it reconsider its appeal of Judge Youngdahl’s order.” Press Release, ACLU (Feb. 24, 1956) (on file with author).

Youngdahl did not revise his order. “I am informed by the Assistant United States Attorney in charge of the Confidential case that your release created quite a stir inside the Post Office Department—all to the good[,]” Williams wrote to the ACLU’s Alan Reitman. Letter from Edward Bennett Williams to Alan Reitman, Assistant Dir., ACLU (Mar. 1, 1956) (on file with author).

350 See Zuckerman, supra note 315, at 178.
charges and to seek an informal compromise with the Department, and the right to a fair hearing. 351

B. Confidential’s Allies

Despite its millions of readers, Confidential “had few friends,” observed Edward Bennett Williams. 352 Though ACLU leaders made clear they found the magazine distasteful and offensive, the ACLU was Confidential’s only real legal ally, having embarked on an extensive campaign against censorship through its National Council on Freedom from Censorship (NCFC), 353 an affiliate of the national ACLU. 354 In 1955, the executive director of the ACLU Patrick Murphy Malin monitored Confidential’s legal entanglements through newspaper accounts and reports from ACLU members. 355 They also cultivated a connection with Confidential editor Howard Rushmore, who kept them informed of government and “pressure group” efforts against the magazine. 356

The mainstream press, historically one of the most vocal advocates of freedom of the press, had a conflicted relationship with Confidential. A few journalists and press organizations came to Confidential’s aid in its battles with the Post Office. The Postmaster General’s order was easy to criticize; a prior restraint, a mail ban was censorship in its purest form. “Can the Post Office Department, without a hearing, bar [Confidential] from the mails?” asked Ed Creach of the Associated Press, “If so, couldn’t any other publication be similarly barred?” 357 “Precensorship invites arbitrariness and encourages . . . the sort of disregard for due process displayed by Mr. Summerfield in regard to Confidential.” 358

Yet others in the publishing world supported the Post Office’s actions against Confidential. At a time when the mainstream press was itself under attack—accused of inaccuracy, bias, and sensationalism— 359 journalists sought to distance themselves from Harrison’s sleazy operations. Several publishers denied that Confidential had the same First Amendment rights as traditional news publications. When it came to

352 WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 264.
353 WALKER, supra note 294, at 228.
356 Id.
359 See, e.g., Editorial, War on Slander, DELTA DEMOCRAT-TIMES (Greenville, Miss.), June 2, 1957 [hereinafter War on Slander].
scandal magazines, “censorship [was] a benefit rather than a handicap,” wrote one editor.\footnote{Editorial, \textit{Stock in Scandal}, \textsc{Charlestown Courier} (Ind.), Feb. 21, 1957.} “[C]ensorship of publications which thrive on gossip, tearing down reputations and libeling individuals cannot be argued against,” claimed one student newspaper.\footnote{Editorial, \textit{A Perspectus of Publications}, \textsc{Daily Tar Heel} (Chapel Hill, N.C.), May 15, 1957, at 2.}

In 1955 the magazine \textit{The Reporter}, usually known for its liberal, progressive positions, published an editorial in favor of the Post Office ban on \textit{Confidential}.\footnote{\textit{Confidentially}, \textsc{Reporter}, Nov. 3, 1955, at 6.}

\begin{quote}
We cannot agree with [those] who, as soon as something like the attempted suppression of \textit{Confidential} occurs, intone the old Voltaire singsong: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” As a matter of fact, we cannot imagine ourselves dying for \textit{Confidential}.\footnote{\textit{Id.} at 6. The ACLU responded with a curt letter: “The American Civil Liberties Union disagrees with your comment. In our opinion it cuts across the civil liberties framework which \textit{The Reporter} itself laudably has defended on numerous occasions, and which is the basis of our American democracy.” Memorandum from Alan Reitman on \textit{The Reporter} and \textit{Confidential} (Nov. 1, 1955) (on file with author).}
\end{quote}

Publications like \textit{Confidential} gave “a bad name to journalism as a profession,” and were “through their extreme sensationalism endangering a basic principle of freedom of the press.”\footnote{\textit{War on Slander}, \textit{supra} note 359.}

\section*{C. State and Local Attacks}

\subsection*{1. Pressure Groups and Obscenity Prosecutions}

Between 1955 and 1957, citizens’ groups across the country pressured booksellers and newsstands to stop the sale of \textit{Confidential}.\footnote{On these censorship “pressure groups,” see Farmer, \textit{supra} note 233; Hempel & Wall, \textit{supra} note 230; \textit{Censorship of Obscene Literature}, \textit{supra} note 192.}

\textit{Confidential} was on several lists of “disapproved” periodicals that were given to newsdealers with a demand that they be taken off sale.\footnote{\textit{Slugging the “Exposé” Magazines}, \textit{supra} note 235, at 75.} Irving Ferman, head of the Washington ACLU, was an “avid reader” of \textit{Confidential}.\footnote{Letter from Victor Lasky to Patrick Murphy Malin, Exec. Dir., ACLU (Aug. 5, 1955) (on file with author).}

In August 1955, when he went to purchase it from a drugstore, he was told that it was no longer sold there.\footnote{\textit{Id.}} A local organization “had approached the druggist and threatened to boycott the store if he continued to sell
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[Confidential].”369 “[C]itizens’ groups . . . have begun to exert ‘book-burning’ pressure aimed at preventing sales of [Confidential],” newspaper columnist Victor Lasky warned ACLU leaders. 370 “I am no devotee of [Confidential]; but . . . I am troubled by some of the methods being employed by well-meaning citizens in their efforts to put [Confidential] out of business.”371

Urged by civic and religious groups, police and prosecutors seized copies of Confidential and threatened retailers with obscenity prosecutions and the loss of their licenses if they sold it.372 In 1957, nineteen magazines, including Confidential, were named as “objectionable” in Baton Rouge in a warning to dealers from the district attorney.373 In several jurisdictions, Confidential was targeted by official literature review boards.374 A Burlington, New Jersey, Literary Control Board banned Confidential and twenty-six other magazines.375 The police chief and his department were authorized to arrest dealers who sold banned material and to bring them to trial.376 In November 1957, the North Carolina Sheriff’s Association put fifty-one “objectionable” publications on a list, including Confidential.377 In Knoxville, the City Board of Review banned issues of magazines containing “offensive text,” including Confidential, and secured the agreement of city’s two main magazine distributors “not to distribute anything banned.”378

Civil liberties groups condemned these measures as unconstitutional prior restraints. The American Library Association described official and unofficial “literature committees” as unconstitutional, leaving newsdealers and booksellers “without recourse to the courts or to any due process of law.”379 “The current censorship movement is characterized by voluntary or semi-official ‘literature committees’ and by law enforcement officers operating extra-legal,” observed a critic from the American Library Association.380 “The more extortionary of these police practices [were] prior restraints on a free press.”381 The Bar Association of the City of New

369 Id.
370 Id.
371 Id.
372 See, e.g., Kay Blincoe, Burlington Eases Ban on Magazine If It Toes Line, BRISTOL DAILY COURIER, March 27, 1957, at 1; War on Slander, supra note 359.
373 War on Slander, supra note 359.
376 Blincoe, supra note 372, at 1.
377 Whitfield, supra note 374, at 2.
378 City Bans Six Mags to Keep Knox ‘Pure,’ KINGSPORT TIMES (Tenn.), Feb. 6, 1957, at 15 (internal quotation marks omitted).
379 Waller, supra note 200, at 475.
380 Id.
381 Crime Comics and the Constitution, supra note 223, at 244.
York issued a statement protesting “pressure-group tactics” against books and magazines: when “one group within the community is compelling the balance of the community to conform to its standards[,] . . . censorship [is] exercised[,] [S]ince it is that of a private group, [it] is without the benefit of the procedural safeguards established by law.”

In some jurisdictions, formal obscenity charges were brought against Confidential, but threats of prosecution were more common than actual prosecutions. The publicity surrounding an obscenity trial only increased demand for the material, and prosecutions were costly and likely to be unsuccessful. The legal definition of obscenity in most states was amorphous and elastic; obscenity was what was “disgusting, filthy, indecent, immoral, improper, impure, lascivious, lewd, licentious, or vulgar.” Even in conservative jurisdictions, there was

382 Bolte, supra note 216, at 93. Newsdealers and publishers brought court actions against “pressure-group censorship” and “police censorship” and were successful in some cases. Waller, supra note 200, at 475–76. In Youngstown, Ohio, a publisher sought an injunction in federal district court against the police chief, who screened and banned objectionable publications. New Am. Library of World Literature v. Allen, 114 F. Supp. 823, 825 (N.D. Ohio 1953). The judge sided with the publisher, declaring that the police chief’s actions were invalid as an arbitrary exercise of power and a violation of due process. Id. at 832–34. A similar case in New Jersey resulted in an injunction against the police. Bantam Books v. Melko, 96 A.2d 47, 63 (N.J. Super. Ct. Ch. Div. 1953), modified, 103 A.2d 256 (N.J. 1954). The “decision should give pause to all would-be censors,” said Walter Pitkin, Executive Vice President of Bantam Books. Walter Pitkin, Jr., Letter to the Editor, To Defeat Censorship: Affirmation of Press Freedom Seen in Recent Ruling on Books, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 15, 1953, at 30. “This important decision reaffirms the liberty of the press which the First Amendment guarantees.” Id.

383 Infra notes 388–402 and accompanying text.

384 Cf. Note, Regulation of Comic Books, 68 HARV. L. REV. 489, 494–99 (1955) (providing an overview of informal censorship tactics used by police and prosecutors). According to one law review article, there were “very few” criminal prosecutions under obscene literature ordinances and statutes. Lockhart & McClure, supra note 236, at 309.

385 Lockhart & McClure, supra note 236, at 309.

[T]hose anxious to suppress [material] that offend[s] them [were] reluctant to use the normal and traditional legal procedure . . . . A judicial proceeding is a public affair in which the merits as well as the demerits of a questioned book may be considered, in which those interested in the preservation of a free literature as well as the censorious may be heard.

Id.

386 Id. at 323. “In the forty-seven states where statutes relating to obscenity exist[ed], all but six define[d] it by adding one or more of the following words: disgusting, filthy, indecent, immoral, improper, impure, lascivious, lewd, licentious, or vulgar.” Larrabee, supra note 220, at 674 (quoting id.). Prior to the 1930s, the leading judicial definition of obscenity came from the English case Regina v. Hicklin; the test of obscenity was whether “the tendency of the [matter charged as obscene] to deprave or corrupt any whose minds are open to immoral influence”—namely,
often significant disagreement as to what was obscene, indecent, lustful, impure, or lewd.  

In 1957, Confidential and its distributors faced obscenity charges in New Jersey and New York. Following a five-month investigation in Albany, two book and magazine distributors were charged with distributing obscene literature, including Confidential. In New Jersey, the publishers and distributors of Confidential and six men’s magazines were indicted on charges of conspiracy to violate a law forbidding the sale of indecent literature. The action followed complaints by the mother of a nine-year-old boy, who said her son had brought two of the magazines home. The judge agreed to place Confidential on probation when its lawyers promised that the magazine would “eliminate exposés on the private lives of celebrities” and become as innocuous as “the Saturday Evening Post.”

In early 1957, Confidential and its Illinois publisher, the Kable Company, were indicted under the federal obscenity statute, which prohibited mailing any “obscene, lewd, lascivious . . . article, matter, [or] thing . . . intended for preventing contraception or producing abortion . . . .” The charges, noted the Hartford Courant, “typified those that people of conscience [had] wished on the magazine for years.” The indictment was based on the March 1956 article, “The Pill that Ends Unwanted

children. Lockhart & McClure, supra note 236, at 394. By the 1950s, most courts had abandoned that standard; newer tests—albeit vague and poorly defined—looked at the effect of material on normal adults, whether it incited “lustful thoughts” or “stirred the sex impulses.” Id. at 329–30 (describing the various phrases courts used to describe obscene material); see also Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476, 487 (1957) (“Obscene material is material which deals with sex in a manner appealing to prurient interest.”). Edward Bennett Williams believed that Confidential could not be considered obscene under any existing test; it was not “hard-core pornography,” did not appeal to “prurient interests,” and “did not tend to excite lustful thoughts and desires in the normal reader.” WILLIAMS, supra note 313, at 280.


Pregnancy. Confidential’s attorney described the article as a warning against the use of the pill, but the indictment said the story gave information on how abortions could be produced.

In a statement reprinted widely in the press, Judge Joseph Sam Perry of the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois described Confidential as a magazine that is “a purveyor of social sewage.” Confidential was “like a bad boy and ought to be whipped for that.” He proceeded to find that Confidential was not legally obscene, and he dismissed the indictment. Confidential’s attorney “hailed the ruling as upholding the constitutional guarantee of freedom of the press.”

2. “Anti-Scandal” Legislation

With Confidential and other “exposé magazines” in mind, many state legislatures considered bills dealing with “indecent literature,” and several states expanded the definition of obscenity in existing laws to cover scandal magazines. The North Carolina legislature granted a local judge the authority to ban “publications which he deem[ed] unfit for public consumption.” The legislation [was] aimed at curbing [Confidential and] the [other] sex and scandal magazines which have flooded the newsstands in recent years,” reported the Daily Tar Heel.

Vermont considered a law that would impose fines “with possible jail terms . . . for persons who provide minors with corruptive literature,” including Confidential. In 1957, Oklahoma passed a law, aimed at Confidential, to create “a censorship board to ban ‘obscene literature on the newsstands.’” The New York Assembly proposed

396 Confidential Magazine is Indicted, INDIANAPOLIS STAR, Mar. 8, 1957, at 23.
397 Kable Co., Confidential Acquitted, FREEPORT J.-STANDARD (Ill.), June 7, 1957, at 1.
398 Confidential Magazine is Indicted, supra note 396, at 1.
399 Kable Co., Confidential Acquitted, supra note 397, at 1 (internal quotation marks omitted).
400 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
401 United States v. Confidential, No. 57 CR 163 (N.D. Ill. June 6, 1957) (on file with author); Kable Co., Confidential Acquitted, supra note 397, at 1.
404 Id.
405 Crackdown: Sale of Corruptive Literature to Minors Now Illegal; State is Preparing to Enforce Law, BENNINGTON EVENING BANNER (Vt.), July 23, 1957, at 1. “Covered under the [law were] magazines and printed matter ‘tending to the corruption of the morals of youth’ because of obscenity, or ‘devoted to the publication of criminal news, police reports, criminal deeds or horror situations.’” Id.
406 Bill Crawford, Did Lack of Parental Supervision in Reading Create Censor Board?, LAWTON CONST., June 13, 1957, at 15. The bill was met with opposition from Oklahoma Press Association officials, who denounced it as a violation of freedom of the press. Id.
measures to “curb traffic in sexy ‘girlie’ magazines.”\textsuperscript{407} One of the bills would restrict “tie-in sales,” in which magazine distributors forced newsstands “to handle sex and ‘expos[é]’ magazines” to obtain standard magazines,\textsuperscript{408} which was a common distribution practice at the time.\textsuperscript{409} A similar bill was passed in Idaho.\textsuperscript{410} Declaring that the “traffic in immoral publications . . . creates an emergency,” a bill was introduced in Texas in 1953 that would penalize the publishers of printed matter devoted to “scandals, whoring, [and] lechery.”\textsuperscript{411}

In 1957, Illinois proposed one of the most far-reaching legislative measures against Confidential.\textsuperscript{412} That May, the state Senate approved an “exposé type of publication bill” that prohibited the “sale, distribution, lending, or giving away of publications which are devoted primarily to the publication of information concerning improper, indecent, or scandalous marital, sexual, moral and social conduct and behavior of well-known personalities . . . .”\textsuperscript{413} Any person who willfully or knowingly sold, distributed, or possessed any “exposé-type of publication” would be guilty of a misdemeanor, punishable by a fine or by imprisonment in a county jail.\textsuperscript{414}

\textsuperscript{407} Assembly Passes Two Bills to Curb Obscene Matter, \textsc{Troy Rec.} (N.Y.), Mar. 7, 1957, at 1.

\textsuperscript{408} \textit{Id.} (internal quotation marks omitted).

\textsuperscript{409} Regulation of Comic Books, supra note 384, at 502.

\textsuperscript{410} Banning, \textit{supra} note 206, at 118. The bill “in the state legislature provid[ed] for punishment of any person or firm which should ‘require a retail dealer to take all or certain groups of such publications at the sole discretion of [the] distributor.’” \textit{Id.} at 118; see also 1951 Idaho Sess. Laws 421.


\textsuperscript{412} \textit{See Bill Would Ban ‘Expose’ Magazines, \textsc{Alton Evening Telegraph}, May 21, 1957, at 10.}

\textsuperscript{413} An “exposé type of publication” included books, pamphlet [sic], magazines, periodicals and other publications which are devoted primarily to the publication of information concerning the lives, behavior and conduct of well-known personalities through the exposé or revelation of incidents or information concerning improper, indecent or scandalous marital, sexual, moral and social conduct and behavior of such personalities; . . . .


\textit{[T]he emphasis of such publications on sex, immorality, depravity, scandalous conduct and, at times, even obscenity . . . causes irreparable damage to the character and reputation of the subjects of such publications, [and] also endangers the public morals, stimulates lewd and lascivious conduct, threatens basic concepts of decency and honesty, improperly influences the ethical and moral development of youth, and constitutes a threat to the fundamental concepts regarding the proper ideals and principles of human conduct and behavior.}

\textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{414} \textit{Id.} There was also a “tie-up” provision:

Any person, firm or corporation, or any agent, officer or employee thereof, engaged in the business of distributing books, magazines,
measure received the minimum thirty votes necessary for passage with thirteen opposed in the state senate. The Illinois House of Representatives opposed the bill because it was a “dangerous step toward censorship.”

Even though the bill exempted news publications, the ACLU and several newspaper publishers branded the measure as vague, overbroad, and unconstitutional. “The Illinois Senate struck a low blow against freedom of the press this week when it passed a bill aimed at the expos[é] types of magazines such as [Confidential],” wrote the Alton Telegraph. “It would be an initial movement to tell the press what it must avoid in its published contents. . . . Soon the press would be operating in an endless morass of censorship.”

The Chicago Tribune likened the measure to the “gag law” invalidated in Near v. Minnesota, and cited the opinion by Justice Hughes in that decision: “[s]ubsequent punishment for such abuses as may exist is the appropriate remedy, consistent with constitutional privilege.” The Illinois House of Representatives tabled the bill on June 27, 1957.

D. Libel

Libel suits were often proposed as a remedy to the “Confidential problem”—a means of bankrupting the magazine, compensating its victims, and avoiding the

periodicals or other publications to retail dealers who refuses to furnish to any retail dealer such quantity of books, magazines, periodicals or other publications as the retail dealer normally sells because said retail dealer refuses to sell or offer for sale any expos[é] type of publication, is guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof is punishable by a fine of not less than $10 nor more than $100.

Id.

Stratton’s Program Made Big Strides Last Week, ALTON EVENING TELEGRAPH (III.), May 22, 1957, at 23. A state senator who was a “publisher of a weekly newspaper, said the bill was ‘bad, unconstitutional and unnecessary,’ [since] persons ‘pilloried in such “expose” magazines’ . . . [had] recourse to libel laws.” Id.

See Illinois Law to Ban Lewd Literature Receives Challenge, TERRE HAUTE TRIBUNE-STAR (Ind.), May 18, 1957, at 28. The director of the Illinois Division of the ACLU argued that “the bill could not stand a single court test.” Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).


Id. The bill “is as repugnant to the American concept of freedom of the press as the magazines themselves . . . . While the scandal magazines may be reprehensible to most Americans, legislation cannot put them out of business without threatening the freedom of all magazines and newspapers. What is improper? Indecent? Scandalous?” Editorial, Confidential-ly, It’s a Bad Law, SOUTHERN ILLINOISIAN, May 17, 1957, at 4.

The “Expose Magazine” Bill, CHI. DAILY TRIBUNE, May 17, 1957, at 14 (citing Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697, 720 (1931)) (“The bill is unconstitutional and an infringement of freedom of speech and of the press, no matter how offensive to good taste the publications in question may be.”).

difficulties of prior restraints—but it was far from ideal. Most victims of *Confidential* were reluctant to sue for libel.421 “So you sue ‘em and it takes years to get into court. Leave ‘em alone and it’s forgotten. People have forgotten it already,” observed actor Gary Cooper.422 “Filing a suit would only give [magazines] the publicity they want. By the time the suit was tried, they’d get more in publicity than the judgment could ever cost them,” commented Marlon Brando.423 There were other difficulties with libel suits: truth was a defense in libel cases, and much of what appeared in *Confidential* was true.424 In California, where most potential plaintiffs resided, statements of “defamation by implication”—statements that were not defamatory on their face—were not actionable without a showing of special damages.425

By mid-1955, a few celebrities had filed libel suits against *Confidential*.426 Errol Flynn sued over two stories, one about an alleged two-way mirror in his bedroom and another that said he’d walked out on his wife on their wedding night to sleep with

421 As one newspaper noted:

This question arises: Why are not these magazines sued out of existence? For the simple reason that most public figures do not like to bear the expense in publicity and popularity of a lengthy and filthy libel suit. And it is difficult to litigate damages in any type of libel suit . . . . There are hundreds of legal loopholes in libel statutes and libel cases are among the most difficult to try. Criminal libel suits, for the most part, would gain the victims nothing. So they bear the brunt of attacks and hope their public is mature enough to hear the stories with an objective ear. Pending suits against the publications merely increase their popularity.

The “expos[e]’” magazines also play vulture to those public figures who have previously been in trouble, knowing full well that once an individual has a charge against him it is much more difficult to establish a reputation that is damageable.


424 See supra notes 128–43 and accompanying text.


426 See generally SCOTT, supra note 3, at 122–25.
In May 1955, Robert Mitchum sued for $1 million over an article, *Robert Mitchum . . . the Nude Who Came to Dinner,* that claimed that Mitchum had appeared nude at a party, lathered with catsup, and told a roomful of guests, “[t]his is a masquerade party, isn’t it? Well, I’m a hamburger . . . well done.”

Mitchum was represented by the famous, flamboyant Hollywood lawyer Jerry Giesler. Giesler was a longtime supporter of the film industry, and he saw Mitchum’s suit as an opportunity to strike a blow against the magazine. “Heretofore the circulation of these [scandal] magazines has been rather small,” he said in a television interview. “But recently one of them in particular has grown to quite some dimension and because of that it cannot be ignored [any] longer. Therefore, people have to, to protect their good name, come out and bring the action.”

“We’ll file civil suits and criminal libel complaints. We’ll sue the publishers, the writers, the printers, the distributors. . . . This smut is going to stop.”

In July 1955, actress Lizabeth Scott, represented by Giesler, sued over an article implying that she was a lesbian, “prone to indecent, illegal and highly offensive acts in her private and public life.” Socialite and tobacco heiress Doris Duke, another client of Giesler’s, sued for $3 million, claiming that an article in the May 1955 issue describing her as having an affair with a “[n]egro handyman and chauffeur,” caused her “mental anguish, shame, and humiliation.” Harrison was reported to have been delighted by the court actions, which he regarded as “good publicity.”

The Mitchum, Duke, and Scott libel suits failed; *Confidential* was a New York corporation and immune from suit in California. More libel suits followed. Dennis

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430 Id. note 3, at 122.

431 Id.

432 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

433 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

434 Id. at 123 (internal quotation marks omitted).

435 Lizabeth Scott Sues Confidential, SAN MATEO TIMES, July 26, 1955, at 14 (internal quotation marks omitted); accord SCOTT, supra note 3, at 122.

436 Sewer Trouble, TIME, Aug. 1, 1955, at 50; SCOTT, supra note 3, at 122.


438 Rushmore, supra note 40, at 36 (internal quotation marks omitted).

439 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

440 Lizabeth Scott’s Suit Loses Out in Court Here, L.A. TIMES, March 8, 1956, at 36; Scandal Mag Trial Record, SAN MATEO TIMES, Aug. 15, 1957, at 20 (stating that Mitchum’s
Hamilton, the husband of British actress Diana Dors, brought a million-dollar libel suit over an article headlined *What Diana Dors never knew about her ever-loving hubby*. In New York, socialite Robert Goelet brought a privacy lawsuit against *Confidential*, alleging that a January 1956 article used “photographs, images or likenesses, incorporating my name as part of a sordid, fictional article entitled *Bobby Goelet’s Rock ‘n’ Roll Romance.*”

Dorothy Dandridge filed a libel suit over an article accusing the actress, who was black, of engaging in sexual activity with a white bandleader. Maureen O’Hara sued suit was dismissed for “a question of jurisdiction”); see also *Takes Up Battle Against Scandal Mags, Port Angeles Evening News*, Apr. 20, 1957, at 11 (“Giesler has filed suits totalling 10 million dollars against Confidential magazine on behalf of Robert Mitchum, Lizabeth Scott, Doris Duke, and other clients. He said the magazine apparently is immune to legal attack in California . . . .”). *Confidential* then filed a libel suit against syndicated columnist Inez Robb of the United Feature Syndicate. *Cat-o’-Nine-Tale, Time*, Aug. 8, 1955, at 66. Robb had written,

> Miss Duke has just struck a blow for Liberty, freedom and decency by filing a libel action . . . against the most putrid of the so-called “expos[é]” magazines now defiling the newsstands.
> Let us hope she not only collects the three [million], but that she is also awarded attorneys’ fees and costs in the sum of another million or so . . . .
> In a way, I am sorry Miss Duke is suing. I am sorry that, instead, she didn’t organize an old-fashioned vigilante party and horsewhip the shabby crew responsible for this verbal assault. A cat-o’-nine-tails speaks a powerful language that might even penetrate the elephant hide and conscience of these lice.

Inez Robb, *Gutter Journalism, Pittsburgh Press*, July 22, 1955, at 15. The ACLU sent a letter to the *New York World Telegram and Sun*: “We must not resort to lynch law to curb free speech as Miss Robb suggests. That is the totalitarian way. The democratic way of meeting abusive speech is through the persuasiveness of free speech itself, and not ‘horse whipping.’” Letter from Patrick Murphy Malin, Exec. Dir, ACLU, to Lee B. Wood, Editor, *N.Y. World Telegram & Sun* (Sept. 1, 1955) (on file with author).


over the article *It Was the Hottest Show in Town when Maureen O’Hara Cuddled in Row 35*. Confidential alleged that O’Hara had been spotted in a passionate encounter with a “Latin Lothario” in a theater. Liberace also brought a libel suit, charging that a story that implied he had romantically pursued a male press agent was “false and malicious.”

In addition to filing libel suits, Giesler urged the California legislature to pass a law forcing “scandal magazines . . . who do business in California [to be] responsible in California.” He also asked Congress to act. “It is our hope that some government agency will step in and put a stop to the publication and distribution of such scandal sheets,” he told the press. “Such magazines should be completely suppressed. . . . I hope that Congress in the near future will bar interstate shipment of such publications.”

Giesler’s comments provoked alarm among ACLU leaders. Columnist Victor Lasky sent a letter to Patrick Murphy Malin alerting him to “recent statements attributed to Jerry Giesler” “lobbying for federal legislation aimed at banning magazines like [Confidential].” Lasky feared that “in this period of hysteria, a person of Mr. Giesler’s eminence could well persuade Congress to ban publications of the exposé variety.” The ACLU’s Alan Reitman proposed writing an “open letter to Giesler, presenting our views on pressure group censorship and prior restraint.”

Giesler also asked California Attorney General Edmund “Pat” Brown to take action, sending him depositions of Harrison he had taken for the libel suits. Brown, a liberal Democrat who was considering running for governor, was sympathetic. In the coming months, Giesler and film industry leaders pressured Brown to crack

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444 Maureen O’Hara Sues Confidential for Million: Actress Charges Article Was False and ‘Did Maliciously Degrade Her’, L.A. TIMES, July 10, 1957, at 14; see also McDonald, supra note 51, at 10.
445 Gabler, supra note 35.
446 Confidential Defends its Story on Liberace, L.A. TIMES, July 18, 1957, at 4; see supra notes 23, 67 and accompanying text.
449 Screen Star Sues; Scott Joins Others Against Magazine, CINCINNATI ENQUIRER, July 26, 1955, at 14 (internal quotation marks omitted).
450 Magazine Sued for $3 Million, SAN BERNARDINO DAILY SUN, July 19, 1955, at 3 (internal quotation marks omitted).
451 Letter from Victor Lasky, supra note 367.
452 Id.
down on *Confidential*, knowing he would need the industry’s financial support in his gubernatorial bid.456

IV. CALIFORNIA V. CONFIDENTIAL

Against a backdrop of legal actions against *Confidential* around the country, and under pressure from the film industry and social reformers, California moved against *Confidential* in 1957.457 The state’s efforts attracted the interest of the nation.458 It was thought that if California were successful in eradicating *Confidential*, its actions could guide other states,459 or that if *Confidential* could be eliminated in California, Harrison would simply shut down the magazine.460

A. The Kraft Committee

In early 1957, California established the Senate Interim Committee on Collections Agencies, known as the Kraft Committee, after its chairman, Republican State Senator Fred Kraft.461 The committee, formed to look into allegations of misconduct by private detectives, was an effort to undermine *Confidential* by going after the magazine’s newsgathering methods, rather than its content.462 Kraft believed—correctly—that private detectives were selling information to *Confidential*,463 and alleged that the

456 Scott, supra note 3, at 161–62; Giesler to Head Fight on Scandal Magazines, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 19, 1957, at 4. According to Hollywood historian Jeannette Walls, “[Brown] was tight with Frank Sinatra, who would be a big contributor to his gubernatorial campaign. He was friendly with the Kennedy brothers, who knew that *Confidential* had the goods on their sexual escapades.” Jeannette Walls, Dish: How Gossip Became the News and the News Became Just Another Show 19 (2000).

457 Indictments Name 11 in Confidential Quiz, supra note 454, at 1.

458 Scott, supra note 3, at 172; see also Publisher of Confidential Reported Indicted on Coast, CHI. DAILY TRIBUNE, May 16, 1957, at 17; Grand Jury Indicts “Confidential,” WASH. POST & TIMES HERALD, May 16, 1957, at B6.; Indictments Name 11 in Confidential Quiz, supra note 454, at 1.

459 See, e.g., Libel is Mudslinging, supra note 175 (“Mudslinging and scandal mongering never has done as much good as it has harm. If Confidential magazine is found guilty of libel in California, then it has violated Florida laws and should not be distributed in Florida cities.”).


462 See Giesler May Be Called in Scandal Hearings, supra note 447, at 8.

463 “The scandal magazines and the unscrupulous collection agencies both employ professional goons who will stop at nothing—even to the breaking of an arm or a leg—to collect an unpaid debt from a working man,” Kraft said.

“The investigators have found that these same floaters, all ex-convicts and known hoodlums, also work at gathering material for the scandal magazines.”
practice was compromising the integrity of the state’s private detective industry.\textsuperscript{464} The Kraft investigation was a result of film industry pressure.\textsuperscript{465} According to the Associated Press, film "executives believ[ed] that a thorough airing of how the magazines [got] their stories can all but kill their mass circulation appeal."\textsuperscript{466}

Detective Fred Otash testified before the committee in March 1957.\textsuperscript{467} Otash admitted that he had a retainer agreement with \textit{Confidential}, and that his work involved bugging celebrities’ homes and taking pictures of them using zoom lenses and hidden cameras.\textsuperscript{468} Otash’s sensational testimony made national news: it was the first the public had heard about \textit{Confidential}’s inner workings.\textsuperscript{469}

The Kraft committee concluded:

\begin{quote}
The committee is satisfied that a definite tieup between some private detective agencies and the scandal and exposé magazines does exist. . . . To spy on Hollywood celebrities in an arbitrary
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{464} \textit{See Report of the Senate Interim Committee on Collection Agencies, Private Detectives and Debt Liquidators}, S. Res. 21, at 5 (Cal. 1957) [hereinafter Kraft Committee Report].

The present committee has focused its attention on violations of constitutional rights of private citizens and other unethical practices by private investigators, collection agencies, and the proraters.

While the hearing involved scandal-type magazines, this was actually a side issue growing out of the committee’s major study, but it surely attracted much more attention. The problem of what can be done to get such publications out of interstate commerce, or out of the retail outlets within this State, is a big one. Their regulation is outside the scope of this committee’s investigation, except insofar as private detectives are used either to verify or obtain information for them.

\textit{Id.}\textsuperscript{465}


\textsuperscript{465} \textit{Id.} Kraft’s investigation focused on the famous “Wrong Door Raid” of 1954, in which Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, and two private detectives were accused of breaking into a Hollywood apartment, looking for DiMaggio’s wife, Marilyn Monroe, allegedly with a lover. They broke down the wrong door, frightening a middle-aged woman named Florence Kotz. The true story of the incident appeared in \textit{Confidential}. See Gabler, supra note 35.


\textsuperscript{469} Otash told of an assignment for \textit{Confidential} in which he was to document a “pre-marital tryst” between actress Anita Ekberg and her husband, actor Anthony Steel. Otash described how he made “hidden movies” of the actress while she was relaxing on the beach and in her apartment. Hill, supra note 467, at 13; \textit{Private Eye Tells About Anita Ekberg}, \textit{Pittsburgh Post-Gazette}, Mar. 1, 1957, at 2. On Otash, see generally Fred Otash, \textit{Investigation Hollywood!} (1st ed. 1976).
manner for the express purpose of furnishing material and photographs for scandal magazines is an abuse of the privilege to hold an investigator’s license.\(^{470}\)

The committee recommended that private detectives be regulated by the Attorney General, who would revoke the licenses of detectives who hired “strong arm goon squads,”\(^{471}\) which “would go far toward drying up the source for these scandal stories.”\(^{472}\) Kraft proposed that the California legislature authorize a committee to delve further into Confidential’s operations.\(^{473}\) “You have a very bad situation in Southern California,” he said.\(^{474}\) “My committee has merely hit on the highlights. We now must dig below the surface . . . . I shall ask for authority to do so.”\(^{475}\) In the spring

\(^{470}\) Kraft Committee Report, supra note 464, at 10.


The Legislature should consider the passage of a new section making it unlawful for any licensee to accept employment for verifying, or the sale of, information of a scandalous nature to such magazines. . . . An effective law should be drafted to protect the right of privacy of our citizens and not at the same time to hamper the freedom of the press. Kraft Committee Report, supra note 464, at 10. Kraft also sought legislation aimed at Hollywood ‘party girls’ who sold information to Confidential. Solon Seeks Laws Aimed At Party Girls, INDEPENDENT (Cal.), May 17, 1957, at A-3.

In addition, Kraft and California officials called for a federal investigation of Confidential. State Sen. Kraft Asks U.S. Scandal-Mag Quiz, supra, at A-2. U.S. Representative Pat Hillings, a member of the House Judiciary Committee, said he was interested in “[Kraft’s] views on public interstate extortions by private investigators and scandal publications.” US Action Vowed on Scandal Magazines, L.A. Times, Mar. 6, 1957, at 7. Another Congressman “asked Postmaster General Summerfield . . . what [could] be done to prevent [Confidential] from circulating through the mails[,]” he was “particularly concerned because his district include[d] Hollywood, many of whose prominent residents have been victimized by practices exposed in the Kraft investigation.” Id.


\(^{474}\) Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).

\(^{475}\) Id. (internal quotation marks omitted). Liberal publications such as The Nation protested Kraft’s call for “special legislation” against Confidential:

[Legislative inquiries of the type being conducted in Hollywood merely bring the scandal to the front pages of the nation’s press and give rise to dangerously half-baked suggestions that “something must be done” about the scandal magazines. To date there has been no showing that the existing libel and slander laws are inadequate to protect individuals against the type of scandal-mongering in which these magazines indulge.]

of 1957, two proposals were introduced into the state assembly—one that would permit “court action against scandal magazines published outside [the] state if they are distributed in California,” and another asking for a “judiciary committee study of scandal magazines.”

Independent of the Kraft probe, the state attorney general’s office had been investigating the possibility of bringing criminal charges against Confidential. During the Kraft hearings, the attorney general’s investigators were “busily subpoenaing financial records of Confidential, Hollywood Research, the Meades and other persons purported to be supplying the smear magazine.” In March 1957, Brown announced that his office was ready to go after the “agents, the printers, [and] the guy behind” Confidential. State officials began a series of conferences to prepare evidence for prosecution on criminal libel and obscenity charges. “[W]e want to put a crimp in the operation of Confidential and its breed in California and we’re going to try every way we can,” said a spokesman for the California Department of Justice.

California’s attorneys claimed that the State did have jurisdiction over Confidential; the magazine had a corporate presence in California through Hollywood Research Incorporated, a branch of Confidential, Incorporated. Brown told the press that criminal charges against Confidential were not censorship, and that he did “not intend to act as censor.” He denied that the film industry had pressured him, alleging he

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476 *Day in Sacramento*, SAN MATEO TIMES, Apr. 23, 1957, at 6; *see also S.B. County Loses Bid For Second State Senator*, SAN BERNARDINO DAILY SUN, Apr. 23, 1957, at 5.

477 *Day in Sacramento*, SAN BERNARDINO DAILY SUN, June 1, 1957, at 7.

478 This investigation apparently had been underway for two years. *See* Leonard Lyons, *Lyon’s Den: Bombing Japan*, INDEPENDENT (Cal.), Sept. 14, 1955, at 28 (“If a Hollywood actress agrees to testify before the Grand Jury, the District Attorney will seek an indictment for criminal libel against the editor of an expose magazine.”). One reason Brown allegedly took so long to bring charges was that he couldn’t find “big-name witnesses,” Hollywood actors, to testify before a grand jury. Drew Pearson, *Magazine Under Fire to Reform*, DETROIT FREE PRESS, May 13, 1957, at 1 (stating that Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley, subjects of Confidential articles, declined to testify); *see also Grand Jury Quiz Looming Over Scandal Magazines: Brown Aide in Huddle Here with M’Kesson*, L.A. TIMES, Mar. 28, 1957, at B1.


480 Indictments Name 11 in Confidential Quiz, supra note 454, at 23.

481 *See, e.g.*, Scandal Mag Owners Face Indictments, MIRROR NEWS (Cal.), Mar. 27, 1957, at 1.

482 *Grand Jury Quiz Looming Over Scandal Magazines*, supra note 478, at B1 (internal quotation marks omitted).


484 *Confidential Publisher to Fight Extradition to L.A.: Harrison and Five of Staff Surrender in N.Y.*, L.A. TIMES, June 12, 1957, at 4 [hereinafter Confidential Publisher]. “[T]he censorship question is worthy of serious study by public groups, including newspapers, the American Civil Liberties Union and public officials,” Brown told the press. *Brown Outlines*
had been motivated to act because of “the effect of such publications on children.”

Brown said he believed that Confidential “caused divorces and broken homes, and [led] to blackmail.”

On May 15, 1957, a Los Angeles County grand jury charged Confidential, its staff, printer, and distributor, and Hollywood Research, Inc., with conspiracy to circulate material pertaining to abortion, conspiracy to circulate material pertaining to “lost manhood,” conspiracy to circulate “obscene and indecent” material, and conspiracy to commit criminal libel. The libel and obscene literature charges were misdemeanors, as was the “lost manhood” charge. Conspiracy to commit a misdemeanor was a felony, carrying imprisonment up to three years or a $5,000 fine. Confidential, noted columnist Drew Pearson, had been slapped with “one of the toughest criminal suits in the history of American magazines.”

B. Conspiracy

To be clear, Confidential was charged with a single crime, conspiracy to commit obscenity and criminal libel, not obscenity and criminal libel, as reported in many

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Confidential Publisher, supra note 484, at 4.

Drew Pearson, Scandal Magazine Faces Showdown on West Coast, DELTA DEMOCRAT-TIMES (Miss.), May 3, 1957, at 4. In an interview years later, Brown also claimed that “[i]t was a rather personal thing. Dorothy Dandridge . . . came to Sacramento for a benefit and told me that a story about her in Confidential came from a God-damned liar. I was so outraged that I turned the matter over to one of my deputies.” Govoni, supra note 58, at 32.


CAL PENAL CODE § 311 (West 1955) (current version at CAL PENAL CODE § 311–311.12 (West 2016)).

CAL BUS. & PROF. CODE § 600 (West 1955) (repealed 1978). For statutory definitions for felonies and misdemeanors in California, see CAL PENAL CODE § 17 (West 1955) (current version at CAL PENAL CODE § 17 (West 2016)).

CAL PENAL CODE § 182 (West 1955) (current version at CAL PENAL CODE § 182 (West 2016)).


Pearson, supra note 478, at 1.
newspapers of the time.\textsuperscript{494} So what mattered legally was not only the content of Confidential’s articles, but the intent behind them—whether Harrison and his associates intended and conspired to publish libelous and obscene material, and material violating the abortion and “lost manhood” sections of the state penal code.

Like most obscenity statutes, California’s obscenity law did not specifically define “obscenity.”\textsuperscript{495} Under California Penal Code section 311, “every person who willfully and lewdly . . . [w]rites, composes, stereotypes, prints, publishes, sells, distributes, keeps for sale, or exhibits any obscene or indecent writing, paper, or book” was guilty of a misdemeanor.\textsuperscript{496} The dominant test of obscenity used by the California courts was that a book was obscene “if it has a substantial tendency to deprave or corrupt its readers by inciting lascivious thoughts or arousing lustful desire.”\textsuperscript{497} The indictment described the entire May 1955, May 1956, and September 1956 issues of Confidential as being “lewd and obscene.”\textsuperscript{498}

Under section 248 of the California Penal Code, criminal libel was the publication of defamatory matter with malicious intent.\textsuperscript{499} A defamatory publication was presumed to be false unless the defendant could prove it to be true, and presumed malicious if no justifiable motive for publishing it could be shown.\textsuperscript{500} A justifiable motive included publishing “matters of actual public interest,” such as “matters of public health, safety, and security, and all facts pertaining to them, as causes of epidemics . . . and the news of crime waves.”\textsuperscript{501} The state’s libel charge implicated only half a dozen

\textsuperscript{494} See, e.g., Grand Jury Indicts “Confidential,” supra note 458, at B6; Pearson, supra note 486, at 4.

\textsuperscript{495} Hunter Wilson, California’s New Obscenity Statute: the Meaning of “Obscene” and the Problem of Scienter, 36 S. CAL. L. REV. 513, 513 (1963).

\textsuperscript{496} CAL. PENAL CODE § 311 (West 1955). The words “obscene” or “indecent” were nowhere defined in the statute; scienter was not a required element of the offense. See id. “[T]he infrequency of prosecution, and, hence, of judicial construction, under the statute, and the flexibility of the statute, which made no effort to define ‘obscene,’ [left] the courts free to develop socially workable and constitutionally acceptable definitions of obscenity.” Wilson, supra note 495, at 513 (internal quotation marks omitted).


\textsuperscript{498} Wilson, supra note 487, at 54.


\textsuperscript{501} WILLIAM R. ARTHUR & RALPH L. CROSMAN, THE LAW OF NEWSPAPERS 220–21 (2d ed. 1940).
articles, including *Robert Mitchum—the Nude Who Came to Dinner*, which the prosecution thought sufficient to demonstrate malicious intent. 502

The criminal libel charge against *Confidential* was unusual, as the crime of libel was practically defunct by the 1950s. 503 Criminal libel laws had originated in the fifteenth century with the English Star Chamber; 504 criminal libel statutes were adopted in the American colonies and remained on the books in most states into the twentieth century. 505 The premise of criminal libel was that libels caused violence, and could thus be punished by the state: “libels, regardless of what actual damage results to the reputation of the defamed, may be penalized by the state because they tend to create breaches of the peace [i.e., duels and fistfights] when the defamed or his friends undertake to revenge themselves on the defamer.” 506 While the action for civil libel was based upon the damage done to the individual, the basis for criminal libel was the injury done to society. 507 A criminally libelous publication did not have to lead to a breach of the peace; it only had to have a “tendency” to cause the libeled person to breach the peace. 508

One reason for the decline of criminal libel by the mid-twentieth century was that civil actions had largely replaced physical violence as a remedy for defamation. 509 Criminal libel was also disfavored as officials recognized its potential conflict with modern views on freedom of the press. 510 As First Amendment scholar Zechariah Chafee observed in 1948, criminal libel was a “pretty loose kind of crime.” 511

502 Wilson, supra note 487, at 54.

503 David Riesman, *Democracy and Defamation, Control of Group Libel*, 42 COLUM. L. REV. 727, 745–50 (1942); see also John Kelly, *Criminal Libel and Free Speech*, 6 U. KAN. L. REV. 295, 317 (1958) (“Prosecutions have been rare and in spite of the paucity of judicial statistics, it is clear that libel actions, especially criminal actions, are unusual.”).

504 Kelly, supra note 503, at 300.

505 Id. at 305–06, 320. “The most ancient and direct instrument for the legal control of communication has been the law of criminal libel.” Id. at 295.

506 Kelly, supra note 503, at 301.

507 ARTHUR & CROSMAN, supra note 501, at 206 (“The state’s sole interest in preventing the publication of libels is the preservation of the peace and tranquility of the realm, and the prevention of turmoil and riots among citizens.” (internal quotation marks omitted)); Glick, supra note 500, at 260; Kelly, supra note 503, at 319. By the 1950s, some states had eliminated the “breach of peace” requirement; many statutes declared the nub of criminal libel to be the publication of matter tending to injure “reputation,” the same definition as in civil cases. Kelly, supra note 503, at 320.

508 ARTHUR & CROSMAN, supra note 501, at 207.

509 Robert A. Leflar, *Legal Remedies for Defamation*, 6 ARK. L. REV. 423, 431 (1952); see Garrison v. Louisiana, 379 U.S. 64, 69 (1964) (“[P]reference for the civil remedy, which enabled the frustrated victim to trade chivalrous satisfaction for damages, had substantially eroded the breach of the peace justification . . . .”).


511 CHAFEE, supra note 315, at 115.
publisher never knows when the law may be applied to him; arbitrary and discriminatory prosecutions are encouraged by such an unclear . . . rule.”

A 1956 study in the *Texas Law Review* found that many criminal libel cases since the 1920s involved “political controversies” and were used by in-groups to punish their enemies. In a press release in 1955, the ACLU argued that a Pennsylvania criminal libel statute “endanger[ed] press freedom throughout the nation.” Criminal libel was “easily used as a weapon for intimidating speech.”

In 1957, *Confidential* became the first national publication in history to be put on trial for conspiracy to commit criminal libel. Attorney General Brown told the press that California was reviving criminal libel, “pioneering new fields in the prosecution of criminal libel.”

**C. May 1957**

The twenty-five witnesses subpoenaed before the grand jury in May 1957 included journalists and detectives who worked for *Confidential*, informants and tipsters, the manager of the trucking company that shipped the magazines, and a postal inspector from Washington. Maureen O’Hara and Liberace appeared before the grand jury as volunteer witnesses and labeled the *Confidential* stories about them “outright lies.” The state’s star witness was former editor Howard Rushmore, who had recently left *Confidential* after disputes with Harrison over editorial policies. Harrison agreed to assume any liability Rushmore faced for libel and paid him $2,000

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512 Kelly, supra note 503, at 320.


Commonest among the political cases were those in which prosecutions were filed against an unsuccessful political candidate or his supporters for statements made during a campaign, now ended, concerning his now successful opponent. . . . One may suspect that in such cases the law was being used by the successful personage or his friends as a means of punishing their less potent enemies.

*Id.*


515 Kelly, supra note 503, at 320.

516 *Brown Outlines Steps to Halt Crime Rise, supra* note 484, at B9 (internal quotation marks omitted).


519 *Id.* at 1 (internal quotation marks omitted).

520 *Id.*
Rushmore took the money and flew to California, where he offered himself as a witness against Confidential. Rushmore testified how the magazine got its information from “call girls, private eyes, [and] bed partners,” and said that the elimination of Confidential would be a “service to American journalism.”

The grand jury indicted Confidential on all the charges. Bail was set at $25,000 for Robert Harrison and $10,000 each for the other defendants. Harrison and his staff were booked in New York as “fugitives from justice” but were able to resist extradition through court actions. In Illinois, Assistant Attorney General Clarence Linn unsuccessfully requested the extradition of two executives of Confidential’s printer, the Kable Corporation. Kable’s attorneys argued that the case “look[ed] like harassment of the press;” “Don’t wrap yourselves and that magazine in the freedom of the press,” Linn retorted. “[D]irt and smut have nothing to do with freedom of the press.”

Fred and Marjorie Meade were in New York City; they went back to Los Angeles with defense attorney Arthur Crowley, apparently to avoid a trial in absentia. Crowley, who would represent Hollywood Research, Inc. at the trial, was a well-known Hollywood divorce lawyer described as the “most famous trial lawyer in Los Angeles.”

521 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 134.
522 Id. at 134, 163.
523 Scandal on Scandal Mag: Ex-Editor Relates “Bedroom Sources,” INDEPENDENT (Cal.), May 15, 1957, at 1 (internal quotation marks omitted).
524 Indictments Name 11 in Confidential Quiz, supra note 454, at 1.
525 Id.
526 “Confidential” Staffers Surrender in New York, BEND BULL., June 11, 1957, at 5 (internal quotation marks omitted).
527 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 170; see also Confidential’s Head Fights Extradition, WILMINGTON MORNING NEWS, July 24, 1957, at 8. Milton Pollack, Harrison’s attorney, argued to the Governor’s chief legal advisor that permitting extradition would “‘open the floodgates to wholesale reprisal’ against the magazine in other states.” Hearing On Publisher: Harrison of Confidential Fights Extradition on Libel, N.Y. TIMES, July 24, 1957, at 51.
528 California Seeks 2 of Illinois Firm, EDWARDSVILLE INTELLIGENCER (Ill.), July 18, 1957, at 6.
529 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
530 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
531 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
532 “Confidential” Couple Fly Back to L.A.: Meade and Wife Surrender on Conspiracy Count, L.A. TIMES, May 21, 1957, at 2. “We’ve come back voluntarily at our own expense. We’ve committed no crime whatsoever,” Fred Meade told the press. Id. Marjorie Meade, wearing “a fur scarf and a five-karat diamond ring,” told reporters, “[d]on’t you think this whole thing has a little to do with destruction of freedom of the press?” Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
Meanwhile, the state threatened *Confidential’s* California dealers with criminal liability if it continued to carry and sell the magazine. Distributors promised to ship 100,000 copies of *Whisper*, another magazine Harrison pushed that was similar to *Confidential*, back to Harrison in New York. “I don’t think [*Confidential*] will ever be on sale in this State again,” Linn said. Ultimately, it won’t go any place. Other States will see that we’ve been able to run it out and they will do the same.” Harrison’s lawyers then filed suit against Brown and Linn, seeking damages of $3 million. “Your unlawful suppression of the distribution [of the magazine] . . . constitutes precensorship of the most arbitrary nature and a flagrant violation of the freedom of the press guaranteed by the California and U.S. Constitutions,” they told Brown in a telegram. U.S. District Judge Harry Westover dismissed the claim, concluding that Brown and Linn were within their authority in warning distributors that they could be prosecuted for selling the magazines. *Confidential* appealed to the Ninth Circuit, and the ACLU of Southern California filed an amicus brief, protesting unlawful “precensorship.” The Ninth Circuit dismissed the appeal.

Panicked, Harrison and his attorneys proposed a deal in which the magazine would cut all “sex and scandal” from its California edition if the charges were dropped. Harrison threatened Brown that the trial, which would involve airing facts about celebrities’ private lives, would be the dirtiest in history.

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536. *New Confidential Issue Won’t Be Sold in State: Publisher Shelves Plan to Distribute Forthcoming Issue Here, Linn Reveals*, L.A. TIMES, July 2, 1957, at B1 (internal quotation marks omitted).

537. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

538. *$2,047,125 Suit Filed by Confidential Here, supra* note 534, at 20 (stating that *Confidential* sued Brown and Linn for $2,047,125 while *Whisper* asked for $1,008,120).

539. Publisher of *Confidential Threatens to Sue Brown, supra* note 535, at 2.


541. *Id.*


545. *Id.*
against criminal libel is the truth, [and] therefore [we] intend to call top name witnesses to show that [we] have been printing the truth,” the defense said. Brown rejected the offer.

That summer, Harrison’s lawyers, through Fred Otash, subpoenaed more than 100 stars to testify at the trial. “Many actors successfully avoided Otash, including [Frank] Sinatra and Gregory Peck, who headed for Las Vegas. Half of Hollywood was said to have “hurried to vacation in Mexico.” It looked like the Exodus from Egypt,” Crowley recalled. An executive at a major studio was said to be working full-time to keep stars from being called to testify. Hollywood was “working full steam behind the scenes” to keep the trial from turning into a scandal.

Though his public face was one of hubris and bravado, Harrison was deeply troubled by the attack on Confidential. According to a journalist for the New York Post who interviewed Harrison in 1957, “[i]n the offices of his attorney, last week, the smell of success around Harrison was noticeably sour. There was no trace of swagger as he paced continually from wall to wall of the room.” Harrison believed that he was being unfairly attacked; several magazines, including respected publications such as Look and the Saturday Evening Post, published scandalous gossip about celebrities, he noted. “Why do they pick on me?” he asked. “What about Look? What about the [articles] they did on Sinatra and Gleason?”

Confidential was in peril. It was not from diminished readership; the newsstand bans were most likely offset by increased circulation and interest in the magazine generated by the censorship campaigns and celebrity lawsuits. Instead, Harrison was being crushed by attorneys’ fees.

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546 Drew Pearson, What Did Coy Confidential Breathe into the DA’s Ear, ALTOONA TRIBUNE (Pa.), May 13, 1957, at 3.
547 Brown Rejects Confidential’s Deal to Eliminate Sex, Scandal, supra note 544, at 1.
549 Miller, supra note 533.
550 HOLLEY, supra note 108, at 35 (“The eight-week period of the Confidential trial was one of the quietest times on record in Hollywood. Many stars had skipped town or even the country to avoid being subpoenaed.”); Miller, supra note 533.
551 Gabler, supra note 35 (internal quotation marks omitted).
552 Film Leaders are Working to Keep Down Scandal, UKIAH DAILY J. (Cal.), Aug. 6, 1957, at 3.
553 Id.
555 Id.
556 Id.
557 Id.
558 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 187; SLIDE, supra note 3, at 180.
V. THE TRIAL OF CONFIDENTIAL MAGAZINE

On August 2, 1957, 135 Hollywood personalities jammed the courtroom of Judge Herbert Walker of the Los Angeles Superior Court, followed by a throng of curious onlookers. A necktie salesman peddled his goods in the courtroom, selling them from a suitcase. Witnesses went outside the court and freely voiced their opinions in front of TV cameras. In the summer of 1957, the trial of Confidential magazine was “the most publicized single news item in most of the newspapers today.”

A. Arguments

Represented by Clarence Linn and Assistant Los Angeles District Attorney William Ritzi, the prosecution promised to illustrate that Confidential intentionally published matter that was obscene, false and defamatory, without good motives and justifiable ends. Confidential “maliciously dredged up from forgotten gutters a slip from the straight and narrow path by a prominent individual and depicted it as the individual’s way of life,” Linn told the jury. Stars were haunted by “forgotten sins, dredged from long-ago gutters and blown up into fanciful tales.”

The prosecution focused on Confidential’s newsgathering methods, which it claimed would demonstrate Harrison’s intent to injure and defame. Confidential hired “women of the night life” to entice prominent people in Hollywood, then report the incidents to the magazine, Linn said. A Hollywood prostitute, one of Confidential’s informants, testified that Harrison “told me that he wanted stories primarily dealing with the sexual activities of celebrities... the more lewd and lascivious the story, the more colorful for the magazine.” Editor Howard Rushmore recalled Harrison’s zeal to dig up incriminating scandal—to get “hot, inside stories from Hollywood that

561 Id. at 78–79.
565 Stars Lured, supra note 563, at 1.
566 See id. at 1; Magazine Linked to Coast Agency: Defense Admits Hollywood Office Got $150,000 from Confidential Data, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 24, 1957, at 34.
567 Hill, supra note 564, at 16.
568 4 Transcript of Record (Aug. 13, 1957), supra note 27, at 376.
would make our readers whistle when they read them.” Rushmore testified that while he was editor he wanted to hurt the celebrities he wrote about in *Confidential*. “Did you have,” Crowley asked, “the specific intention yourself to injure someone?” Rushmore replied: “I certainly did.”

Crowley contended that *Confidential*’s articles were true and that “there [was] no malice concerned.” He cited *Confidential* articles on subjects such as “social security, cancer cures, a mink coat racket, [and] telephone blackmailers” to illustrate that several articles in each issue were “public service” articles. The celebrity articles also had a public purpose: “the American public has a right to know when the stars of the motion picture, radio, and tv do not live moral lives,” Crowley argued. “[P]rivate detectives have been hired to verify these stories. They are backed up by sworn affidavits,” Crowley said. *Confidential* hired “the best law firm it could find and paid them a large sum of money to keep from violating the law.”

DeStefano described the magazine’s extensive “verification” process, and his conversations with Harrison about libel and obscenity:

> I pointed out to Mr. Harrison that a publication like [*Confidential*] could never be guilty of criminal libel because in order to have criminal libel you must have enmity, you must hate an individual . . . and that I knew of no case in the history of this country where a nationwide publication had ever been accused of criminal libel.

On the issue of whether *Confidential* intended to publish obscenity, Crowley introduced as evidence two large bundles of bestselling novels, including *Peyton Place, From Here to Eternity, The Naked and the Dead*, and *East of Eden*, as well as the men’s magazines *Tomcat, Dazzle, Nugget*, and *Escapade’s Choicest*. *Confidential* was far less racy than those popular publications, he argued. Crowley asked Ross what he had told Harrison about the legal definition of obscenity. Ross referred to

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569 2 Transcript of Record, *supra* note 27, at 130.
570 *Id.* at 202.
574 Lee Besler, Tab Hunter Balks at Testifying in Libel Trial of “Confidential,” *KINGSPORT TIMES* (Tenn.), Aug. 8, 1957, at 14 (internal quotation marks omitted).
577 Index to 8 Transcript of Record (Aug. 20, 1957), *supra* note 27 (providing a list of exhibits introduced by the defense).
578 8 Transcript of Record, *supra* note 27, at 1021–22.
579 *Id.* at 932.
the Supreme Court’s recent decision in Roth v. United States, issued just one week before the Confidential trial. In Roth, the first case in which the Court addressed obscenity, Justice Brennan said that the First Amendment protects the communication of all ideas having “the slightest redeeming social importance,” but “implicit in the history of the First Amendment [was] the rejection of obscenity as utterly without redeeming social importance.” Roth set out a constitutional criterion for obscenity: “[W]hether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest.” Roth was a victory for both social reformers and free speech advocates; the decision narrowed the definition of obscenity yet at the same time reaffirmed obscenity as categorically without constitutional protection.

“[O]bscenity is determined according to the standards and the practices and the mores of the community,” Ross told the court. Ross continued: “[a]n obscene matter is one which arouses a prurient reaction—a sexually itchy reaction, an uncontrolled desire to commit depraved acts.” Creatively interpreting the Roth holding, Ross explained that he informed Harrison that under a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, if the result was to make a person “chuckle” he could not have lascivious thoughts at the same time, and the article was not obscene.

Harrison’s threat to call hundreds of film stars to testify hung ominously over the proceedings. About two weeks into the trial, the prosecution moved to deny Crowley the right to call the stars he’d subpoenaed, contending that only the stars mentioned in the articles listed as the basis for the indictments could be called as witnesses. Walker agreed to limit testimony to the articles introduced by the prosecution. Hollywood issued a sigh of relief. Walker told Ritzi to read the allegedly obscene and libelous articles aloud to the jury, which took over two days. Reported the New York Daily News, “[s]pectators drank in the testimony avidly—it was the first time

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581 8 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 1014.
582 Roth, 354 U.S. at 484.
583 Id. at 489.
584 See id.
585 8 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 932.
587 13 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 1710.
588 Seymour Korman, Jury to Visit Confidential’s Theater Scene, CHI. DAILY TRIBUNE, Aug. 31, 1957, at 8 (internal quotation marks omitted).
589 Confidential Loses Bid to Drop Charges, WASH. POST & TIMES HERALD, Aug. 16, 1957, at A16.
590 4 Transcript of Record, supra note 27, at 377–81; Judge Limits Testimony in Scandal Trial: Rule Curbs Stars, CHI. DAILY TRIBUNE, Aug. 20, 1957, at 43.
many of them had heard Confidential’s scandals, for the publication [was] banned in California.592 The articles and accusations were made part of the public record, and the press gladly reprinted them, detail for sensational detail.593

Ultimately, the defense never called any celebrities as witnesses.594 The only stars who testified were Maureen O’Hara and Dorothy Dandridge, called as prosecution rebuttal witnesses.595 O’Hara claimed that she never had romantic activity in Grauman’s Chinese Theater, and that she hadn’t even been in the United States at the time.596 Dandridge denied the story about her alleged tryst with a white bandleader.597 There was too much racial prejudice in 1950 for her to have openly had an affair with a white man, she said.598 African-American newspapers across the country celebrated Dandridge’s forthright testimony.599 Wrote the Baltimore Afro American: “The tiny star’s blast at American standards . . . visibly impressed the jury, the judge, the prosecution, and took the wind out of the defense’s sails.”600

In his closing argument, Crowley finally brought up the free press issue, likening California’s actions against Confidential “to the book burnings and witch hunts of

592 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 174 (internal quotation marks omitted).
593 Newspaper editors claimed that covering the trial presented them with an ethical dilemma: how to fulfill their responsibility of reporting the news without rehashing Confidential’s salacious gossip. Clean—and Otherwise, NEWSWEEK, Aug. 26, 1957, at 60, 60. A few newspapers downplayed the details of the trial, or ran the story on their inside pages—the New York Times gave instructions to its West Coast reporter to “write this one for your Aunt Minnie.” Id. at 61. But most did their best to sell papers with the story. The New York Daily News featured articles with outrageous, outsized headlines such as “14 Stars Shine in Hollywood Bedtime Story.” Id. “[P]ractically every newspaper and magazine attacked Confidential editorially,” observed Howard Rushmore, but they “didn’t hesitate to devote their news columns to reporting the lurid . . . details of the trial . . . using blaring headlines, sexy photographs and thousands of words reprinting what Confidential had said months before . . . .” Rushmore, supra note 40, at 33.
594 If he were to call the stars to testify, he would be bound by their answers, even if they were subsequently found perjurious. Bob Thomas, “Confidential Closes Defense; More Fireworks Possible,” SAN BERNARDINO DAILY SUN, Aug. 31, 1957, at 1. If the state called them, Crowley could attack their stories on cross-examination. Id.
595 Gladwin Hill, 2 Film Actresses Testify on Coast: Maureen O’Hara, Dorothy Dandridge Deny Stories Carried in Confidential, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 4, 1957, at 40.
596 Id. Judge Walker permitted the jurors to be taken to the theater, by bus, to view the site of the alleged episode. Jack Smith, Confidential Trial to Move Over to Grauman’s Theater: Jury to See Alleged Love Scene Site, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 31, 1957, at B1. Both the prosecution and members of the jury wanted to know if it would be physically possible for O’Hara to have been in the position described by the theater usher. See id.
597 Hill, supra note 595, at 40.
598 15 Transcript of Record (Sept. 3, 1957), supra note 27, at 1907.
599 See, e.g., Charles Denton, Dandridge on Witness Stand: Dandridge on Stand, Rips “Birds and Bees” Story, DAILY DEFENDER (Chi.), Sept. 4, 1957, at 1; No Walk in Woods—Dottie, AFRO-AM. (Balt.), Sept. 14, 1957, at 1.
600 No Walk in Woods—Dottie, supra note 599, at 1.
history.

The trial was “one of the worst cases of suppression of freedom of the press that I have ever seen.”

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That this magazine is under assault in the California courts is, we assume, a fact known to most of our nine million readers. . . .

A California Assistant Attorney General has stated to the press:

“In my opinion, CONFIDENTIAL is finished.”

This is a determined effort, initiated by a segment of the motion picture industry, to “get” this magazine.

We hold no secrets from our readers. In our first issue, nearly five years ago, we promised to “publish the facts” and “name the names.” We have kept that promise; and our readers have made us successful. We have the world’s largest newsstand sale. . . .

Our success is due to their appreciation of our efforts to establish the truth and to maintain the right for them to have the truth. . . .

WE ARE NOT GUILTY OF “CONSPIRACY TO PUBLISH CRIMINAL LIBEL.”

A precious and historic American principle is this: truth may be distasteful, but truth can never be libelous. . . .

. . . .

We believe that the truths we have published . . . have been in the public interest and in the best traditions of American journalism. . . .

. . . .

“Hollywood” is in the business of lying. Falsehood is a stock in trade. They use vast press-agent organizations and advertising expenditures to “build up” their “stars.” They “glamorize” and distribute detailed—and often deliberately false—information about private lives.

Because of advertising money, in these “build-ups” they have the cooperation of large segments of the daily press, many magazines, columnists, radio and TV. They have the cooperation of practically every medium except CONFIDENTIAL . . . They can’t “influence” us. So they want to “get” us. . . .

We do not underestimate this effort to “get” us. We concede that those who want to “finish” us are powerful and resourceful. They have some tricky arguments; they are artists in the old three-shell game.

But we expect to survive. For we believe that even those Americans who may not like what we say will, nevertheless, defend our right to say it.

We doubt that the time has arrived when Americans can be “gotten” for the crime of telling the truth.


602 Acquittal Is Asked in Libel Trial, HARTFORD COURANT, Sept. 12, 1957, at 10 (internal quotation marks omitted). Confidential’s “free press” arguments were mocked in the press. “In the final arguments in the [Confidential] case in Los Angeles the defense attorney made
“The prosecution wants to indulge in censorship . . . to do your thinking for you,” Crowley said, “to satisfy a certain political segment.”

“They’re trying to put the largest newsstand-selling magazine in the world out of business. Who is the prosecutor and who is the Attorney General . . . to tell you what you can and can’t read?”

“Who are these people to impose a censorship, to stifle thought and reading habits, to encroach on freedom of the press? Would they burn books like Hitler did, would they engage in witch hunts?

When you let the state tell you what to read, you are letting such individuals take away one of the most precious bits of freedom you have.”

Confidential Case Defense Pleads Freedom of Press, supra note 601, at B1 (internal quotation marks omitted). Turning to prosecutor William Ritzi, he asked:

“Does Mr. Ritzi think it is a public service to sacrifice freedom of the press on the altar of expediency to cover up people in this town who walk around like they wear the purple of ancient Rome?”

There is only one industry where homosexuality is not only condoned but protected.

Confidential Defense Sums Up Arguments, INDEP. J. (San Rafael), Sept. 12, 1957, at 8. Crowley said that it would be better if the $350,000 “war chest” which he had claimed the movie industry had raised to destroy Confidential were used to “clean out the homosexuals, nymphomaniacs, and dope addicts from their ranks.”

Confidential Case Defense Pleads Freedom of Press, supra note 601, at B1 (internal quotation marks omitted).

Seymour Korman, Confidential Calls Trial “Witch Hunt”: Charges State Effort of Censorship, CHI. DAILY TRIB., Sept. 12, 1957, at 10. Ritzi accused Confidential of “hid[ing] under freedom-of-press laws while showing a lack of responsibility.” Jury Gets Confidential Case; Deliberations to Start Today: Prosecution in Scorching Last Attack, L.A. TIMES, Sept. 17, 1957, at B1 (internal quotation marks omitted). Pointing to Fred and Marjorie Meade, he charged: “People who are most concerned with freedom of the press are those who see it in a vastly different light than these people. People who are really concerned see a free press as honest, responsible and truthful . . . . Libel and obscenity are not protected by our Constitution,” he protested vehemently. Id. (internal quotation marks omitted). “The real problem here is not ‘a free press,’ but a ‘responsible press versus libel and obscenity.’” Id.
B. Proper Procedures

Unlike other efforts against Confidential, California’s case generated virtually no public criticism.606 Despite California’s vague criminal libel and obscenity laws, the pressures of the film industry, and the obvious political motivations behind Brown’s actions, the ACLU said nothing. Apparently relieved that more overt suppression had been avoided, the organization remained silent during the trial.

“Naturally there have been efforts to censor and suppress ‘Confidential.’ Such efforts we deplore. Now in Los Angeles the proper method of action is being pursued,” wrote the Oxnard Press Courier.607 “[E]xisting laws against obscenity and gratuitous libel are fairly rigorous, and the current case . . . is the way to compel compliance—not to set up some board of censors who in an [excess] of zeal might make any reading not suitable for 12-year-olds, impossible to obtain.”608 “Censorship tends to spread like cancer[,] . . . [B]ut there are laws against libel and slander on the books of all states,” opined another editor.609 “The public is also entitled to legal protection against obscenity in its grosser and more obvious forms . . . .”610

“What is most important about the Confidential case is that it is being prosecuted under long-established legal procedures,” wrote the Decatur Herald in an article titled Legal Procedures, Not Censorship, A Proper Approach.611

Many of the persons who have found the scandal magazines an affront to good taste have urged special legislation to prohibit the periodicals from being published . . . .

However . . . such measures endanger the whole concept of freedom of the press, for who is to say what should be banned? If these magazines are not publishing the truth, the remedy is

606 The only critic, ironically, was Howard Rushmore. See Rushmore, supra note 40, at 38: I have said publicly that I considered the recent legislative investigation of Confidential in California unwise and, in its broad aspects, a threat to a free press. Although I was, under force of subpoena, a witness for the State of California in the criminal trial of Confidential’s owners and researchers, I felt misgivings about certain aspects of the prosecution’s case. I do not believe that courts should be used to suppress a publication; persons damaged by publication of false or defamatory material can always sue in the civil courts.


610 Id.

through such actions as the libel and conspiracy trial being conducted in Los Angeles.\footnote{Id.}

Make no mistake about it—we think this type of slush magazine is a blot on the fair face of America.

But the way to get rid of them is not to limit the right to write and print freely . . . but to hold them (and all men) responsible for what they write and print. The way to do this is in the time-tested and proven way of democracy—through the courts.

It takes longer, this way, and (like other democratic processes) is “inefficient.” But any other way is risking the totalitarian method of telling everyone just what they can and can’t do. That way, freedom dies.\footnote{Id.}

\section*{C. The End of Confidential}

After a record fourteen days of jury deliberation—the longest in California history—the Confidential trial came to a close.\footnote{The ‘Exhausting’ Juror, NEWSWEEK, Oct. 14, 1957, at 74, 74.} The jury split seven-to-five on the criminal libel part of the conspiracy charge, and voted eight-to-four on the obscenity part of the charge.\footnote{Id.; Jack Lefler, ‘Mag’ Jurors Discharged After 2-Week Deadlock, BRIDGEPORT POST, Oct. 2, 1957, at 48.} One outspoken juror said that the “freedom of the press” issue introduced into the case by the defense was an important factor in his stand for acquittal.\footnote{SCOTT, supra note 3, at 187.} Because the jury could not reach a unanimous verdict on whether Confidential committed a conspiracy, a mistrial was declared.\footnote{Confidential Trial Jury Dismissed in Deadlock: Case Ends in Mistrial as Panel Members Fail to Reach Verdict After Two Weeks, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 2, 1957, at 1.}

“Confidential trial lays egg,” read one newspaper headline.\footnote{Confidential Trial Lays Egg, DAILY NOTES (Canonsburg, Pa.), Oct. 2, 1957, at 8.} “No verdict, no nothing . . . Nobody goes to jail . . . Confidential magazine is still in business.”\footnote{Bob Thomas, Confidential Trial Ends as Expected, FLORENCE TIMES (Ala.), Oct. 7, 1957, at 11.} “Confidential magazine won . . . means a green light for the garbage business.”\footnote{Editorial, Views on the Day’s News, PITTSBURGH PRESS, Oct. 4, 1957, at 26.} Harrison claimed to be overjoyed.\footnote{Publisher Pleased at Libel Trial End, WASH. POST & TIMES HERALD, Oct. 3, 1957, at A3 (“Publisher Robert Harrison said today the failure of a California jury to reach a verdict in the criminal libel trial of Confidential magazine was a victory for free speech and a free press.”).} “The fact that reasonable people of good-will
could differ so strongly . . . is proof that there was no basis for a criminal prosecution . . .," he told the press.622 The trial’s result “constitutes a vindication and reaffirmation . . . of our basic constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and freedom of the press—not only the freedom of a publisher to publish, but equally, if not more important, the freedom of the public to read . . . .”623

The State planned to try the case again.624 The prospect hit Harrison hard, since he had paid around $500,000 to his attorneys for the trial.625 Harrison also faced large settlements in the Liberace, Dorothy Dandridge, and Maureen O’Hara libel suits.626 Sensing that Harrison was in financial trouble, Brown offered Harrison a deal, which he accepted over the objections of his lawyers, who wanted to go back to court and run up his bill.627 Under the agreement, Confidential would run no more exposés about the private lives of celebrities, and Harrison would publicize the magazine’s ‘change of heart’ in newspaper advertising.628 The state’s original charges would be reduced to a token charge of conspiring to publish obscenity.629

In December 1957, a judge found Confidential guilty of conspiracy to publish obscenity and fined Harrison $5,000.630 In early 1958, Confidential published advertisements in San Francisco and Los Angeles newspapers claiming that it would “eliminate exposé stories on the private lives of celebrities.”631 The announcement, signed by Harrison, added: “While we have never felt that such stories violated any laws, in a spirit of cooperation with Edmund G. Brown . . . we have agreed . . . to so change our format. We are confident that our millions of readers will find the new format interesting and exciting.”632

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623 Id. (internal quotation marks omitted).
624 Confidential Retrial: Coast Prosecutor Rules out Compromise in Libel Case, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 4, 1957, at 45.
625 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 187 (“[The trial] had cost [Harrison] an estimated $500,000, a sum equivalent to $3.5 million today.”); Retrial in Doubt for Confidential: A Court Hearing This Week May Reveal Decision on Prosecuting Magazine, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 6, 1957, at 60 (“The trial was estimated by state officials to have cost, on the prosecution side, about a million dollars . . . . The defense probably cost a better part of $500,000.”); see also TAB HUNTER WITH EDDIE MULLER, TAB HUNTER CONFIDENTIAL: THE MAKING OF A MOVIE STAR 185 (2005).
626 HUNTER WITH MULLER, supra note 625, at 185.
627 Id.
628 Id.
631 Confidential Clean Up?, NEWSWEEK, Nov. 25, 1957, at 81, 81.
632 Announcement by Confidential & Whisper Magazines, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 12, 1957, at A11. Editor Al Govoni “knew immediately that the magazine was history, but Harrison refused to believe it. Then he found out how tough it was to serve up [that] kind of journalism under the watchful eye of the lawyers. ‘The settlement was so binding,’ Govoni wrote to a friend, “that it became impossible to put out a book with any guts.” Govoni, supra note 58, at 33.
In February 1958, Harrison began to put out a toned-down Confidential, which featured such “safe” stories as What’s Wrong with the Oil Burner in the White House Basement? and Penicillin Can Save Your Life! If Confidential seems changed . . . if you’ve noticed a new complexion, it’s because we’ve broadened our outlook,” the magazine announced. “We’re quitting the area of private affairs for the arena of public affairs . . . . Where we pried and peeked, now we’ll probe, and occasionally we’ll take a poke . . . . If wiseacres say that we’ve retreated from the bedroom, we’ll say yes, that’s true . . . .” Newstand sales of Confidential, once nearly four million, went down to around one million in May 1958.

In the spring of 1958, Harrison announced he was getting out of the publishing business. He could no longer withstand the financial burden of defending his magazines: there were “too many lawsuits,” in his words. Harrison sold the rights to Confidential to entrepreneur Hy Steirman for $25,000. Steirman mandated non-Hollywood stories; issues focused on such noncontroversial subjects as bankruptcy, weight loss remedies, rabies, phone jewelry, and bad dentists. Sales nosedived.

It was then that the real results of the trial became apparent. “Perhaps it is just as well that the two-month Confidential trial ended in a hung jury . . . . [F]or the litigation seems already to have served its primary purpose of toning down the lurid scandal publications,” noted one critic.

The magazines still may not be fit for most living rooms, but it is generally agreed that they are not quite so bad as they were before . . . . The heavy expenses of the trial appear to have made the publishers and editors of Confidential and her scandalous sisters more conscious of their responsibilities in putting out magazines under the protection of the First . . . . Amendment to the Constitution.

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635 Id.
636 High Price of Virtue, TIME, May 26, 1958, at 56.
637 Id.
638 Jack Jones, Gable Denies Romance with Miss De Scaffa: Scandal Jury Told of Story, L.A. TIMES, Aug. 13, 1957, at 1 (“There have been too many lawsuits and the expose field magazine—except for Confidential—is dead.”) (internal quotation marks omitted).
639 Id. at 266.
640 Id. at 267.
641 Id.
642 SCOTT, supra note 3, at 188 (“[C]irculation plunged to roughly 200,000 before it closed in the early 1960s.”).
644 Id.
[M]en who hope to make a fat living by publishing scandal are put on notice that they may be subject to costly law suits. It is true that Mr. Harrison was not put in jail but it is also true that the profit from his venture was much reduced. This is handwriting on the wall for others to read.  

In the end, Confidential had been censored, but not in the way its opponents had planned or expected. The elimination of Confidential from the nation’s newsstands was accomplished not through official bans, postal restrictions, anti-scandal legislation, or criminal sanctions, but rather through the exhaustion and financial depletion of publisher Robert Harrison. Forced to defend himself on multiple fronts for over two years, Harrison could no longer afford to pay his attorneys. This kind of “censorship” was entirely within the purview of the First Amendment.

CONCLUSION

The year 1958 saw the effective end of Confidential, and the end of an era. Laws governing publishing content, and public attitudes towards government involvement in the press, soon changed, as did popular views on celebrities, sex scandals, and the coverage of public figures in the media.

Within a few years of the Confidential trial, the entire apparatus of official censorship was crumbling. The use of “lists” by policemen and prosecutors to threaten newsdealers and booksellers diminished between the mid-1950s and the early 1960s. Following public criticism by the ACLU in 1958, the influence and prestige of the National Organization for Decent Literature waned. Several government review boards were dismantled after court decisions. Detroit’s notorious censorship system ended in 1957 when a court enjoined officials from making threats of prosecution to booksellers and newsdealers.

Obscenity law was liberalized in the 1960s by several decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court. A leading publishers’ attorney called the era the “end of obscenity”

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646 See WALKER, supra note 294, at 235.
648 Id.
650 Lockhart & McClure, supra note 647, at 7–8.
651 See infra notes 655–59 and accompanying text.
and of “censorship.” The ACLU at last took a firm stand on obscenity, concluding that “the constitutional guarantees of free speech and press apply to all expression and there is no special category of obscenity or pornography to which different constitutional tests apply.” The ACLU also advanced a near-absolutist position on libel, announcing its “opposition to virtually all libel actions as restrictions on free speech, except in cases of reckless disregard for the truth.”

In 1964, the Supreme Court’s decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan* imposed constitutional restrictions on the libel tort. Criminal libel was all-but-eliminated. In 1961, the drafters of the Model Penal Code refused to include a criminal libel section: “[u]sually we reserve the criminal law for harmful behavior which exceptionally disturbs the community’s sense of security. . . . It seems evident that personal calumny falls in neither of these classes in the U.S.A., [and] that it is therefore inappropriate for penal control.” Three years later, the Supreme Court in *Garrison v. Louisiana* recognized the diminishing need for criminal libel statutes:

Changing mores and the virtual disappearance of criminal libel prosecutions lend support to the observation that “. . . under modern conditions, when the rule of law is generally accepted as a substitute for private physical measures, it can hardly be urged that the maintenance of the peace requires a criminal prosecution for private defamation.”

Several states, including California, declared their criminal libel laws unconstitutional and repealed them.

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652 Walker, supra note 294, at 236. The California legislature drafted a new obscenity statute in 1961 in which it adopted a new definition of obscenity, consistent with the *Roth* decision: “Obscene” means that to the average person, applying contemporary standards, the predominant appeal of the matter, taken as a whole, is to prurient interest, i.e., a shameful or morbid interest in nudity, sex, or excretion, which goes substantially beyond customary limits of candor in description or representation of such matters and is matter is which is utterly without redeeming social importance. Act effective Sept. 15, 1961, ch. 2147, § 5, 1961 Cal. Stat. 4427, 4427 (codified as amended at Cal. Penal Code § 311(a) (West 2016)).

653 Walker, supra note 294, at 234.

654 Id. at 230.


656 Id. at 283–84.


658 479 U.S. 64 (1964).

659 Id. at 69 (quoting Emerson, supra note 275, at 924).

These transformations in the law were driven by changing public attitudes—a shift in the prevailing moral climate that was spurred, in part, by publications like Confidential. By the end of the 1950s, there were significant changes in public opinion regarding censorship. The 1960s saw far less opposition to sexually suggestive material than the previous decade; sexual imagery abounded in the culture, and “sex became an integral part of the public domain,” observe historians John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman. With their daring exposés of public figures’ sexual affairs, Confidential and the scandal magazines altered popular sensibilities around the public discussion of sexual matters. Confidential contributed to a more open cultural milieu that encouraged freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Confidential’s legacy lives on in America’s tabloid culture. Robert Harrison has been described, rightly, as the godfather of tabloid journalism, and his style and tactics spawned scores of imitators, from The National Enquirer, which debuted in 1965, to People (1974) to TMZ (2005). Confidential transformed the nation’s media more broadly. By 1960, elements of the “scandal magazine” style had become a part of mainstream journalism. “[M]any high class . . . magazines” were starting to print “eye-raisers and ‘inside stuff’ that tabloid lawyers delete,” gossip columnist Walter Winchell wrote in 1957. Weekly magazines were publishing sensational material that “would have been censored by the attorneys of even Confidential,” and family magazines were digging up scandalous matter “in much the same manner that Confidential would have done.”

Confidential ended the “hero-worshiping era” of Hollywood. After Confidential, “the public no longer expect[ed] its screen heroes to be [idols] who regularly pay off the mortgage, teach Sunday School, and retire by 10 each night,” Jerry Giesler told the


661 WALKER, supra note 294, at 232.
662 D’EMILIO & FREEDMAN, supra note 63, at 300.
663 In 1965, Newsweek wrote with alarm about the rising circulation of the tabloid The National Enquirer. “The editorial policy behind these profits is unabashedly simple. . . . If a story is good, no matter how vile,” it would run it. No Matter How Vile, NEWSWEEK, Jan. 18, 1965, at 48 (internal quotation marks omitted). The Enquirer was based on “tips” from newspaper reporters, “for stories too ghastly to appear in regular dailies.” Id.
664 Id.; see also HUNTER WITH MULLER, supra note 625, at 185.
666 Rushmore, supra note 40, at 34, 37 (“Even the sedate movie fan magazines that for years had been publishing details of the stars’ eating habits and preferences in such things as clothes, homes and perfumes, now began to use semi-sensational materials with suggestive titles over every story.”); see also GOODMAN, supra note 100, at 53. “The one contribution the expose type [magazine made] to the field of journalism was to emphasize that people are interested in other people,” noted one commentator in 1961. Hy Gardner, Hy Gardner Calling, OGDEN STANDARD EXAMINER (Utah), Apr. 2, 1961, at 6. “This led to more national magazines publishing more candid personal stories than ever in history, many in the first person.” Id.
667 Crosby, supra note 96, at 4 (“When I was a boy . . . fan magazines were entirely filled
press near the end of the trial. Rather than shun the scandal magazine treatment, stars learned to embrace it, turning salacious revelations into part of their public personas. In early 1958, one critic noted that “[i]t was only a few weeks ago that movie stars were taking to the hills to escape questioning as witnesses in a Hollywood libel trial against a scandal magazine. Now they are literally tumbling over each other to tell it all in slick-paper magazines.”

For years, Robert Harrison remained bitter about what happened to Confidential. In 1964, Harrison was interviewed by journalist Tom Wolfe for Esquire magazine. Harrison said he was working on creating a tabloid called “Inside News” (“This is going to be bigger than Confidential,” he promised), and also thinking of writing his own memoir: Now It Can Be Told. None of these ever came to fruition.

“You couldn’t put out a magazine like Confidential again,” Harrison told Wolfe. “You know why? Because movie stars have started writing books about themselves! . . . They tell all! No magazine can compete with that.”

with chocolate marshmallow sauce . . . . Then ‘Confidential’ magazine came along. Overnight the character of our movie goddesses changed . . . . “); Shearer, supra note 454, at 22.

668 Shearer, supra note 454, at 22.


671 See Wolfe, supra note 16.

672 Id. at 89.

673 Id. at 157.

674 Id.