George Gallup in Hollywood. *By Susan Ohmer.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xiii + 281 pp. Index, notes, illustrations. Cloth. $69.50; paper, $24.50. ISBN: cloth, 0-231-12132-6; paper, 0-231-12133-4.

Reviewed by Sarah E. Igo

After reading Susan Ohmer's fascinating account of George Gallup's work in the movie industry, it is difficult to understand why so few have reckoned with the pollster's legacies to modern business. Most know Gallup as the man behind the famous poll he created in 1935, which gauged Americans' sentiments about political candidates and social issues of the day. Public-opinion polling, however, was just one item (albeit the most visible) in Gallup's expansive portfolio. One of the virtues of Ohmer's study is that it turns our attention to the pollster's less public work on behalf of advertisers, marketers, and filmmakers—and, in the process, persuades us that his efforts in this domain were as important and far-reaching as the Gallup poll.

The focus of Ohmer's book is Gallup's entrée into the movie business in the 1940s through his market-research firm, Audience Research Institute (ARI, later renamed Audience Research, Inc.). His pitch? That he could deduce empirically "what the audience wants," and thus give moviemakers control over the most unpredictable facet of the entertainment enterprise. This was a critical period of transition for the film industry, which was embroiled in antitrust investigations, conflicts between exhibitors and producers as well as studios and independents, and financial difficulties, in part due to declining revenues from abroad during World War II. Gallup's inroads into Hollywood were a sign not only of industrywide turmoil, but also of the ways informal audience measurement by directors, producers, and theater owners was being displaced by "scientific" studies, strongly promoted by the pollster himself.

Ohmer begins not with Hollywood, however, but with Gallup's earlier labors in the area of audience research, a kind of obsession that began with his newspaper studies in the 1920s. In pioneering a new method for registering reader interest, he discovered that news articles were far less popular than comics, picture pages, and sports columns, a finding that attracted intense

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interest in the business world and led the advertising firm Young & Rubicam to hire Gallup as its director of research. From this perch, Gallup established his national polling outfit, the American Institute of Public Opinion. In 1940, trading on his success as "America's pollster," Gallup founded the Audience Research Institute.

Meticulously researched, *George Gallup in Hollywood* stands as the fullest chronicle to date of Gallup's career. Although this is not Ohmer's stated intention, it can also be read as an argument for the centrality of survey research, and of Gallup himself, to modern marketing. One comes away from her story astonished by how many techniques, now commonplace, were at least partial inventions of the pollster's—from page-by-page studies of newspaper readership (the "Gallup Method"), to the "coincidental method" in radio, to image-driven advertising, to story and title tests, to "publicity penetration" indices, to box-office projections.

The seeds for Gallup's Hollywood ventures were planted early in his career. A pattern of calling for "objective" facts about readers or viewers, selecting representative national cross-sections, and devising questionnaires to measure preferences began with Gallup's canvasses in the field of print journalism and repeated itself in his advertising studies, political polls, and eventually in his surveys of movie audiences. In a deliberate effort to transplant his opinion-gathering expertise to a new arena, Gallup assiduously courted studios and moguls (not always successfully). His role as an advisor to moviemakers was cemented with an in-depth study of attitudes toward double features in 1940. His company went on to "isolate every factor that might influence viewers' responses, from a film's title, narrative, and cast through its advertising and publicity" (p. 4), subjecting each to statistical discipline in a bid for the "total management" of spectatorship (p. 217).

This history is told in exhaustive detail, covering the cast of characters surrounding Gallup (notably ARI's assistant director and future advertising legend, David Ogilvy), his influential findings (such as the importance of the teenage market and the profitability of escapism), and the projects that ARI took on. The latter ranged from floating story ideas for Hollywood studios to estimating the audience size for *Gone With the Wind*, to advising Walt Disney about which characters would make the best vehicles for films.

Ohmer's ability to move between the internal workings of ARI and the external pressures on Hollywood to calculate the makeup of its potential audience is especially impressive. Attentive to the nuts and bolts of both surveys and studio politics, she makes the case that the

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varied reactions to, and uses of, ARI's research "reflected the structural and economic battles of the time" (p. 111), particularly the "struggle for power that characterized the studio system in the 1940s" (p. 119). Perhaps the most valuable aspect of her book is its investigation of how Gallup's facts and figures informed the decisions of three different clients: a major studio, RKO Radio Pictures; a powerful independent producer, David O. Selznick; and another independent with links to RKO, Walt Disney. Whereas Disney wound up organizing much of his production around ARI's studies, for instance, and Selznick pounced on expert data that gave "added weight to his own ideas" (p. 167), Gallup was not always able even to get a hearing at RKO. Ohmer skillfully demonstrates that market research recalibrated relations among studios, independent producers, exhibitors, actors, and writers.

A couple of issues would have benefited from closer examination. One is the question of how much Gallup and ARI *shaped* rather than *recorded* audience preferences. By identifying certain trends—the large youth market for movies, or the desire to watch familiar stars and narratives, for example—Gallup also perpetuated them. Furthermore, the surveyors' quasi-scientific theories, such as Ogilvy's belief that Americans couldn't abide foreign accents, could cause them to misread audiences and mislead studios (about Desi Arnaz's drawing power, for example). What were the long-term effects of market research on movies and their audiences?

A second issue concerns the methods and motivations of the surveyors. Ohmer generally depicts Gallup as a populist who simply hoped to discern what the audience wanted, rather than as a businessman with immense power to determine markets. Yet she relates several instances of ARI's altering the wording of questions to achieve different results or interpreting numbers selectively. Ohmer hints that Gallup's surveys may have been influenced by his clients' interests, but she is reluctant to speculate and thus short-circuits her analysis. At one point, Ohmer states, "From the beginning, many in the industry perceived Gallup as being allied with one group—producers" (p. 117). But we never get a sense of what she thinks of this claim.

But these are minor quibbles. *George Gallup in Hollywood* is an extremely valuable portrait of the shifting field in which Hollywood operated in the 1940s, and an excellent study of the ambivalent relationship between two modern industries—moviemaking and marketing—that each sought profit in the public's pulse.

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