

G-Men Heroes or Deep State Thugs: Hollywood's Historical Representation of the FBI

Abstract:

For most of the 20th Century and now in the 21st Century, the FBI agent is celebrated as a hero and patriot. The agents are frequently used as main or supportive characters that solve crimes and dedicate their careers to seeking justice. The FBI agent is viewed as an apolitical figure. This study uses cultivation theory to analyze the positive correlation between film and TV representation and trust in the FBI.

Keywords: FBI, symbolic reality, collective reality, film representation, J. Edgar Hoover, cultivation theory.

Introduction

The perception of the FBI and FBI agents are bolstered by media representation because most individuals do not have a personal experience with the FBI. Most of us are not investigated, indicted or incarcerated. Our perception of the FBI has been formulated from a collective knowledge of fiction and non-fiction elements. According to Ahlskog (2019), history is a reflection of the historian's view and that self-knowledge is constructed. Ahlskog based his thesis on Collingwood's (1993) premise of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is the inheritance of historically-constructed ideas, practices and institutions from previous generations.

We only know what we know, and we rely on others to provide us with information to formulate our social knowledge. The dilemma of interpretation was defined by Richard Shusterman (2000) as the act of searching for understanding, a reconciling of what seems obvious and transparent at a given point in time and what is still unknown (Hagood, Alvermann, and Heron-Hruby, 2010). The audience can be led to understanding or to an interpretation. Zamir (1999) argued that Plato's allegory of the cave supports the notion that the philosopher cannot expect the nonphilosopher to accept at face value a direct presentation of intuitive truth that the latter has never previously encountered. In that sense, an individual may accept the presentation of truth based on repetitive media reinforcement, without personal interaction. Others, like Richard Shustermann, view Plato as an "enemy of art" as his attitude towards art leads toward stereotypes repeated for centuries.

According to Schutz (1967) and Berger and Luckman (1966), the individual's consciousness is socially determined, in that society exists only as individuals are conscious of it. In that context, our interpretation of norms is based on socialization and interaction with the prevailing culture. Accordingly, the individual's social knowledge is created by four sources; personal experiences, significant others, institutions and the media. Kolb (2015) believes that social knowledge cannot exist independently of the knower but must be continuously recreated in the knower's personal experience. Parents and other significant "others" are a key factor in social knowledge according to Berger and Luckman (1966), citing that parents function in primary socialization, as they mediate realities to the child. Institutions have functional control over knowledge, whereas for example, academic researchers experience the knowledge practices that endure over generations, such as peer review, public relation techniques and access to materials (Camic, Gross, & Lamont, 2011). In the process of acquiring data, social knowledge is constructed by the limitations and rejection of information provided or measured by institutions. Stanley Fish (1980) believed a group of people can be connected around a set of interpretive principles, or rules, that govern how interpretation is performed and how the meaning is assigned (Hagood et al., 2010). The interpretive community uses established rules and codes to define the message or narrative.

The marketplace of ideas keeps us honest. Since we can never be sure we are right (Franck, Bricmont & Chomsky, 2010). Mill's argument concludes that some of our current opinions that we hold with great conviction may be false. Our perceptions can be

manufactured, supported by the right to free-speech or political persuasion, repeated and indoctrinated. The repetition of common themes enable different national populations to acquire their traits via a cultivation of similar ideas and themes.

The media plays a large role in developing an individual's social knowledge. Cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) states the media shapes people's reality and their views on the world around them. People with high levels of exposure to television tend to receive more messages from the broadcasts on television and therefore, gradually adapt their views and beliefs on the issues around them based on these constant messages. This study will look at the cultivated image within pop culture of the FBI as an intentional result of manipulation by J. Edgar Hoover in the early days of the agency and will explore the continuation of the representation in today's modern dramas. Garcia-Castro and Perez-Sanches (2017) believed the 'greatest impact of television materializes through the repetition of images (Perez-Sanches, 2017)'. Much of what people know or don't know has not been personally experienced; they know it from stories they have heard.

This study utilizes the most basic type of relationships investigated by cultivation, the bivariate relationships between exposure to film and TV and beliefs about the FBI. This study utilized mainstreaming as it sheds light on variations across studies, or in this case the similar messages over a lengthy period of time. Mainstreaming focuses on the potential interaction of demographics variables. Heavy or long-term viewing may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behavior, which ordinarily stem from other factors and influences. The concept of mainstreaming was developed by cultivation

researchers to focus on the potential interaction of demographic variables. (Shanahan & Morgan, 1999).

There are intervening variables between film/TV exposure and various dependent variables. Film/TV have casual effects on various control variables, which in turn affect dependent variables. For instance, in this study, the reinforced characterization of the FBI agent, over decades, contributes to the direct knowledge of the FBI. The education process of generations of individuals is casual and the knowledge is collective over a period of time. Cultivation researches have traditionally held that television has a a cultivation effect in part of the ‘unselective, ritualistic and habitual’ way in which people watch television (Rubin, Perse & Taylor, 1988 p. 111).

Hollywood’s attempt at rewriting history can impact the cultivated view of real life events. Toplin (2009) appreciated the challenges of film making to tell historically accurate stories within a ninety-minute timeframe, which is eliminated from the story because the lack of cinematic value can be as detrimental to representation as false or misleading facts. Hollywood will massage history to meet the needs of producers and directors to fulfill the assumptions of the classic cinema paradigms.

Literature Review

Morgan and Shanahan (2017) found that the individuals who are heavy television viewers are more likely to be authoritarian, and that authoritarians are more likely to see the FBI as having a necessary role in society. For instance, heavy viewers tended to agree more with statements such as “the government should do what it thinks is right,

even if it's not what the majority wants" and other statements that reflect support for government latitude with respect to civil liberties and free speech. Their research points to a cultivation of authoritarianism and supports Gerbner's findings that heavy television exposure cultivates a sense of fear, anxiety and mistrust. However, the research is clear to say that the overall exposure of television or films is not a one-way causal relationship. Cultivation theory is considered to be mutually embedded in styles of life in which they are systematically reflected, expressed and reproduced. This study also looks at how the consistent framing by the FBI and Hollywood of the FBI agent leads to a cultivated reality.

This analysis is fundamentally based on cultivation theory. Cultivation theory begins with George Gerbner and his examination of the effects of watching television. He said, "The longer we live with television, the more invisible it becomes" (Gerbner, 1986). Television and mass media cultivates our view of the world from infancy and in 1986, Gerbner viewed television as the primary source of socialization and everyday information. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of a common symbolic environment.

Gerbner, et al. (1985), looked at what heavy television viewers absorbed about science from regular viewing in general. The study revealed that audiences cultivate a less favorable, more skeptical and mistrusting opinion about science. The cultivated opinions manifested into a belief that scientists were social outliers who work on dangerous and threatening projects. Heavy film and television viewers were more suspicious of innovations, because they believed there were underlying motivations and

suspicious reasonings for the technology. The same groups thought that the scientists should be restricted and monitored.

J. Edgar Hoover shaped the image of the FBI, via the media, and his heavy handiness becomes a political liability in future decades (Lofgren, M. 2016). The liability rose when actors, artists, and writers were persecuted by Hoover for challenging his cultivated image of his agents or because they were lifting up the stature of individuals Hoover condemned. Hoover resents the public's adoration of gangsters (Gibson, 1988). He was upset that dead gangsters were sympathetic characters and the FBI was criticized. Hoover detested the 'misplaced hero worship' and sought out a counter-symbol. He creates the iconic FBI agent we symbolically view today by successfully controlling the media's depiction of the Bureau. Hoover is meticulous about image control (Cecil, 2014). If the film was about the FBI, the Bureau ran background checks on leading actors of television shows showcasing FBI stories. The FBI, as to whether they put a good light on the Bureau, evaluated scripts (Sbardellati, 2012).

The FBI believed in the cultivation theory. When the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideas (MPAAPAI) wrote guidelines for films the FBI adopted the language. In one report, *Special Agent Report, Los Angeles*, titled *Communist Infiltration into the Motion Picture Industry*, (1943), it was reported that 'a constant stream of hints, lines, touches, and suggestions battering the public from the screen will act like drops of water that split a rock if continued long enough. The rock that they are trying to split is Americanism.' According to Noakes (2000), Hoover admitted that even if it were true to insert communist propaganda into a film, the FBI

agent had no way to assess the effect on viewers. Hoover believed that unsophisticated moviegoers might miss the propaganda, which would provide disconfirming evidence to the target population and discredit the frame. The disconnect was remedied with a 'counter subversive frame' that would assume the experts on communism had a better capacity to decipher subversive propaganda than average Americans.

The modern public's perception of the FBI has roots in the birth of mass communication. Early newsreel footage of federal agents were manipulated to persuade the public. Decades of the reinforced images and messages of the G-man crossed generational lines. Hoover's reign from 1935 to 1972 held a consistent persuasion upon the public. Cultivation theory may explain the transference of social knowledge from one generation to the next, as it takes into account individual histories and does not assume direct transmission of its message leads to subsequent behavior (Giles, 2010). The 'drip-drip' hypothesis of media influence, may not just be individual but generational, across decades of consistent messaging. The 'drip-drip' effect of the representation over time has not necessarily made us more aware of the FBI, but may have made us more fearful of the world they protect. They appear as saviors that calm our anxiety.

Governments use fear and anxiety to influence their citizenry. Bar-Tal (2020) found that individuals, society members, pursue safety, and seek government for protection. Security is an essential precondition of an ordered existence for an individual, a collective and a societal system. Under these conditions, the individuals must have a secure environment that allows the individual to pursue their goals without being subjected to threats. The appearance of threats will increase the feelings of fear and insecurity if those

threats are perceived as real. Bar-Tal (2020) accuses government leaders as manipulators of fear and insecurity. Leaders use a system of beliefs and values that support particular construction of enemies. Hoover's propaganda is effective in deconstructing the cultural myths of the gangster and building the stature of the government agent.

The long term impact of Hoover's propaganda and sustained representation of government agents may not be challenged. Bar-Tal (2020) uses empirical evidence to show that fear has limiting effects on cognitive processing, citing Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway (2003) that the propagation of the fear tends to cause adherence to known situations and avoidance of risky, uncertain, and novel ones; it tends to cause cognitive freezing, which reduces openness to new ideas and causes resistance to change. In this way, Hoover was successful in branding the FBI over the decades of his leadership.

Noakes (2000) portrays Hoover as a manipulator of the framing associated with the counterculture, unwilling to create a frame of the communist threat in Hollywood that would not be contested by the public. Hoover was unwilling to accept the risks associated with promoting a frame that would be rejected. He used the FBI to promote his anointed frame and turned to the state agency to share it with the public by using the FBI's power of controlling allocative and authoritative resources (Mooney and Hunt, 1996).

Cultivation theory is suspect and limited in its application. This study attempts to look at representation of the FBI over time with a cultivated view, manipulated by the government and propagated by accepted and sustained beliefs of popular culture. However, governments are not the only ones responsible for maintaining public perspectives. Nieguth (2015) explored the 'good citizen' and the desire of the populace to define the community in

a way that suits the populace. In Canada, cultural production and political satire has held a popular and valued position. The intent is to differentiate and celebrate Canadian culture from the neighboring and often invading culture from the United States. Comedic programming is viewed as symbolism. The engagement with the audience is intended to build the national identity by using the social and cultural norms that the audience expects.

Gerbner has been criticized and cultivation theory research has been labeled as ‘tainted, trivial and trifling, owing its use of quantitative, empirical survey research techniques, somehow inevitably associated with imperialist American research enterprises’ (Ruddock, 1997). Paul Hirsch (1980) believed Gerbner’s methods provide a self-fulfilling goal and objective. He claims that Gerbner seeks to impose his categories of purpose of content analysis onto the interpretive mind of the view (Hirsch, 1980). Hirsch continued to say that even the coding of variables within a Cultivation Theory analysis is selective and arbitrary.

Doob & Macdonald (1979) rebuked Gerbner’s assertion that the more someone watches violence, the more the person fears violence or believes that they will be a victim. Their study suggests that an actual incident of crime, near the viewer, is more likely to make a difference than exposure to film/TV violence. Hughes (1980) supports those findings and criticized Gerbner’s perspective that the viewer will have an inaccurate perception about the amount and kinds of crime committed in the world.

Rubin (1988) dismisses Gerbner’s work similarly and states, ‘Hierarchical regression analyses added that individual demographic differences, program selectivity, and perceived realism accounted for most of the variance in personal perceptions.’

(Rubin, Perse, & Taylor, 1988). Television itself is viewed as less and less a powerful catalyst for personal interpretation and psychological impact. Cultivated experience plays a role in our perceptions, but Gerbner is supported by the international appeal of the federal agent. People with no connection to the United States or FBI agents have similar views. The power of American commercial television expanded in the 1960s and was seen as a general effort of the American military industrial complex to mute the protests in much of the world and lead to a homogenizing of world culture (Tunstall, 1977). Hollywood feature films expand the American cultural influence in a form of cultural imperialism. TV shows such as *FBI*, are exported to countries, Mexico in particular, and replace local programming.

Hirsch's criticism of Gerbner's addition of 'mainstreaming' to his theory strikes a particular nerve when Hirsch (1981a) says that mainstreaming is not an effect of television but a statistical artifact known as regression to the mean. But, in 2003, Gerbner's 'mainstreaming' can be seen as a different and significant process. Van den Bluck (2003) defends Gerbner by saying Gerbner compared two means, the 'outliers' of the subgroups and compared them to the mean of the subgroup and this protected Gerbner from making a conclusion that was predetermined or destined to prove his case (Van den Bluck, 2003). If all viewers watch similar programs, be it film or TV, it may not always be easy to establish what the mainstream message actually is unless quantitative content analysis is performed. If the message, the storyline of Hollywood, is repetitious over a long period of time, it may be concluded that individual reception is subordinate to the overall media agenda. In the example of this study, by the FBI

carefully crafting its public image in popular media, the agency has been able to create a clear and unwavering perception in the mind of the audience.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and American pop culture have an intersecting history, with the former using the creators of the latter to help sculpt how the country's biggest law-enforcement agency is seen by the public. The FBI has a long history of investigating what they believed to be, "leftist" subversion in the United States (Noakes, 2003). Hollywood directors, writers and actors were frequent targets (Sbardellati, 2013). Animosity and suspicion has, over time, been shared between the left and the right, however the image of the FBI portrayed in Hollywood films has remained surprisingly consistent.

Research Questions:

The study progressed with two main research questions:

R1) What cultivated understanding of the Federal Bureau of Investigation was created by J. Edgar Hoover's manipulation of the agency in Hollywood?

R2) How as the image of the federal Bureau of Investigation in popular visual media changed over time, particularly after Hoover's death?

Method

This study used IMDb as the database. The site claims to have a searchable database of more than 250 million data items including more than 4 million movies, TV

and entertainment programs and 8 million cast and crew members.¹ Films that mention the FBI or have the FBI in the IMDb description of their plot were found by using the keyword 'FBI'. A total of 1,216 films were found with the keyword FBI. The films were organized by decades starting in the 1930s.

The decades of film were analyzed for positive and negative representations of the FBI agent using grounded theory methods. LaRossa (2005) states a number of criteria may be used to assess qualitative research and that qualitative research can be descriptive and “spectacular”, but in disciplines where theory is valued, qualitative research routinely is judged by how well it is connected to theory. LaRossa’s warning points us toward types of coding methods to help us choose valuable keywords for our research data collection.

Open coding, characterized by Glaser (1978), as “running the data open” by using a concept-indicator model, that provides a comparison of similarities and variations in the texts. In this study, we applied the open coding to the film/TV genre. We looked for indicators, a word, phrase or sentence in the plot, title or theme of the film/TV show. Then we identified a concept associated with the indicator, looking for a concept that is a symbol or or conventional sign attached to a referent. Thus, *FBI* and *Federal Agent* are concepts, so are, truthful, lawful, duty, and honor. Indicator keywords were used to identify the negative representation of the FBI agents: conspiracy, incompetent, illegal, flip, liar, and traitor. Positive identification indicator was assigned to the films that

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https://help.imdb.com/article/imdb/general-information/what-is-imdb/G836CY29Z4SGNMK5?ref=helpart_nav_1#

portrayed agents and the FBI in a positive light, using keywords such as heroic, truthful, patriotic, legal. Neutral identification was noted if the depiction of the agency or individual agents lacked clear stated positive or negative characteristics.

During the coding process, we were aware of the storytelling component of our subject and we incorporated a selective coding process to help us verify that our methods had suitable theoretical connections. Davis (1974) believed that a researcher will decide or should decide what the main story underlying the analysis data, the story illuminates the data, the data modifies the story. LaRossa (2005) supports Davis, believing that different methodological strategies advance different techniques to help researchers choose a project's main story. Strauss and Corbin (1998) believe selective coding can be defined as the explication of the "story line." Using a core variable for analysis, the core variable has "analytical power" because it is intended to pull the concept-indicator keywords together to form an exploratory whole.

There are some inherent issues that come about in trying to use IMDb as if it were an academic database. One of the biggest is that some films that use the FBI in their storylines do not show up with the keyword *FBI*. It would be a difficult task to examine all films and TV shows ever made since 1934 to see if the FBI is mentioned, represented or presented in the storyline, without the aid of a data source like IMDb. When using the search term "FBI," IMDb lists 1,216 movies and TV shows that include the FBI or FBI agents in storylines. To filter through all the films and TV shows independently would be an arduous task. Therefore, there are limitations in using the database because we are unsure of their coding methods. Assuming that the website provides accurate and

thorough connectedness between keywords and concepts, we conducted our data search, in a classical view (Roiger, 2017). In the classical view all concepts have definite defining properties. These properties determine if an individual item is an example of a particular concept. In contrast, the probabilistic view does not require concept representations, but are applied to be attached to our keywords. A film or TV show that labels a character as a federal or government agent, but not specifically as a FBI agent would fall into this category. The probability that the character is an FBI agent and not a CIA or other departmental agent would need to be assessed by the researcher, and in many cases may end up being an example of the exemplar view. The exemplar view does not require concept representations to have defining properties. According to Roiger (2017), the exemplar view attests that people store and recall likely concept exemplars that are then used to classify new instances.

It is the attempt of this study not to read the minds of the viewers who were exposed to the brand of the FBI over generations of consuming pop culture, but to instead look at the qualifiers used by those producing material to represent the FBI as a cultivated, casual, education of the meaning of the FBI and FBI agents. This study chose to use specific terms about the FBI and federal agents from past generations. The terms were found in film/TV character descriptions from various generations, either in fictional or non-fiction texts. In this context, mainstreaming appears to be the best means of comparison, but it does leave room for criticism, similar to the criticism of Gerbner. Non-viewers are not examined, as this is an examination of the representation of a federal

agency via the government, independent and dependent film/TV producers, and government officials.

Results

The Historic Perspective of the FBI

Before 1934, “G-Man” was underworld slang for any and all government agents (Gibson, 1988). On September 26, “Machine Gun” Kelly was found hiding in a decrepit Memphis residence. Kelly emerged from his room, hands-up, crying “Don’t shoot G-Men, don’t shoot.” By 1935, though, only one kind of government employee was known by that name, the special agents of the Bureau. Journalists Collier and Cooper’s narrative that the FBI was dispassionate, incorruptible without the use of brute force to solve crimes but instead focused on the clinical science of forensics (Cecil, 2014).

From gangsters to spies, President Roosevelt suspected pro-fascist groups were allying themselves to foreign political movements seeking to overturn democracy and were crossing the line into criminal activity Sbardellati, J. (2012). In 1934, Roosevelt had first asked the FBI to determine if American Nazi groups were working with foreign agents. In 1936, the President and Secretary of State tasked the Bureau with gathering intelligence on the potential threats to national security posed by fascist and communist groups Jeffrey-Jones, R. (2007). In the wake of the impetus on catching foreign nationalists, *The Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939) is produced with questionable origins. It has been variously claimed for *Confessions* that it was made at the request either of FBI chief, J. Edgar Hoover, or of the Roosevelt administration (Wallis and Higham, 1980).

There is no archival evidence to support either source, but the film did need clearance from Washington at several stages of production.

During the 1940s, films were scrutinized for communist propaganda. The FBI used the MPAPAI or the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, a private, anti-communist organization in Hollywood to analyze films for communist propaganda (Noakes, 2013). Hoover tied civil rights to communist activity blaming 'Reds' for creating hostilities and race revolt. The FBI would use the following criteria to identify films that did not meet the FBI's standard:

Category I: Values or institutions are smeared or represented as evil, through casual references to current political issues. Example: The free enterprise system; wealth; profit motive. Racialized examples: suggesting that America has a race problem; suggest that 'good' (white) Americans harbor racist attitudes.

Category II: Values or institutions judged to be particularly anti-American or pro-Communist are glorified in the movie, either explicitly or through casual conversation. Example: failure, depravity; the common man; the collective. Racialized Examples: portraying black characters in a more positive light than white characters.

Classic films such as '*It's a Wonderful Life*' and '*The Best Years of Our Lives*' failed the FBI test. The FBI claimed the films contained Communist propaganda. According to the FBI, the films contained scenes that demeaned bankers, the military, the forces of law and order, the American form of government and Catholicism (Noakes, 2013).

The FBI continued to control the way the FBI was portrayed in popular media. The production of the film, *The FBI Story* (1959), was heavily controlled and manipulated by the FBI. The film's director, Mervyn LeRoy, claimed that everyone on the set had to be approved by the FBI, and he was provided two FBI agents to help oversee the production (Gibson, 1988). The studios were complicit either because they agreed with Hoover and the government's anti-communist stance, or out of fear they went along with the surveillance or else be attacked by Hoover. Before 1934, "G-Man" was underworld slang for any and all government agents. As previously stated, the FBI did not have a national reputation prior to 1934, and Bureau agents were often confused for the Secret Service. By 1935, though, only one kind of government employee was known by that name, the special agents of the Bureau. The cultivation of this idea can largely be seen as the end result of careful crafting of the Bureau's image in popular culture through these early films like *The FBI Story* (1959).

In 1950, a Gallup poll revealed that 79% of the American public believed Hoover was doing a good job, 2% said he was doing a poor job and 19% had no opinion (Gibson, 1988). That large number of apparent support can be interpreted, at least partially, as the end result of nearly 20 years of careful crafting of the FBI's image in popular media. Every week, TV viewers are watching multiple programs wherein the FBI, or in the case of Ness, government agents who looked and sounded like the carefully crafted image of the FBI G-man, bust the bad guys using discipline and intuition.

The 1960s and 1970s began a period of time when, outwardly, the FBI fell out of step with American society. The assassination of President John F. Kennedy created a

seismic shift in American culture. The faith in government began to diminish upon the ideas of conspiracy and shadow operators in the government. United States institutions were being challenged in the streets by civil rights activists and anti-war demonstrators. The Vietnam War was being defended with the domino theory that communism needed a foothold in one country and the whole world would fall into communist hands. The Watergate conspiracy is the pinnacle of the public's view of government was challenged and Hoover's hold on film representation began to slip.

As Hoover maintained his anti-communist stance and often retorted with previous exploits from the 1930s and 1940s. The FBI maintained their public image with the TV show, *The F.B.I.* until 1974 (Cecil, 2016). But that didn't help film makers from making films that questioned the motivations of the federal government.

After Robert Kennedy was assassinated, Hoover wrote a memo to his men that Kennedy's election would have been the end of Hoover's power. Witnesses of the murder claim the FBI changed their statements that there was a second shooter. According to Carrier (2015), the CIA and the FBI committed multiple illegal activities, murders and assassinations of political leaders during the 1960s-1970s. The American public does not want to believe that both the CIA and J. Edgar Hoover were heavily involved with the Mafia and had committed many crimes and murders. The public does not want to believe that the FBI and Hoover killed King that he regularly demoted agents who were assigned to find fault with King and failed to do so (Carrier, 2015).

Hoover's Hollywood and Social Constructive Reality

Social constructive reality is created with the process of communication.

Habermas (2000) considered communicative action as the preferred model of empowerment in contemporary society. Films and TV became a very powerful tool of Hoover until his death. Hoover constructed a symbolic reality that persists today despite questionable practices and contrary realities from what the media presents. Society has a part in maintaining the image. Habermas (2000) argues that reality itself is a social construct that the process of communication creates the meaning individuals place on ideas and ideals and the meanings assigned to them.

Hoover was upset about the hero worship of gangsters. John Dillinger was a striking character in gangster folklore and he gained celebrity status via news reports and media sensationalism. Hoover lied about Dillinger's exploits to prove the outlaw was 'unmanly'. He would tell the public that Dillinger dressed up as a nun to rob a bank and tell stories about other costume tricks the gangster would use. Bringing down Dillinger was the beginning of the FBI myth. The G-men were established as a national police force and Hoover's power grew. (Gorn, 2009)

Hoover banned any film that told the Dillinger story or used Dillinger as a central character (Wilson, 2015). Despite his attempted control, one film about Dillinger was produced in 1945. Eight films about Dillinger were made after 1945. Hoover's attempt at keeping the popular bandit off the big screen was successful. No books were published about him until 25 years after his death, but the books followed the FBI version of the story, portraying the gang as a bunch of bloodthirsty predators.

Early gangster films were accused of glorification of criminal acts and disrespect to law enforcement. Early gangster films faced the censorship of the Motion Pictures Producer and Distributors of America (MPPDA). Films rebuked by the MPPDA would change their scripts or reshoot scenes to appease the organization. *Scarface* (1932), produced by Howard Hughes, was targeted by the MPPDA for the film's sympathetic portrayal of the criminals in the film. The MPPDA wanted the main character to be tried and punished instead of dying in the final gun battle of the film. The Hollywood-created archetype of “mobsters” and “informants” are a valued tool for law enforcement (Rich, 2012: 1433). *Doorway to Hell* (1930), *Little Caesar* (1931), *The Public Enemy* (1931), and *Scarface* (1932) were made before the Hays Code. After the Hays Code was implemented, the anti-hero motif changed to please the moral statutes of the code. *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) intended to reach young audiences by educating them on the consequences of crime, and the fruitlessness of following criminal idols. The Hays Code was an effective way for Hoover to control films. Hollywood filmmakers chose to embrace the directives of the Code in order to forestall legal battles. (Gilbert, 2013).

A large blow to Hoover would be the critical praise and popularity of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). The film focused on the legendary gangsters, glamourising their exploits with sympathetic grace as the two outlaws are hunted and butchered by federal marshals. The FBI agents were portrayed with historic accuracy for bungling many opportunities to catch the outlaws

In 1936, Hoover used his political collateral and friendships with reporters to create a 30-minute promotional film, *You Can't Get Away with It* (1936). The film was a

propaganda vehicle that featured agents firing machine guns, working in high-tech labs, and performing other day-to-day duties of a Bureau agent. Hoover appeared as the leader of a highly focused and determined elite squad of crime fighters. Hoover's emphasis on technological sophistication and bureaucratic efficiency proved to be effective publicity (Gorn, 2009). Not included in the film are other tools of the FBI that perhaps show a side with more questionable ethics: bribes, bounties, payoffs, as well as threats, coercion, and violence.

CBS broadcasted several law enforcement TV series during the years when the House Un-American Activities Committee prosecuted citizens accused of being communist sympathizers, many were notable directors and filmmakers. *Martin Kane*, *Private Eye* (1949-1954), *Famous Jury Trials* (1949-1952), *Man Against Crime* (1949-1954), *Danger* (1950-1955) and *Treasury Men in Action* (1950-1955) did not alter the paradigm of cops and robbers. The television network created shows that did not challenge the stereotypes of the day and reinforced the image of law enforcement. Hoover held a tight rein on studio production, using the luring threat of being called before the HUAC. Edgerton (2007) looks beyond fictional work and identifies CBS News as a significant factor in stopping the spread of McCarthyism and the abuses of the FBI. In 1950, a former FBI agent and TV producer created a 213-page booklet, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. The pamphlet listed 151 broadcast personnel as communist sympathizers. Those people listed in the pamphlet were immediately fired and unemployed. Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly used the show *See It Now*, to craft rebuttals against the FBI's broad inquisition. The

rebuttals were successful and ultimately changed the opinion of Americans toward McCarthy. Decades later, the film *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) dramatized the efforts of the CBS legends to expose the actions of the congressman and federal prosecutors.

The 1970s, began an era of counter-culture when norms were challenged and government intentions were questioned. Hoover's death in 1974 should have been a demarcation point, and probably landmark for the decline of FBI mythos. The films of the 70's represented angst and frustration with the government, the lack of faith in the institution of the presidency and the rise of the anti-hero. *The Godfather* (1972) is a return to the empathetic gangster film. The heroes in the film are members of a crime syndicate and the FBI are shown as manageable inconveniences.

There are very few films made about the FBI in 1974 but many of the 1970s films reflect anti-establishment frustration and government agencies and agents are viewed skeptically. *Serpico* (1973), *The Conversation* (1974), *Three Days at the Condor* (1975) have the same caustic and cynical eye that the government was out to get the good guy, suggesting that the government left a shadow that concealed corruption. Films and TV shows, without Hoover's critical eye and judicial arm begin to attack the idea that federal agents are incorruptible and scrupulous. It wasn't long before the American public knew that even J. Edgar Hoover was suspected of the latter.

After 1974, FOIA requests and further investigations revealed Hoover's personal vendettas against political figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and the Kennedys. Hoover was open about his animosity towards King. After King's assassination, Hoover

wrote to his agents, “The negro youth and moderates must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teaching, they will be dead revolutionaries.” (Carrier, 2015).

Landridge, Gabb and Lawson (2019) came to the conclusion that film is arguably a better medium for evoking emotion than communicating complex information. The artistic license of a filmmaker or in Hoover’s case, the artistic license of a propagandist, may allude to a greater agreed upon understanding when art becomes a gateway to ‘impact’. Films create an effective engagement and identification for the public. What they lack in personal experience, the films create a ‘real’ that is grounded in the experiences of the audience and their phenomenological perceptions (Landridge, Gabb & Lawson, 2019). The film representation after Hoover’s death reveals a society foundation to distrust the FBI.

The Watergate Scandal occurs immediately after Hoover’s death. The established perspective of law enforcement, in synchronicity with the head of government, to protect and defend the Constitution seemed unwavering until the ‘Saturday Midnight Massacre’² on October 20, 1973. The President of the United States fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox and accepted the resignations of Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William Ruckelshaus. The FBI, sealed off Richardson and Ruckelshaus offices by “the request of the White House.” The event challenged the hegemony of government and threatened the institutions of the United States, as the appearance of the President taking over the justice department threatened the Constitution

² Nixon Forces Firing of Cox; Richardson, Ruckelshaus Quit: By: Kilpatrick, Carroll, Washington Post, 21 October 1973; page A01

(Hosansky, 2007). There were implications that the President was protecting his own self-interests, and the FBI was caught in the middle of the growing scandal. It would be known that the leader of the Watergate break in was G. Gordon Libby, a former FBI agent. The Hoover mythos was challenged with a new narrative. The government appeared contrary to the decades long representation and the public has never fully regained trust (Hosansky, 2007).

Watergate proves to be the watershed moment for both the FBI and the Presidency. The Watergate investigation and resignation of the president may be viewed as a struggle between the president and a bureaucracy he could not control (Gage, 2012). Ultimately, the discontent and public outrage unleashed because of Watergate helped to change the FBI as much as it transformed the relationship between Congress, and the public's attitude about the Deep State (Jeffrey-Jones, 2007).

The "Deep State" conspiracy arises after the death of John F. Kennedy and the escalation of the war in Vietnam, and it continues as a popular conspiracy to this day. Lofgren (2016) believes that the political changes of the 1970s, the absence of J. Edgar Hoover and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act's ability to place domestic national security surveillance under supervision of a court appeared to stop the advance of the national security state. Lofgren (2016) feels the 1970s was a temporary detour from the upward trajectory of the Deep State.

Since John F. Kennedy's assassination, the public trust in government has declined. Polling by Pew Research indicates a drop from a 77% favorable rating in 1964 to an 18% favorable ranking in 2017 (Pew Research, November, 14, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, the trust in government is higher among members of a party that controls the presidency.

The rise of the Social Responsibility Press corresponds with the distrust of the FBI and government. Social Responsibility Theory is associated with the 1949 “Commission of the Freedom of the Press” in the United States. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, two Washington Post reporters, become the bearers of a new wave of journalism. Their investigative journalism was responsible for bringing down Richard Nixon. The public looked to the reporters as the saviors of the democracy in much the same way Hoover looked upon his federal agents. Brian McNair (2010) believed journalists to be the heart of Habermas's public sphere. Journalists provided the space for public debate and a platform for truth to be placed into the sunlight, as an antiseptic against corruption.

Films and TV shows began to support the idea that journalists were protecting the public. *All the President's Men* (1976) was the film version of the Woodward and Bernstein book. *The China Syndrome* (1979), highlights paranoia the public felt about government lies and corrupt big business. Viewers were gravitating to films that showcased a deep state whereas the good guys were often overwhelmed by the surrounding distrust. *Network* (1976) makes a mantra out of the moment, “I’m mad as hell and I won’t take it anymore.” *Apocalypse Now* (1979) portrays the psychological black hole of anarchy and a lack of trust in authority. The film’s basic premise that the CIA puts a hit on an American Army general, and ends in an amoral abyss. While, *Alien*

(1979) ends with the revelation the “company” felt the crew of the spaceship Prometheus to be expendable. The distrust of the government and their relationships with corporate America are reflected in the films of the later 1970s.

During this period of time, the FBI appears impotent and absent in contrast to the Hoover era. A short lived TV series *Today's FBI* (1982-82) attempts to treat the FBI in the traditional Hoover way, and the series doesn't last very long. The villains and the anti-heroes begin to emerge. The unpolished, slightly psychotic, authority figures rise to take the place of the clean cut agent. In 1983, the remake of the film *Scarface* (1983) ushers in the over-the-top criminal, succeeding because the authorities seem dim witted and easily outsmarted. Drug trafficking becomes a matter of fact, an occupation with a few inconveniences of courtrooms and brief incarcerations. Scarface is out in broad daylight and the Feds can't stop him. Scarface is punished by his own success and bitter rivals.

In 1992, the FBI made some unfortunate political missteps. A scenario played out like a replay of the Bonnie and Clyde or Dillinger take downs. Randy Weaver was an Army veteran who took his family to the remote hills of Idaho in an effort to preserve his white separatist doctrine. The FBI, along with ATF and US Marshals botched an effort to arrest Randy Weaver for missing a court appearance on firearms violations. After a series of errors, including killing Weaver's dog, a shootout concluded with the deaths of Weaver, his wife and his son (Witkin, 1995). The attack is credited for the birth of the militia movement.

In February of 1993, the FBI attempted to serve search warrants to David Koresh at his Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. After 50 days of a standoff, on April 19, 1993, US Attorney General Janet Reno got approval from President Bill Clinton to use tear gas to force out the remaining Davidians in the compound buildings. The plan backfires when the tear gas canisters catch the building on fire, killing four Davidians. Six ATF agents were killed during the siege (Gilliam, 2014).

Two years later, on April, 19, 1995, Tim McVeigh, a Michigan militia member, blew up the Federal building in Oklahoma City. The explosion killed 168 people and injured 680 others. McVeigh was a part of a Patriot insurgency that was rooted in a stream of contention by far-right challengers that developed over time. It turned out that the FBI had evidence on McVeigh prior to the bombing. The mistakes foreshadow what is to come on 9/11 (Wright, 2007).

The three events created a public perception that the FBI was mistake prone and incompetent. Hoover's agents were never this bad nor was the agency so deeply flawed. During the 1990s, and before 9/11, the most notable representation of the FBI may be agents Mulder and Scully from the *X-files* (1993-2002). The FBI is seen as a dark and sinister underground of secrets. The series revolves around the lies the government tells to protect the "truth". The FBI agents seem overwhelmed by the unraveling of dark conspiracy. The deep state has fully blossomed in this series, and the agents mistrust what they see, their fellow agents and doubt every action. This series may be the moment when the Hoover ethos is turned inside out. *Twin Peaks* (1990) paved the way to the *X-files* with the surreal cornucopia of subliminal avante garde. FBI agent, Dale Cooper,

comes to solve a murder but his persona quickly becomes abstract. The crime is not the focus, neither is the agent, but the bizarre nature of the culture he tries to navigate. The FBI agent is lost among the mysteries.

During the 1990s, there were 335 films/TV shows that portrayed the FBI in a positive or neutral light, with five films portraying FBI agents in a negative way. The aftermath of the incident at Waco, Texas saw an increase in negative representation of the FBI agent in the 2000s. Fourteen films or TV shows viewed the FBI negatively, while 326 films portrayed the FBI in a positive or neutral light. The current decade, of the 2010s, the largest number of films/TV shows about the FBI were produced; 418 films/TV shows. Of those 418 films/TV shows, 4 of them portray the agents in a negative perspective. These statistics do not reflect individual episodes of the television series. Further analysis would have to be completed to determine if within the series, there were undercurrents and representations of FBI agents that were unfavorable.

The Sopranos began in 1999, after the success of *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995). Another era of the anti-hero mobsters begins. The pre-Hoover and the post-Hoover construction of the sympathetic mobster continues to grow. The mobsters in the TV series and films are too smart to be caught by the federal agents. Edgerton (2013) examined the TV series *The Sopranos*. In the series, the FBI is viewed as the racketeer's worst nightmare. Many times, the lead character, Tony Soprano, is either physically running from the FBI or suppressing his constant paranoia about the FBI coming to take him away. The representation of the FBI in the *Sopranos* fulfills the social constructive reality of their role, albeit it seems as if the FBI can't catch their man, unlike the agents in

The Untouchables. Edgerton believes that *The Sopranos* is not a period piece but is in ‘close synchronicity with the mood and agenda of its audience’ (Edgerton, 2013).

In 1993, *Silence of the Lambs* became a critical and popular hit. The film profiles a young FBI agent, Clarice Starling, as she investigates and attempts to capture a serial killer. *Silence of the Lambs* is actually the second film of a trilogy surrounding the exploits of serial killer Hannibal Lecter. In the first film *Manhunter* (1986), a FBI superior is named Jack Crawford. Jack Crawford, is based on real life agent John Douglas. Douglas wrote the book *Mind Hunter: Inside the FBI’s Elite Serial Crime Unit*. He and fellow agent Robert Ressler coined the term, ‘serial killer’ (Douglas and Olshaker, 1995). Crawford is portrayed as Clarice Starling’s supervisor in *Silence of the Lambs*. The film delves deeply into the mind and motives of the FBI agent while the agent is exploring the minds and motives of a psychotic. The film captures Hoover’s fascination with science as a tool for law enforcement, but it also explores a new representation, a female agent with the same skill sets as her male colleagues. The female agent shows superior skills in detection, duty, and cunning. Hoover’s kind of agent (Mayo, 2008).

After 9/11, the FBI representation changes on screen. In 2011, Hoover’s personal dark secrets were examined in the film, *J. Edgar* (2011). Johnson (2011) wrote about the film’s director Clint Eastwood’s approach to Hoover’s closeted homosexuality. The approach paints a dark picture of Hoover as a man suppressing his inner self and trying to appease his mother. Eastwood’s view of the FBI chief manifests into a similar motif of an agent dramatized in the *Ozark* (2017-2020) Netflix series. The FBI agent in

Ozark is a sociopathic FBI agent who uses his sexuality to entrap a conspirator to reach the head of Mexican drug cartel. Hoover is seen as suppressing his sexuality, while the modern day G-man exploits his sexual orientation, openly with other agents and uses it like a weapon. The *Ozark* ethos of the FBI appears as an overt expression of Hoover's eros.

The long running series, *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020) showcases the BAU (Behavior Analysis Unit), focusing on the dangerous serial killers in the United States, attempting to anticipate the killers' next moves. Netflix created the series *Mindhunters*, basing their series on the Douglas and Olshaker tell all book on the FBI's elite unit. The FBI's image has reestablished science based law enforcement but it is now unafraid of the character flaws of the agents. The FBI and Hollywood may have accepted, even embraced, the atypical character.

In 2018, corresponding to the tensions between the Trump administration and the FBI, the public's view of the FBI has changed. According to Pew Research, 65% had a favorable opinion of the FBI, while 26% viewed it unfavorably. But since early 2017, the share of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents with a positive view of the bureau has fallen 16 percentage points, from 65% to 49%. By October of 2019, the Republican's view of the FBI rebounded. Two-thirds of Republicans (66%) had a favorable view of the FBI.

Discussion

The FBI remains a very popular device in film narratives and television series. The FBI agent is still a hero in the eyes of scriptwriters and presented to the public in an overwhelming message that the federal agents are an important presence in law enforcement.

Recently, the show *FBI* premiered on CBS. The show pulled in an average audience of 9.167 viewers in the first season (Nielsen, 2019) and was ranked sixth in the top ten CBS scripted TV shows for 2018-2019. Does popularity correlate to trust? The FBI agent is still a hero in the eyes of scriptwriters and presented to the public in an overwhelming message that the federal agents are an important presence in law enforcement.

There are accusations that the modern day FBI is conducting the same oversight on Hollywood scripts that Hoover applied many decades ago.³ Sources such as insidover.com, ikonlondonmagazine.com and [buzzfeed](http://buzzfeed.com)⁴ claim film directors have asked for FBI input, only to have the FBI rewrite scenes to maintain a more positive FBI image.⁵ The greatest challenge to the FBI image at this moment comes from the President of the United States. President Donald Trump has attacked the FBI as a partisan organization that reflects a Deep State.

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