Introduction

“Malice in Wonderland”

In 1944, just six years into her career as a nationally syndicated Hollywood gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper quipped that her future memoirs would be titled “Malice in Wonderland.” Witty and catty, Hopper’s title perfectly captured her reputation in Hollywood. Malicious was the least of it: “unpredictable and ruthless,” “cold-blooded,” “a vicious witch,” and, due to her right-wing politics, “fascist.” Hopper herself did not shy away from such descriptions. When actress Merle Oberon asked why she wrote such cruel things in her column, Hopper replied, “Bitchery, dear. Sheer bitchery.”

Hopper was fifty-two years old and an underemployed, struggling supporting actress when the Los Angeles Times picked up her fledgling movie gossip column, “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood,” in 1938. She soon became a powerful figure in the film industry during its “golden age,” when the movies were the dominant form of mass entertainment in the United States. Syndicated in eighty-five metropolitan newspapers as well as small-town dailies and weeklies during the 1940s, Hopper had an estimated daily readership of 32 million (out of a national population of 160 million) in the mid-1950s and remained influential into the next decade.

Hopper in her famous hats became a Hollywood icon, yet her nasty reputation dominated her career, persists today, and overshadows her historical significance. Industry participants attributed Hopper’s malicious gossip to her jealousy as a failed actress toward others’ success, to her strident conservatism that propelled her on political witch hunts, and to her bitter rivalry with Louella Parsons, who preceded and competed with her in the movie gossip business. The rival columnists were “guardian Furies,” the renowned playwright Arthur Miller noted in his memoirs, “the police matrons planted at the portals to keep out the sinful, the unpatriotic, and the rebels against propriety.” But this image of Hedda Hopper, while not without substance, owes much to her style and self-fashioning and has obscured her cultural
and political importance. Hopper’s distinctive contribution to U.S. popular and political culture between 1938 and 1966 lay with how she combined and wielded gossip about the worlds of both entertainment and politics in her column. Her aims were threefold: to distinguish and propel her career, to push her agenda of moral and political conservatism, and—furthering both—to connect with and mobilize her vast readership.

Letters from readers demonstrate Hopper’s success with motivating them to join in conversations and campaigns around the typical topics of movies and stars, as well as the social and political issues of great concern to the conservative Hopper. In an industry that routinely disposed of letters from fans and readers, Hopper saved many of hers and published some of them in her column, revealing her respect for, and dependence on, her audience. These letters provide a unique source base for understanding “the lost audience” of Hopper’s gossip and Hollywood’s past. Like all historical collections of both public and private letters, however, they also are limited as historical evidence in terms of representativeness. Not every filmgoer read Hopper’s column, not every reader wrote to Hopper, not every letter was collected and preserved, and not every letter was published or published intact. Moreover, the topics these letters addressed were generated by Hopper herself through the content of her daily column, frequent radio programs, and later television appearances, and often came in response to direct requests from Hopper.

Recognizing these limitations, and that all primary historical sources are partial and incomplete, this reader response allows for a close examination of Hopper, her respondents, and their practice of Hollywood gossip over the middle decades of the twentieth century. Such an approach differentiates this study from the popular and scholarly biographies that exist of Hopper as well as of her powerful contemporaries in the gossip field, Walter Winchell and Louella Parsons. While traditional biography aims to explore and explain a person’s entire life story, historians—whether microhistorians or “biographers not”—are reimagining the biographical form “to see through the life” to larger historical contexts and processes. Similarly, the focus here is on the story of Hopper’s gossip career and her relationship with her audience. Indeed, extant mail from Hopper’s readers shaped the content of this book more than events from Hopper’s own life, although the two together can tell us much about American popular and political culture.

As practiced by Hopper and her respondents, Hollywood gossip intersected with and illuminates key developments in mass media gossip, American movies and movie culture, newspaper journalism, and conservative politics during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. In these years, these four areas
of American life underwent significant change. Celebrity gossip increasingly permeated the mass media, the motion picture industry enjoyed and then declined from its golden age, print journalism dedicated even more column inches to “soft” news (items about entertainment and celebrity) as opposed to “hard” news (information about politics and foreign policy), and a political conservatism dominated by an “Old Right” gave way to an emerging “New Right.” As a purveyor of and participants in mass media gossip, as a movie industry insider and moviegoers, as a celebrity journalist and newspaper readers, and as a political figure and citizens, Hopper and her respondents reflected and affected these changes through their practice of Hollywood gossip.

The mass media gossip of Hopper and her readers shared many of the characteristics of traditional gossip that make it an important and influential means of communication. Although formerly overlooked or trivialized, gossip is increasingly recognized as a significant aspect of the human condition. The evolutionary biologist Robin Dunbar even has suggested “that language evolved to allow us to gossip.”

Gossip is “private talk”—true or false talk about private life—voiced, often illegitimately, in the public realm. Gossip also is and historically has been seen as the private talk of women. With the assumption that women were situated primarily in the private sphere and greatly interested in private lives and personal issues, this gendering of gossip contributed to negative evaluations of gossip as trivial, inaccurate, or damaging. Cultural aphorisms—such as the Danish “The North Sea will sooner be found wanting in water than a woman at a loss for a word” and the Chinese “The tongue is the sword of a woman, and she never lets it become rusty”—confirm this view. As a woman, Hopper, as well as Parsons, fit the stereotype of the gossip as female, and neither woman won the recognition of the New York–based male columnist Walter Winchell. Hopper and Parsons were “like two biddy schoolmistresses,” Winchell’s biographer Neal Gabler argues, “until the world passed them by.”

Furthering the association of women and gossip, most of the extant letters from Hopper’s respondents—about eighty percent—are from women.

Hopper’s columns and readers’ letters reveal the private pleasures and personal benefits they received from what was dismissed as women’s “trivial” or “idle” talk, but their Hollywood gossip had a crucial public function. As in traditional societies, it resulted in shared information and knowledge, allowed for discussion and exchange, and contributed to relationships and a sense of community among participants. Gossip also could be wielded, as Hopper and her readers surely did, as “a weapon of the weak” to assail
the powerful in society and to reinforce dominant norms by stigmatizing those celebrities who stepped outside the boundaries of what the community deemed appropriate behavior. For all these reasons, celebrity gossip was a powerful discourse in Hopper’s time that has proliferated across and permeated mass media outlets in our own time as well.

Hopper and her readers’ Hollywood gossip contributed in important ways to the functioning of the U.S. motion picture industry during and just after its golden age. As film historians expand their scholarly inquiry to “people and processes outside the immediate circles of filmmaking,” the functions fulfilled by movie gossip, its purveyors, and participants emerge not as ancillary but as central to the film industry. As a gossip columnist during the era of the old studio system, when a few major studios controlled the production, distribution, and exhibition of most films, Hopper was dependent on and dedicated to the industry. Yet she was not just an extension of it. Instead, she occupied a position “in-between” the movie industry and its audience. Given the industry assumption that women constituted the majority—seventy to eighty percent—of filmgoers, Hopper’s readers and her relationship to them were viewed as important for Hollywood. In turn, confirming recent theories of cinema spectatorship, Hopper’s respondents were active, conscious, selective filmgoers who produced, circulated, and acted on their own meanings of film. Their letters conveyed the experiences and opinions of actual consumers of Hollywood film, especially women, revealing the significance of movies and movie culture in their personal and political lives, as well as their public efforts, together with Hopper, to influence the direction and output of the motion picture industry.

One of Hopper and her readers’ most vital industry functions involved the shaping of “star personas” through private talk. What differentiated a star from an actor was that audiences were interested in, and thought they knew something about, the star’s “real life” in addition to their “reel life” on film. Gossip played a key role in the mix of film roles and off-screen personalities, of public images and personal information that created the star persona. As they lived their public-private lives, stars sparked interest, discussion, and often controversy. When Hopper publicized actual—and manufactured—details about the private lives of film stars, and her respondents sought out and made sense of those details, they both confronted changing social and sexual mores and contributed to a Hollywood star system in which studios sold the stars and stars sold the movies. When the studio system declined in the transition to “New Hollywood” by the 1960s, so too did the place of Hopper, her readers, and their practice of Hollywood gossip.
Yet movie stardom still depended on the publicity provided by celebrity journalism, and Hopper and her readers confirmed and challenged long-term trends in the news coverage of celebrities. When Hopper became a celebrity journalist in the late 1930s, she entered a well-established field. As historian Charles L. Ponce de Leon demonstrates, celebrity gossip, news items, and feature stories already were a “staple of the metropolitan press” by the 1880s, as “entertainment values became increasingly emphasized” in print journalism.¹⁸ In most ways, Hopper was an imitator of those who had come before her, not an innovator. She adopted the conventions—both in form and content—of the genre of celebrity journalism, conventions that in the 1920s Walter Winchell had taken in new directions in New York and Louella Parsons had perfected for Hollywood. Like her predecessors, she believed that “a person’s real self could only be viewed in private,” therefore private talk revealed the truth, and she considered invasions of privacy in the interests of democracy; her readership had a “public’s right to know” about prominent figures.¹⁹ Also like her predecessors, Hopper became a celebrity in her own right, a “star” journalist generating her own publicity and public interest in her private life, particularly among her readers and fans.

The celebrity journalism written, or rather dictated, by Hopper and read by her readers fell into the category of what has come to be called “soft” or entertainment news, as opposed to “hard” or political news, but, like earlier women journalists or “front page girls,” Hopper actually created a hybrid.²⁰ She included gossip and news about the film industry, local and national politics, and particularly the politics of films and filmmakers in her column and radio shows. In the process, she gave celebrity status to both entertainers and politicians. While Winchell already had accomplished this for New York and the nation, Parsons had not done quite the same for Hollywood. Hopper’s hybrid of soft news and hard news could be seen as an unwelcome insertion of celebrity and entertainment into politics, but it is more accurate to say she departed from journalism’s twentieth-century trajectory toward depoliticized “infotainment” by inserting politics into her coverage of celebrities. Moreover, she understood and addressed her audience as citizens, not just readers, spectators, or consumers, and her mostly female respondents reciprocated in kind.²¹

Hopper saw her readers as citizens because she saw herself as a political figure and activist, and together they helped shape popular conservative politics in the mid-twentieth century. A new, revisionist literature has transformed historical understandings of conservatism during this period, placing it within the mainstream of American political life, rather than at the
The conservative Hopper also should be taken seriously, rather than dismissed as “rabid” or “a crank” who engaged in “pinko purges,” and so too should her readers. Revealing an important popular culture dimension to political conservatism, Hopper used her journalistic platform throughout her career to promote traditional morals and conservative politics, to admire and attack members of the film industry for their moral behavior and political views, and to mobilize her readers around related issues and campaigns. Always a proud and highly partisan member of the conservative wing of the Republican Party, she expressed and sought to build opposition to the New Deal in the 1930s, U.S. intervention in World War II, Communism at home and abroad during the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and modern manners and morals. Her respondents joined her in these efforts and were characteristic of the women and men who built the grassroots base of the era’s conservative movement.

Hopper was a popularizer of conservatism, not an intellectual or a theorist, but she conveyed a unifying set of ideas and values at a time when the libertarian and traditionalist strains of American conservatism were in “uneasy and sometimes volatile contradiction to one another,” according to historian Donald T. Critchlow. Hopper was what came to be called a “libertarian,” strongly committed to the separation of a private realm of activity—the economy and personal life—from a public realm of activity—the state and politics. As a member of the Old Right, she advocated the free market and antistatism, condemning the welfare state and government regulation of the economy. She also supported the traditional moral values central to the emerging New Right agenda, although as a libertarian she was reluctant to use the state to intervene in private matters. Instead, she sought to use gossip to enforce community norms. Her consistent anti-Communism also bridged the libertarian-traditionalist divide, as it did for all conservatives. Hopper’s integration of political ideas and values associated with the Old Right, the New Right, and what they shared allowed her to address and mobilize all her conservative respondents and demonstrates a crucial continuity in twentieth-century conservatism.

Taken together, Hedda Hopper and her respondents’ practice of Hollywood gossip made her column part of the public sphere. The idea of the public sphere is associated with theorist Jürgen Habermas and “designates a theatre in modern societies”—distinct from civil society and the state—“in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.” While Habermas posited one public sphere with newspapers as a central institu-
tion, scholars since have proposed multiple and alternative public spheres, as film historian Miriam Hansen did with the cinema. Appearing in newspapers and covering the cinema, Hopper’s column fulfilled many public sphere functions, becoming an arena for sharing information, conveying values and ideas, engaging in discussion and debate, forming and advocating opinions, and taking political action about significant issues of public and private life. The conversations of Hopper and her respondents through columns and letters demonstrate how participation in Hollywood gossip created new modes of citizenship, particularly for women, in the mid-twentieth-century United States.

Yet Hopper’s movie gossip column was a distinctive and limited site within the public sphere. While Habermas considered the public sphere a place where distinctions were made between the public and private worlds of participants, Hopper’s column privileged gossip, a form of talk that collapsed boundaries between the public and the private, the political and the personal. While public sphere participants in Habermas’s formulation sought reasoned discussion and debate, Hopper’s writings modeled and encouraged emotional statements and exchanges based on fear, anxiety, hate, and, yes, malice. And while Habermas’s ideal public sphere guaranteed access to all citizens, freedom of expression, and open-ended deliberations, Hopper through her column both excluded and censored letters from respondents who disagreed with her and sought confirmation and support for her predetermined moral and political views. Hopper’s commitment to the ideals of citizen participation in the public sphere, or reader participation in her column, only extended as far as the promotion and protection of her career necessitated and her campaigns for moral and political conservatism warranted.

Although Hopper’s gossip career and conservative campaigns were mutually reinforcing, bringing her visibility and power inside and outside Hollywood, they also could be seen as contradictory. She sought to restore what she saw as the values and verities of an earlier age, but she made her career at the intersection of the film industry and celebrity journalism and endorsed free market capitalism—three forces in modern America credited with propelling the social and cultural changes she lamented. There was another apparent contradiction. Hopper presented herself as the voice of small-town America and nostalgically harked back to the era of scattered, small “island communities,” but in her youth she could not wait to leave the town where she had been raised, Altoona, Pennsylvania.
“From the time she was very young, she was determined to escape from the big family,” Hedda Hopper’s youngest sister, Margaret, recalled. “To leave Altoona. To find a place in the world she knew in her imagination.” Such determination and dreams also appeared in Hopper’s two books of memoirs, published in 1952 and 1963 when she was in her sixties and seventies, and in her columns and interviews. In all her autobiographical musings—as is true of most autobiography, biography, and even celebrity profiles—Hopper reconstructed as well as fictionalized past events and experiences to link past and present and to give a purpose and shape to her life. In “writing a woman’s life,” Hopper created a narrative that explained and justified the persona she later adopted and projected as Hedda Hopper, gossip columnist. Her published remembrances asserted a continuity of identity and intention from her youth through adulthood, and drew more on the form and content of the celebrity profiles Hopper often wrote than on the genre of women’s autobiography. In contrast to the passivity found in most women’s self-writings, Hopper’s memoirs emphasized her “industry, perseverance, and will power,” an emphasis found in celebrity journalism. Hopper was born Elda Furry in 1885 (she later claimed 1890) to strict Quaker and Republican parents, David and Margaret Furry. She hated her name. “Elda Furry has always sounded to me like a small blonde animal with soft skin that people like to stroke,” she later noted. “Being stroked makes my hair rise on my head.” Other commentators thought the name appropriate; “I think it should have been pronounced Fury,” stated Hopper’s editor at the Los Angeles Times. Born in “peaceful, pretty” Hollidaysburg, Elda and her family soon moved to Altoona, where David Furry owned a butcher shop.

Hopper’s stories of life in Altoona emphasized her strong and independent spirit, politically conservative and patriotic upbringing, fascination with fashion, performance, and the theatrical world, and rejection of family and gender expectations. Seeing the celebrated actress Ethel Barrymore on stage changed her life: she decided to become an actress. Inspired as much by Barrymore’s costumes as her acting technique, Elda soon acquired her first store-bought hat. “Of bright green straw trimmed with red velvet geraniums,” her hat sparked great interest at church on Easter Sunday. “I said if a hat can get the attention of this many people, I’ll never go bareheaded,” and it was a lesson she never forgot. Her favorite holiday was Fourth of July. “Orators weren’t ashamed to stand up and say what America meant to them,” the patriotic Hopper recalled, “and as kids we were pretty proud.”
But she also told stories of hard work, sibling rivalries, and family resentments. As the middle child of seven surviving children in a family with an ill mother—“an angel on earth”—and a father who “thought women should be the workers,” Elda cooked meals, “did the washing, ironing, cleaning, and helped Dad in his butcher shop,” while her brothers shirked. She also blamed her mother’s infirmity on the “raft of children” her father’s “selfishness” had created.  

“I spent most of my early life fighting,” she recalled in the 1920s. “I hated men, because I thought them all selfish, grasping, and overbearing.” Meanwhile, she dreamt of Broadway stardom and saw herself as a “rebel.” Although her father discouraged her dreams of a career in the theater, “it only made me the more determined to find out if I could do it,” and when “life became intolerable at home, I ran away to New York and went on the stage.”

In later describing her theatrical career, Hopper adopted the self-mocking tone typical of women who recognized their challenge to traditional gender expectations, but her frank acknowledgment of her ambitions and struggles again fit more with celebrity coverage than women’s self-writing. Without her parents’ prior knowledge or approval, Elda first joined a theatrical troupe in Pittsburgh, then arrived in New York in 1908 at age twenty-two, signed on and toured with various opera companies as a chorus girl, and eventually worked her way up to larger roles in plays and musical comedies. “Things were different in those days,” Hopper later remembered. “There weren’t a hundred stage-struck girls for every job.” Her attributes were many. “I was young and pretty. My figure wasn’t bad. I had a peaches-and-cream complexion. Others agreed on her good looks. “She was very beautiful, had this wonderful complexion and great poise and bearing,” remembered her friend, screenwriter Frances Marion. Charles Brackett, also a screenwriter, claimed, “Elda had the most beautiful legs in the New York theater.” She also benefited from entering the theater at a time of expanding popular culture, burgeoning consumer culture, and growing emphasis on “personality” and appearances. But she was not known for her singing, dancing, or even acting ability, and she knew it. “I was working under one handicap,” Hopper recalled. “No talent.” Still, “just to be behind the footlights was wonderful,” and she was ambitious and worked hard, because if she failed she faced “a fate worse than death—go home to Altoona.” Moreover, it was through the theater that she met her future husband, De Wolf Hopper.

In recounting the sad, often humiliating story of her marriage, Hopper’s remembrances departed from both women’s writing and celebrity journalism, revealing a woman willing to admit to unhappiness in her private life.
and finding fulfillment in her public life. Calling herself Elda Curry, she met De Wolf Hopper while appearing in her first New York production. “Never was there an unlikelier physical candidate for a ladies’ man,” Hopper’s biographer George Eells argued. A famed stage actor, singer, and comic opera star, De Wolf Hopper was tall, with bold features, no hair, and a bluish tint to his skin from gargling silver nitrate for his throat, but he was very charming and popular with women. “I remember my first glimpse of him,” Hopper later recalled, “a tall, striking-looking man with a marvelous voice. Every woman within earshot was leaning toward him worshipfully.” He was four years older than her own father and already had four failed marriages behind him. When they married in 1913, she had just turned twenty-eight; De Wolf was fifty-five. In 1915 their son, William De Wolf Hopper, Jr., was born, and by 1918 Elda had changed her name. She sought to distinguish herself, or so she always said, from her husband’s four previous wives—Ella, Ida, Edna, and Nella—and consulted a numerologist, who came up with “Hedda.” Her new name hardly got away from the “two-syllable names ending in ‘a’” she had desired, but the alliteration with her husband’s last name worked. Still, Hedda’s status as De Wolf’s fifth wife did not last long. His insults and infidelities proved to be too much, and she filed for divorce in 1922. Marriage convinced Hopper that a “man must be worth marrying before a woman will give up her independence,” and she never married again.

Hopper’s energetic, engaging descriptions of her theatrical and early motion picture work during her marriage further acknowledged her challenge to traditional gender expectations, and they were consistent with the self-promotion of celebrity journalism and not the “narrative flatness” of women’s autobiography. Hopper’s discussions of her acting revealed her pride in and commitment to her career, as well as her resentment of her husband’s opposition to a wage-earning wife. Because De Wolf Hopper wanted a “wife who’d stay home while he did the acting for the family,” she retired for a brief period of time until her “lord and master changed his mind.” But in many ways Hopper was a “new woman,” spirited, competent, and self-reliant. She felt frustrated with her dependence on her profligate and unreliable husband and soon returned to work. She described being “excited” about a part, how she “loved” a play, and having a “delightful time” during a film shoot. While both she and her husband tried movie acting, illustrating how “theater people were at last forced to take the cinema seriously,” only she liked and succeeded at it. Hopper found that “motion-picture work is the most fascinating form of acting. It develops all one’s resources and every day’s work means a new adventure.” By the time she divorced, her film career was
flourishing, she was earning $1,000 per week—as much or more than her husband did in the theater—and her success was causing marital conflict. From this experience, Hopper concluded that “women should work” and not see marriage as “the end and aim of all women.” She believed “most women can support themselves, most jobs are open to women these days, and even the hardest job is easier than pleasing a man.”

Despite her evident success, the self-mockery Hopper used to discuss her theatrical talents appeared again in her stories about film acting, as did her tributes—characteristic of celebrity journalism—to hard work and making the most of opportunities. She first appeared in the motion picture *Battle of Hearts* (1916), and during the next fifty years she made over 140 films, mostly playing fictional characters but also appearing as “herself,” her Hollywood gossip columnist persona. Her “nonexistent acting technique,” according to her biographer Eells, “proved more compatible to the camera” than to the stage. She appeared in *Virtuous Wives* (1918), the first film of the future production head at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Louis B. Mayer. Hers was a supporting role, but she made the most of it. At this time actresses wore their own clothes for film shoots, so Hopper spent her entire salary of $5,000 on an expensive wardrobe and outshone the leading lady. “The picture made a solid reputation for me as a clotheshorse and upped my salary,” Hopper recollected. “Producers who didn’t know my name began to say, ‘Get what’s-her-name who played the rich woman in *Virtuous Wives*—she’ll dress this.’”

By embracing fashion and the latest styles, she drew on a popular means of constructing and expressing personal identity and “new beginnings” to create and make her reputation as an actress.

Over the years and with a coveted MGM contract in the 1920s, Hopper perfected the role of the well-dressed society matron, often “brittle and worldly,” and was rarely cast as anything else. Such typecasting was crucial to the Hollywood star system, aided the factorylike efficiency of movie production in the studio era, and was a powerful box office tool. Hopper’s typecasting enabled her to secure roles in the “society films” that were very popular during the 1920s and, according to historian Steven J. Ross, projected harmonious class relations, the benefits of individualism, and the myth of upward mobility—all conservative political messages with which Hopper agreed. Again and again, she played wealthy wives and aristocratic ladies such as Mrs. Collingswood Stratton, Lady Wildering, the Countess of Rochester, and Madame Zoe in films with titles like *High Society Blues*, *The Snob*, *Her Market Value*, *Such Men Are Dangerous*, *Adam and Evil*, *The Cruel Truth*, *Sinners in Silk*, and *Another Scandal*. Hopper credited her highly “affected” accent,
which “nauseated myself and my friends,” with getting her “all those phony society-female roles that I played on the screen.”

Hopper’s discussions and critics’ reception of her film roles and typecasting foreshadowed her style and self-fashioning as a gossip columnist. While she received good notices in the 1920s for “lending charm, distinction, and élan” to various films, having no colleague “who can better play the lady,” and creating mothers that are “smart, up-to-date and the rival of the flappers,” most commentaries focused on her ability to play the “jealous woman” and “the matron on the make.” Early in her career, she was happy with such roles. “I like to play bad women, frankly,” she said during the making of Virtuous Wives. “Good women are so deadly dull.” But later in her career and in her memoirs, Hopper expressed frustration with her typecasting. “I was the mean woman who made the stars look good,” she recalled. “I never played a good woman on the screen till my contract with Metro was finished.” Even so, Hopper’s typecast screen persona as the classy, flamboyant, and bitchy older woman translated into her later gossip career. She partly constructed her persona as a gossip columnist out of her film roles, just as Ronald Reagan did later as a politician. Moreover, members of the industry and newspaper audience familiar with Hopper’s acting “read” her gossip columnist persona through those roles. As historian Michael Rogin found for Reagan, the merging of “on- and off-screen identities” revealed a powerful “conflation of movies and reality” for Hopper as well.

In reflecting back on her ability to change careers in the late 1930s from acting to gossip, Hopper credited her perseverance, with having “guts enough to stick it out” and “wear down Hollywood’s resistance,” another theme of celebrity profiles. Her decades-long experience in the industry gave her an extensive knowledge of movies, moviemaking, and movie culture and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Beginning in 1915, she had lived in Hollywood on and off before making the move west permanent following her divorce in the 1920s, “a remarkable era of growth” in Los Angeles when the population rose 140 percent. Originating in Altoona, middle-class, Protestant, and conservative, Hopper fit the profile of many westward migrants, and she too brought from the country’s heartland to southern California “nostalgia,” as journalist Carey McWilliams understood it at the time, “for an America that no longer exists.” Over her lifetime, the continuous flow of her fellow migrants contributed to the region’s booming economic growth as well as its conservative political culture. Hopper made her home in Hollywood in the “golden twenties,” when filmmaking became California’s top industry, but stayed through the Great Depression, and her movie career mirrored the economic times.
She was struggling even before she lost her savings in the stock market crash and her MGM contract in 1932—Louella Parsons, movie gossip columnist for the newspaper empire of William Randolph Hearst, had deemed her “Queen of the Quickies” for trying to make a living out of many minor roles—and work was scarce in hard times. “I had been around too long,” she later concluded. “Producers were tired of my face. Of course, I was tired of it, too, but I couldn’t do anything about it.”

She had only five small parts in 1933, and when she appeared in her typical role as a snobbish “society leader” in *Alice Adams* (1935), starring Katharine Hepburn as an ambitious small-town girl, studio publicity noted her return “to the screen after an absence of two years.” Moreover, her pay had dropped to $1,000 per film in 1935 from $1,000 a week in 1917. To make ends meet, she wrote a play, ran for a political position and lost—“thank goodness the citizens had a better idea!”—worked as a talent agent, promoted Elizabeth Arden cosmetics, acted in theater, and returned to selling real estate, an activity she had pursued during the previous decade when a housing boom made the real estate salesperson the “archetypal Los Angeleno of the 1920s.” Her friends, such as Frances Marion, did what they could to help the struggling Hopper.

In fact, Hopper’s memoirs showed how her women friends contributed to the beginning of her gossip career by providing her with lucky “breaks,” another theme in celebrity journalism. “Writing a column is the only job ever handed to me on a silver platter,” she wrote. “I’d worked so hard finding picture parts that many times I pushed my luck away from me.” Marion Davies, an actress and longtime mistress to William Randolph Hearst, and Ida Koverman, who served as executive assistant to Louis B. Mayer at MGM, were particularly helpful. Hopper met Mrs. Eleanor (Cissy) Patterson, the publisher of the *Washington Herald*, through Davies, and Patterson, “captivated by Hedda’s brittle and spicy observations about Hollywood,” hired her in 1935 to write a “letter from Hollywood,” Hopper’s first published gossip. Although this job did not last long, and Hopper tried and failed at radio gossip in 1936, in 1937 she signed with Esquire Feature Syndicate for a gossip column with the crucial behind-the-scenes support of MGM, or so the story goes. Reportedly, an MGM publicist told Esquire, “We don’t know if Hedda Hopper can write, but when we want the lowdown on the stars, we get it from her.” Meanwhile, Mayer, who wanted a rival columnist “strong enough to curb Louella’s power,” followed Koverman’s suggestion and secretly backed Hopper in the newspaper business. In the end, when the *Los Angeles Times* picked up “Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood” in 1938, Louella Parsons had a real
rival, and Hopper had a new career at the age of fifty-two. With a little help from her friends, she had finally “found, at the end of her rainbow, the pot of gold into which she now dips her pen.”

Hopper also had found an outlet for her private talk and, once she gained the necessary clout and confidence, her moral and political views. She had long delighted in gossip. “Sundays were always exciting for me,” she wrote of her life in Altoona. “I devoured every scrap of scandal and fashion news in the Sunday supplement.” When she moved to Hollywood in 1923, she became known as a seeker and source of good gossip. She sought out the “inside story on everyone in order to spice up her conversation” and sent “long, gossipy letters” to Parsons. The two were contemporaries—Hopper joked she was “one year younger than the age Louella claims to be”—and on friendly terms. Parsons, then still writing her column from New York, appreciated hearing from the Hollywood-based Hopper, “the lady who knows it all.” In return, Parsons promoted Hopper and her career in her successful syndicated movie gossip column, as when she noted the actress had off-screen “experience as a troubled wife” before she played one on-screen as Mrs. Crombie in Conceit (1921).

Parsons had begun writing a newspaper gossip column in 1915 and by the 1930s was known as “the first lady of Hollywood.” While she had a reputation for gushing, promotional prose about the film industry and its employees—“Marion Davies has never looked lovelier” became a famous phrase—Parsons was powerful, and Hopper knew it. Their shared devotion to gossip first underpinned, and then undermined, their mutually beneficial relationship.

Similarly, Hopper’s “juicy gossip about film stars” was one reason Ida Koverman gravitated to her and formed a friendship with her; another reason was Hopper’s political conservatism, rooted in her small-town Pennsylvania childhood during the long period of Republican Party electoral dominance. Before she became Mayer’s assistant, Koverman had been a secretary for the future Republican president Herbert Hoover, and both women worked at MGM, one of Hollywood’s most conservative studios. For Hopper, enfranchised by the women’s suffrage amendment in 1920 at age thirty-five, politics mattered. When she acted on her political convictions—propelled by financial desperation—and ran for a seat on the Republican County Central Committee in 1932, Koverman supported her, as did Parsons. “Even if we differ with her in politics,” noted Parsons, at the time a Democrat, “we can’t help but hope that Hedda will be elected.” Losing the election, despite swamping the voters with fifteen thousand handbills, did not stop her political activism. Two years later she represented Mayer, then chairman of the California
Republican Party, at a campaign gathering for Hoover’s reelection bid. She energetically campaigned for Hoover, who shared her conservative Quaker upbringing, values, and qualities, including commitments to individual enterprise, social responsibility, and “ruthless righteousness.” “It will be an everlasting disgrace to the women of California if Hoover is not re-elected. The country will backslide a century,” she warned, if the Democratic challenger, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, won. Hopper maintained her interest in political conservatism and involvement in the Republican Party throughout her gossip career.

Hopper also remained committed to moral conservatism. Despite her own divorce, single motherhood, and living over forty years in “Hollywood Babylon,” seen as a site of sin and scandal, Hopper believed in and upheld the moral respectability of the Quaker girl from Altoona. Hopper was rumored to have ruined her career at MGM by refusing to recline on Mayer’s casting couch, and her friends and family reported she had “no lovers, no love affairs,” only “platonic relationships.” Hopper did have one significant romance in her early forties, however. “I’m in love for the first time in my life,” she reported to Frances Marion. But she broke off the relationship when the married man could not secure a divorce from his Catholic wife. Marion considered this heartbreaking decision “the root of Hedda’s virulent self-righteousness,” according to her biographer Cari Beauchamp. “She had suffered, she had vigilantly held to her moral ideals; those who did not must also pay a price.” With her deeply held moral values, long-standing conservative views, and a column to call her own, Hedda Hopper was set to pursue and practice the politics of Hollywood gossip.
Hedda Hopper at her desk, engaged in her work as a gossip columnist, 1944. (Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.)