

The FBI's Obscene File: J. Edgar Hoover and the Bureau's Crusade against Smut.
By Douglas M. Charles. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2012. Pp. x,
171. \$24.95.)

In this brief, eye-opening policy history, Douglas M. Charles succeeds in delivering a “primer” on the FBI’s efforts to police obscenity over the course of much of the twentieth century (4). Since the Bureau destroyed its physical stockpile of obscene films, magazines, and other paraphernalia in the early 1990s—“one of the largest and most comprehensive” porn collections by one G-Man’s estimation—Charles had only the administrative portion of the file with which to work (27). Researchers in FBI records will sympathize with Charles as he recounts the obstacles to access, which include the destruction of records, a labyrinthine filing system, the lengthy Freedom of Information Act process, a plethora of redacted passages, and, perhaps most significant, the lack of a centralized index. With over one hundred thousand FBI case files that carry obscenity-related classifications, Charles is quite aware that his research represents only the tip of the iceberg.

What spurred this massive investigation? Though sensitive to the role of technological innovations and what he calls “great sociocultural shifts,” Charles places more emphasis on FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover whose “own particular and puritanical value system” shaped his agency’s campaign to regulate national morality (136). Hoover’s antiradicalism and xenophobia blended with his traditional Victorian moralism and inspired his quest to serve as a public watchdog guarding against all forms of licentiousness. Hoover’s Bureau defined obscenity broadly; for example, it policed postwar “race music,” fearing that white children would be lured into depravity by the combination of sexually suggestive lyrics and energetic rhythm-and-blues beats.

Hoover’s FBI sought not only to contain the spread of pornography but also to educate the public in correct moral behavior. Hoover used the FBI’s publicity apparatus to highlight moral dangers, including the supposed threat of homosexuality during the so-called Lavender Scare when gays and lesbians were being systematically purged from the federal government on the grounds that they constituted security risks. The Bureau attempted to capitalize on this atmosphere of homophobia when, “[d]uring the 1950s, FBI officials sought to use antiobscenity laws to silence the first significant gay rights group in the United States, the Mattachine Society, and the first significant group to publish a nonpornographic gay magazine, *One, Inc.*” (45). Soon, however, the courts began narrowing the definition of obscenity, thereby hindering the FBI’s effort to stifle these groups through obscenity investigations.

Clearly, Hoover lost his crusade against smut and his battle to regulate public morality. He struggled even to control his own agents. The Bureau constantly fretted over the “improper handling of obscene exhibits” by its own officials, and Hoover personally set up regulations to guard his agents from “undue curiosity about such filth” (35, 62). Such efforts were to no avail. According to former Assistant Director William Sullivan, “within hours a file with compromising photographs would be opened and closed [by FBI agents] so many times that the tape would lose all its adhesiveness” (62). Hoover’s grip on the broader culture proved even more tenuous.

It is striking to consider the FBI’s failure to combat obscenity in relation to its more effective political surveillance. Charles may have profited from pursuing this theme further. Nevertheless, his book makes an important contribution to FBI history and to studies on sexuality and censorship, and it is certain to provoke further research.

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