

# **Rockefeller Support for Projects on the Use of Motion Pictures for Educational and Public Purposes, 1935-1954**

by William J. Buxton

Department of Communication Studies  
Concordia University  
7141 Sherbrooke Street West  
Montreal H4B 1R6  
Canada  
[buxton@vax2.concordia.ca](mailto:buxton@vax2.concordia.ca)

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While it is now commonly recognized that Rockefeller philanthropy supported a number of important projects related to radio, its involvement with motion pictures has received much less attention. Yet between 1935 and 1954, the Humanities Division (HD) of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), along with the General Education Board (GEB), allocated around a million and a half dollars to initiatives related to film, scattered across a broad range of initiatives. Indeed, the RF and the GEB interests in motion picture and radio programs were considered as part of a single program concerned with how the educational possibilities of the two new media could be explored and cultivated. As is the case with the Rockefeller projects related to radio, items dealing with motion picture initiatives can be found in abundance at the Rockefeller Archive Center. In addition to extensive material in the RF and the GEB collections (including the fellowship files), additional valuable documentation can be found in the Program and Policy collections, and in some of the officers' diaries (particularly those of John Marshall and David Stevens). In reading through the files on the particular projects found in these various collections, one is almost immediately struck by the overall vision and sense of unified purpose that seemed to underpin the support given to film. In particular, one can detect a strong interest in cultivating an inter-connected community of interests in educational film, each playing a particular role within an emergent complex.

While the composition of this community -- and those aspects of it singled out for emphasis -- shifted over time, the over-riding concern to create an enduring infrastructure for non-theatrical film nevertheless remained.

The shift towards an interest in film was rooted in the realignment of the Rockefeller divisions in the late 1920s, and the new mandate given to the HD to concern itself with issues related to public appreciation of the new media. At the same time, the GEB began to address more directly how general education could be cultivated, in the sense of trying to "help people live better in a democracy." The program in film, as it emerged and developed, was rooted in the division of labor that had been carved out between these two divisions in matters related to film. The backdrop to this development was growing concern with the possible deleterious effects of Hollywood film (given attention by the Payne Fund Studies) on the one hand, and the recognized need to better develop "visual education" within the school system, on the other.

Rockefeller officers believed that the potential harmful influence of entertainment film could not be effectively countered through negative measures such as censorship, or "through diagnostic studies of the effect of motion pictures on the social attitudes of children and adolescents" (a thinly veiled reference to the Payne Foundation-sponsored studies). Rather, they saw the main problem as the related questions of "How can the public . . . be helped to an understanding that enables it to distinguish good from bad . . . in films?" and "How can informed public opinion be brought into constructive relations with the industry?" Accordingly, the initial foray of the two Rockefeller divisions into motion pictures was very much informed by an effort to mediate between commercial and educational interests in film.

In the case of the GEB, the initial proposal that it considered came from George Zook of the American Council for Education (an umbrella group representing education associations, school systems, and public libraries). It called for the establishment of an American Film Institute that was to be modelled on the recently established British Film Institute. This agency was to have the role of planning and coordinating the various activities related to educational film. While it was not entirely clear why the GEB decided not to fund this organization, there is some evidence that a centralized directive body of this kind was not acceptable to the representatives of the film industry, who were concerned that such an agency would have been a powerful competitor. In any event, rather than providing support for the establishment of a centralized authority, the GEB funded a series of projects that addressed the goals of general education and film in a more decentralized fashion. Beginning in 1935, a number of projects "concerned with the use of the motion picture in schools and colleges" were provided with support. The American Council of Education (ACE), abandoning its vision of a centralized agency, concentrated instead on a series of projects related to the use of motion pictures in the schools, beginning with a grant from the GEB for \$12,500 in 1935. Overall, the ACE received grants totalling nearly \$200,000 to examine how motion pictures might be used for instructional purposes. This involved surveying the experiences of hundreds of teachers and their pupils and collecting this data in a series of publications that provided insights into how the educational audiences responded to various motion pictures

produced for classroom use. In effect, the ACE program represented an effort to build bridges between visual educators and the film industry, by assessing the educational merits of commercially produced films.

A similar orientation was evident in a project organized under the auspices of the Commission of Human Relations of the Progressive Education Association (PEA), under the direction of Alice V. Keliher. It received over \$167,000 between 1936 and 1939 for a project that involved a close working relationship with the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), an organization that had been established by the film industry to oversee its public relations. Hollywood films, largely "screen biographies and dramas," were adopted and distributed to schools with the purpose of educating children about human relations. This involved, then, assembling selected shots and sequences from full-length features into short films to be shown in schools to promote "character education." Members of the Commission were responsible for editing films and selecting material of relevance to such situations as "frustration, conflict, and decision." The screening of these films was to then serve as the basis for classroom discussion. In both of these GEB-funded projects, emphasis was placed on measuring the effectiveness of using commercially-produced motion pictures in the classroom.

As the GEB programs in film and general education progressed, it became evident to those working in the area of visual instruction that Hollywood motion pictures were inherently limited as educational vehicles because of their bias towards providing entertainment to a mass audience. It was felt that more attention needed to be given to the production of educational films per se, and that good instructional films might be better produced in a non-profit setting. Accordingly, funding was provided to Robert Kissack (director of the Visual Education Unit at the University of Minnesota) to establish a production unit. Between 1937 and 1941, the Unit received a total of \$134,000 from the GEB. By directly supporting the production of films, the GEB appeared to be violating the principle that funding would not be allocated for the creation of media material per se. However, given that this venture was thought to have "definite experimental or demonstrational value," it was allowed to proceed. It was felt that if the university-based film production center were to be successful, it could serve as a model for similar developments elsewhere, thereby helping to establish a vibrant educational-film production sector.

It was also recognized that motion pictures could never acquire much usefulness for the classroom, as long as the system of film distribution remained inadequate. To help remedy this situation, the GEB supported the formation of the Association of School Film Libraries, Inc. The Association, which received over \$47,000 in grants from the GEB between 1938 and 1941, brought together "the hundred odd agencies distributing films to the schools in a central authority that would inform schools about what films were available and would also evaluate them." It saw itself as "the distribution agency among the motion picture projects of the General Education Board and the Rockefeller Foundation." Aside from setting up an organizational structure for informing school film libraries about the films that were available, its main accomplishment was the preparation of a series of film catalogues that received wide distribution.

Finally, between 1936 and 1938, the GEB awarded a total of eighteen fellowships to persons showing promise in the film field. The funding allowed them to upgrade their professional abilities by spending time at an institution specializing in some aspect of film practice. Those with a "broad knowledge in some field" with an emergent interest in film were particularly encouraged. For instance, John Devine, who had a background in public administration (along with a stint at the SSRC) was sent to the London Film Centre.

The activities of the GEB were complemented by a number of important film initiatives sponsored by the RF. One of the most favoured institutions was the film library of the Museum of Modern Art, which received a total of \$338,730 from 1935 to 1954, largely in support of its work to collect, preserve, and circulate "historically and aesthetically important" films. What gave rise to this initiative was the realization by Rockefeller officials that the commercially dominated motion-picture industry was at odds with film appreciation and film scholarship. Given that motion pictures were not systematically preserved, collected, or organized, film could neither become an object of critical study nor an important component of the cultural heritage of Western civilization.

Under the direction of John Abbot and Iris Barry, the film library of the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) served as an important center for the preservation of film, film education, and film scholarship. It not only crafted the films into a more accessible form, but organized them into various thematic series and made them available at a nominal cost to nonprofit groups. Indeed, given that Iris Barry had had previous experience with the London Film Society, it was hoped that something along the same lines could be developed under the auspices of the Film library. In a related educational initiative, Barry and Abbot organized the first course on film at Columbia University and taught it with the assistance of guest lecturers, most of whom were film-makers.

The role of the film library began to take on a different complexion as a result of the growing interest in the documentary film movement, which was gaining momentum in the late 1930s in the United States. To both foundation officials and educational film specialists, this development represented a promising alternative to the commercial entertainment-model that had become dominant. With its focus on producing escapist entertainment, Hollywood was not at all disposed to produce the film equivalents to radio programmes such as "Town Hall of the Air," which had been created by private broadcasters. This meant that if documentary films were to be produced, one needed to look beyond entrenched commercial interests. In support of establishing a more robust documentary film production sector, the HD sought to give this form of non-theatrical film a higher profile. To this end, the HD provided grants to the film library to bring European film-makers and scholars into the country for short visits, with a view to creating a "guild spirit" in the United States within the documentary film community. Perhaps the most notable of these was Paul Rotha, "one of Britain's outstanding documentary makers and the author of a book on the genre." From October 1937 to March 1938, Rotha used the library as a base for lecturing, for showing a representative group of films, and for making a documentary film on how to make documentary films.

The other major institution supported by the RF was the American Film Center (AFC), which was established in 1938 under the direction of Donald Slesinger, a former dean from the University of Chicago and the education director at the 1939 World's Fair in New York. From 1938 to 1948, it received \$295,000 from the RF in appropriations. It was conceived of as a "non-profit agency for advisory work on film making and for distribution of films of educational content." Its purpose was "to do with film what Hollywood would not do through a profit motive or social impulse" and create a better working relationship between documentary film producers and distributors. In the same way that the Film library of MOMA was at least partially modelled on the London Film Society, the planning for the AFC drew on on the London Film Institute, under the direction of John Grierson, for inspiration. To some extent, the AFC was very much in line with the American Film Institute that had been proposed to the GEB by the ACE a few years earlier.

As the 1930s drew to a close, an effort was made to develop a more clearly defined division of labour and working relationship among the GEB- and RF-sponsored projects in the area of film. Specifically, the GEB allocated \$300 to defray the costs for a meeting of representatives from the various film initiatives, held at the RF offices in New York in February, 1939. While there is little evidence that this meeting resulted in a more coherent film program, the very fact that it was held reveals the extent to which the different film ventures were thought to comprise an inter-related complex. Indeed, this set of projects embodied the HD's emergent priorities of elevating public taste, preserving and circulating cultural artifacts, developing a knowledge base for cultural practices, mediating between private, public, and state sectors, and "reaching mens' minds" through the new mass media. It was through cultivating a community of practitioners that these goals were to be realized. The GEB fellowships played an important role in this regard, as they allowed for the circulation of ideas that developed as a result of the visits to various institutions by GEB-sponsored fellows. In addition to helping those in the educational sector improve their skills by spending time with commercial film organizations (such as the March of Time, Inc.), it also allowed for promising talent to become familiar with the work going on at such RF- and GEB-sponsored ventures as the American Film Center and the Minnesota Visual Education project. This effort to create a community of like-minded practitioners in the non-theatrical film field was in line with an approach which began to be used by all of the five Rockefeller divisions in the late 1930s. "The first step is to ask competent representatives of each field what purposes should prevail if the interpretation of knowledge in that field is to be valid." This culminated in a meeting "in which representatives of the field of knowledge in question and practitioners in the media of interpretation discuss what can be done."

That an awareness of a network of Rockefeller-sponsored film ventures was emerging, is evident in the observation of the Minnesota program director, Robert Kissack "that we are but one small iron in the Rockefeller fire of motion pictures in General Education." The Minnesota project, along with AFC -- and to some extent the PEA project -- were concerned with production. The ASFL and the MOMA projects were aligned with distribution. And finally, the ACE project and PEA project were mainly concerned with exhibition. This model of the communications network in relation to film bore a striking

resemblance to the framework for the study of communications that emerged from the Communications Seminar in 1939-40, which stressed that the communication system consisted of a chain of inter-related components from production through to distribution and consumption. It may indeed have been the set of film projects put in place was an articulation of a vision of a communications system that informed the thinking of the HD and GEB officers beginning in the mid-1930s.

However, this sense of cooperating decentralized agencies proved to be short-lived. The GEB did not extend the grants for the film projects it sponsored past their initial periods, and the HD moved to centralize its funding for film ventures within the AFC and MOMA programs. This meant that these two institutions began to absorb many of the functions for the cultivation of educational/documentary film that had previously been centralized, such as distribution, production, publicity, evaluation and scholarship. In this regard, the AFC was increasingly viewed as a non-theatrical film clearing-house, responsible for serving as an intermediary for the different agencies working in the educational and documentary film field. To this end, it was designated to administer and coordinate some of the grants that had been awarded for film-related ventures. For instance, the AFC began to work with the American Library Association to improve the distribution of educational films in libraries. A later venture of a similar nature involved the American Committee of the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, whose main purpose was to facilitate the international exchange of films. In terms of production, it worked with organizations such as the New York Zoological Society to produce films intended to increase awareness of a particular institution's activities. The AFC was also viewed by the HD as an emergent center for film scholarship. This development came as a result of Donald Slesinger's involvement in the Communication Seminar of 1939-40, which set out an agenda for research in the field. Indeed, the RF saw the AFC as doing for film scholarship what the Princeton Radio Research project had accomplished for the study of radio. While nothing comparable to the ground-breaking radio research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld and his co-workers ever emerged, the AFC did coordinate the support for Leo Rosten's influential study of Hollywood and tried to adapt the Merton-Stanton program analyzer to film.

However, while the AFC had some modest successes, a good number of the projects that it undertook failed to attain their ostensible goals. Indeed, there were numerous signs that the AFC was failing to gain acceptance from the non-theatrical film community. In addition to its inability to retain administrative personnel, the AFC also antagonized some of the key organizations that were involved in the documentary and educational film movement. For instance, it came into conflict with another organization that received Rockefeller support, namely the Association of Documentary Film Producers, Inc. which had received a grant from the RF for a study of the problems of documentary film production, beginning in February, 1940. The representatives of the Association were directed by the HD to work through the AFC and attempted to do so. However, the two organizations were at loggerheads right from the beginning, and the Association eventually sent a memorandum to the HD declaring that it had formally severed all ties with the AFC, and would look for guidance and support elsewhere. Despite the lack of clear evidence that the AFC was fulfilling its mandate to promote documentary and

educational film in the United States, the RF continued to renew its grants, with the final allocation scheduled to continue until 1948. It was only after the RF auditors discovered that the AFC had committed a number of serious financial improprieties that its funding was revoked in 1946.

There is little doubt that the AFC can be viewed as one of the HD's least successful ventures. It not only suffered from poor financial management, but made a number of ill-advised decisions about the kinds of initiatives that it should undertake. It may have been the case that the AFC had been poorly conceived in the first place, assuming roles and responsibilities for which it lacked the requisite skills and resources. One might add that the RF officers may well have had misplaced confidence in the AFC's leadership of Donald Slesinger and Luther Gulick, thereby failing to adequately monitor the Center's activities. Nevertheless, a number of positive developments did emerge out of the ill-fated AFC venture. The Educational Film Library Association, which was founded at the AFC in 1943, developed into an important national clearinghouse for information in the educational field, and began organizing what was to become the largest 16mm film festival in the world. The AFC's modest newsletter, *Film News*, developed into a widely circulating magazine that became a model for disseminating information about film. More indirectly, the very fact that the RF and the GEB committed themselves to giving documentary film a higher profile through the AFC -- resulting in a flurry of activities -- may well have helped to place this form of expression more firmly on the cultural map.

The film library of MOMA, in contrast, proved to be a highly successful institution, whose impact upon educational and documentary film has likely been unrivalled. During the period in which the AFC was struggling to establish itself as a credible institution, the Film Library not only continued to build on its foundations of archiving, cataloguing, and circulating films, but also engaged in a variety of innovative and productive ventures. These included sponsoring Sigfried Kracauer's monumental study of German film, working with the Library of Congress to store films, organizing a program of films entitled "The Documentary Film, 1922-1945," and preparing an extensive report on the use of documentary film during wartime. Unlike the AFC, whose legacy remains ambiguous at best, the Film Library not only set standards for preserving and collecting films, but made important advances in developing film appreciation and pedagogy. Above all, the collection of the Film Library became the most significant resource for film scholarship in the United States, with many of the leading texts in the field (including Arthur Knight's *The Liveliest Art* and Sigfried Kracauer's *Theory of Film*) drawing on its material.

Overall, the RF- and GEB-funded projects never coalesced into a well conceived infrastructure for non-theatrical film, along the lines that were envisioned in the late 1930s. With the failure of the AFC to establish itself, a network of this kind was never able to materialize. This meant that the accomplishments of the film library, significant as they were, did not form part of a well-integrated system linking the diverse aspects of educational and documentary film within a unified framework. Nevertheless, it could be argued that by supporting such a range of projects related to non-theatrical film, something approximating a community of like-minded film experts and practitioners was

created in the process, a "guild spirit" that was to leave its mark on the development of educational and documentary film world-wide.