

Copyright, American corporate capitalism and the Australian film industry in the 1920s

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ABSTRACT

In the 1920s the state of the Australian film industry was the subject of significant public scrutiny. A recurring complaint was that “some gigantic octopus” had gained a stranglehold over film distribution and exhibition spaces, due to the egregious practice of blind and block booking of American films. The Royal Commission into the Australian Motion Picture Industry (1927) found that 90% of films screened in Australia came from the US, with 60% of profits returning entirely untaxed. This paper explores how US control was achieved in the Australian marketplace. This research is based on original archival research that discloses the corporate links between the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPPDA) and the Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia (MPDAA) in the 1920s. It reveals a significant degree of local collusion that contributed to the difficulties faced by independent film production, distribution and exhibition companies. Though some of this material was made available to government inquiries in this era, I argue that the significance of this evidence was not understood at the time. This paper reflects on why it was not necessary to own or directly manage Australian firms to control the Australian film distribution and exhibition market in the 1920s. In so doing, it connects copyright with business history, bringing to light how rights are aggregated and transacted to facilitate control over cultural consumption.
