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The Unsung Propagandists: Female Ascendancy in the Office of War Information and their Influence on the Development and Dissemination of World War II Propaganda

Dalia Bronisas Dooley

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Dr. Neil Weijer, George A. Smathers Libraries

Abstract

As the nation rallied its resources for wartime in 1942, the Office of War Information (OWI) assumed a pivotal role in disseminating information related to the war and aimed at mobilizing the American populace. Within the organizational framework of the OWI, a small cohort of pioneering women ascended to leadership positions, challenging prevailing gender norms and reconfiguring the narrative surrounding women's wartime engagement. Classified after the war's end, their records are now part of the 7,112 boxes that encompass the totality of the OWI's records, now housed in the National Archives. An exploration of the documents of these women, including correspondence, published work, and other internal records, paints the picture of their continuous participation and influence which resulted in some of the most visible domestic propaganda campaigns of the Second World War. Previous scholarship, while plentiful in the exploration of the domestic roles of women during the war, fails to acknowledge the directorship of these women in their efforts to rally national support for not just female recruitment, but other facets of wartime activity. Through an in-depth examination of archival materials collected from the OWI, this research seeks to contribute to a nuanced understanding of female contributions on the American home front.

Introduction

The historiography of World War II has extensively documented the multifaceted roles played by women during the conflict, shedding light on their contributions to the war effort on various fronts. Recent scholarship on these areas emphasizes women's service in domestic and auxiliary positions, with titles such as *On the Farm Front: The Women's Land Army in World War II, Eat for Victory: Food Politics and the Politics of Domesticity,* and *Valiant Women: The Extraordinary American Servicewomen Who Helped Win World War II,* to name a few (Carpenter, 2003; Bentley, 1998; Andrews, 2023.) This conventional understanding persists

when exploring the smaller facet of women pursuing or concluding their higher education during World War II. For example, Mary Weaks-Baxter's *We Are a College at War* which specifically studies the experiences of students at an all-female college in Illinois, limits its exploration to female roles "in skilled factory jobs and in the armed forces" where she then confines her approach to familiar areas of auxiliary service, domestic labor, and organization. "Rockford College women gave blood, took first aid courses, worked as nurses in community hospitals, cared for children in daycare centers provided for war workers, and prepared bandages, surgical dressings, and garments for use in field hospitals in war zones" (Weaks-Baxter, 2010, p. 91). Moreover, existing scholarship frequently overlooks the contributions of college-educated women holding prominent positions, including those within the American government. This scholarly gap presents an opportunity to enrich our current perspectives by delving into the substantial involvement of women in professional capacities beyond domestic spheres during World War II. Focusing on female engagement in governmental agencies, my research concentrates on the female directorship within the Office of War Information (OWI), where I transcend the depiction of women merely as recipients of propaganda and highlight their pivotal roles as directors of propaganda campaigns.

On June 13, 1942, six months after the U.S. entered World War II, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9182, creating the Office of War Information. The OWI was tasked with gathering information on a wide range of wartime activities, from civilian labor and domestic operations to military activities, and relaying that information as the official outlet for wartime propaganda. Its distribution channels included bureaus of graphics, magazines, film, and radio, responsible for broadcasting the information gathered to domestic and foreign audiences. In addition to the internal OWI departments, relationships with private advertising enterprises, movie production companies, and all branches of the American military allowed the OWI's messages to permeate every aspect of civilian culture.

Even though the OWI was new in name, both its concept and its messaging had recent precedents. During World War I, the Committee of Public Information had centralized information on the Allied war effort and its goals. Like those of its predecessor, the pieces produced by the OWI were noncontroversial in an attempt to reconcile the popular view of both the public and the government during the span of the war and elicit continuous support: whether physical, financial, or emotional. While the OWI's main efforts lay in mobilizing the resources

necessary to win the war, its campaigns also aimed at laying a solid foundation for American values in the post-war era. These values, it was hoped, could give rise to a "peaceful, democratic world, just as the Committee of Public Information had attempted to do just 25 years earlier" (Winkler, 1978, p.8). Indeed, messages pertaining to the postwar era were fraught and discouraged, and due to the conventional wartime messaging, the OWI's predominantly male leadership inherited these attitudes towards female service from World War I. However, a stark contrast to the norms exercised during World War I emerged as female workers in the OWI began to ascend to directorship positions.

In this paper, I will discuss two such women: Mary Keelor, who became the Program Manager for the Recruitment of Women in February of 1944; and Catherine Lanham, who earned her position as Program Manager for the Security of War Information Campaigns in late 1943. While both women obtained their directorships late into the war, I posit that the reasons behind the timing stem from an increase in female representation in almost all aspects of the labor force, as more men were drafted into military service. While the absence of men was more noticeable in factory positions and other blue-collar jobs which the draft favored, I suggest this absence was present in official bureaucracies as well. While the men in these roles may not have been called to active military service, per se, they were siphoned into new governmental positions which were created as the war progressed into its middle and final stages. The positions left by these senior male officials were filled by the small percentage of women who often served as subordinates prior to their promotion.

The backgrounds of these female directors are also shrouded in mystery– with only a few exceptions. Many of the women working in the OWI were young college graduates siphoned into the male-lacking workforce (Weatherford, 2010, p. 332). However, given the nature of the OWI records, the biographical files of the employees were not a significant priority of the Office. All of the information regarding the lives of these women comes via external sources.

Catherine Lanham attended Indiana University in Bloomington and graduated in 1938 with a bachelor's degree in music. Following her graduation, Lanham spent three years teaching in Evansville, Indiana, then moved to Washington D.C. where she held her position at the OWI from 1943 until July of 1945. Following her tenure, Lanham began writing for the advertising company Crowell-Collier's *The American Magazine* in 1946. She authorized pieces in numerous magazines including *Good Housekeeping, Harper's Bazaar, Ladies' Home Journal,* and *House*

Beautiful. Despite her prominence in the public sphere after her tenure at the OWI, Lanham stands apart from her female director counterparts in possessing a tangible and accessible biographical narrative, highlighting her exceptional individual history later in life which focused on issues of female empowerment and gender roles, as her involvement within the OWI appeared most prominently in her obituary. Mary Keelor's history, on the other hand, is an enigma. The historical record remains silent on the details of Mary Keelor's life before and after her tenure in the OWI. While we can only ponder why this absence exists, I suggest that the reasoning behind her non-appearance is connected to the nature of the position in the OWI, as her predecessor Ralph F. Witgraff is absent from both the OWI records and external sources as well.

The majority of the women employed by the OWI worked as secretaries, assistants, or in other positions with lesser significance as compared to directors. Their existence is only ascribed in the depths of the OWI archival documents via sticky notes from their desks or messages to their superiors regarding the date and time correspondence was delivered. These anonymous aspects illustrate yet another limitation of this archive and the records chosen to be kept following the dissolution of the OWI. This may explain these women's absence in scholarly research and the broader historical record.

Careless Talk Costs Lives: Catherine Lanham and Wartime Security

As an office of broader national concern, the Security of War Information Office was dedicated to educating American citizens about the necessity of discreet communication regarding war-related matters to prevent the dissemination of sensitive information to adversaries. Catherine Lanham's most notable achievement in this department, amidst her involvement in various campaigns, was her oversight of the *Careless Talk Costs Lives* initiative. This campaign aimed to highlight the risks associated with American citizens sharing sensitive wartime information, such as the whereabouts of soldiers and other crucial occupations during the war and emphasized the potential repercussions of such information falling into enemy hands. Lanham's leadership in this capacity provides a unique perspective on the portrayal of women's contributions within the OWI. Rather than focusing solely on female recruitment, Lanham directed a department with a broader national scope, addressing overarching national concerns.

Among the numerous materials published during *Careless Talk Costs Lives* was the booklet titled *Death Talks out of Turn*. The booklet served as a form of casual security training through the fictional story it retold following the vignette of a factory worker returning home. The piece was designed much like a children's book, with a shallow plot and a basic writing style, making it easy to understand for those laborers who lacked higher education.

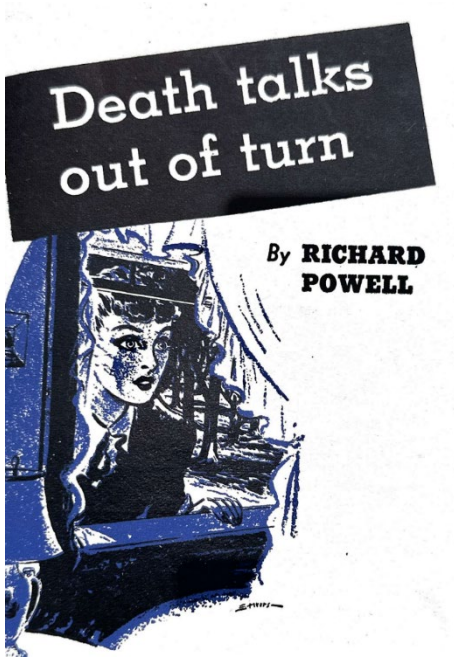

Figure 1. *Death Talks out of Turn* Booklet Cover,
The National Archives Series 208.

The booklet was given to "every departing worker" and explained "why he still has to remember security even if he is going back to Podunk" (*Death Talks Out of Turn*, The National Archives, Series 208, Box 59). Lanham's criticism of the rough draft of the booklet was the significant lack of text, which "leaves too much to the imagination." Particularly, Lanham adds the additional text:

> "1. Appeal to the reader's selfish motives– the patriotic approach will be a little old to [the worker], particularly if he's in a big hurry to get back to his old business. Perhaps a hint that his prestige in the old hometown will be considerably higher if he doesn't talk about what he's been doing– gives his government job an element of mystery, etc.
> 2. Appeal to his pride by suggesting that as a former government employee, he should set an example for the rest of the townspeople by not talking. If they hear him blabbing

about his former job, they will see no reason why they shouldn't talk about what little they know." (*Memorandum for Mr. Charles Ramsey from Catherine Lanham: November 19 1944.* The National Archives. Series 208, Box 59)

Lanham's critique underscored the importance of crafting a message that not only addresses innate human self-interest but also appeals to their sense of pride and duty as a representative of the government. Lanham's approach, deployed particularly during campaigns at the closure of the war, leaned on appealing to individual egotism. This individualistic approach exploited the deep-seated fear of responsibility inherent to human nature. This alternative method targeted American civilians who, while not stationed in war zones, were made to grapple with the unsettling notion that their dissemination of information within the homeland could potentially lead to the deaths of American soldiers abroad. This strategy was what made the *Careless Talk Costs Lives* campaign so successful– with Lanham at the forefront.

***Womanpower*: Mary Keelor and the Recruitment of Women**

In February of 1944, Mary Keelor took the place of Ralph F. Witgraff as the Program Manager for the Recruitment of Women, after having served as his assistant for a year. Keelor's advancement came at a time of shifting concerns among American women. As casualties mounted, it became both necessary to find more women to fill overseas service positions, and more likely that women would need to continue to work after the war's end. The approach of the Recruitment of Women Division changed as well, transitioning from campaigns focused on the availability of industrial jobs for women to the availability of military positions and job retention for women. The first campaign Keelor spearheaded was the *Womanpower* Campaign, which spanned from February 14th, 1944, to March 13th, 1944 with a total of 34 editorials published in newspapers, magazines, radio segments, and other ubiquitous forms of media (*Womanpower*, The National Archives, Series 208, Box. 587).

At the center of the messages of *Womanpower's* military-related campaigns was a message of urgency, as seen in the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) draft edited by Mary Keelor, "The first job and [redacted] recruiting message must do is sell women on the virtually urgent need for WAVES– a need which is more urgent today than any time since the war began… a patriotic need which can save hundreds of American lives" ("The Navy Must Send More WAVES", The National Archives, Box. 591).

Figure 2. WAVES Recruitment poster,
The National Archives Series 208.

The appeals illustrated by the pieces included "the fill[ing] of vital jobs, an exciting new experience, plenty of freedom, good pay and extras, valuable post-war training…" (*The Navy Must Send More WAVES*, Box 591).

The success of *Womanpower* remains ambiguous due to conflicting factors. While critiques highlight its indirect approach to combating familial social norms and its unbalanced strategy, letters of congratulations to Keelor regarding the campaign's success and a slight uptick in female military recruitment complicate the assessment. However, it's important to note that the potential failure shouldn't be attributed solely to Keelor herself; rather, it was largely influenced by deep-rooted fears and perceptions regarding female service, which originated from the First World War and the resulting prejudices. Common apprehensions included the belief that women in the armed forces would lead to the erosion of femininity and uncertainty about women's roles in the postwar labor system. While Keelor's office indirectly acknowledged these concerns, their approach was often passive, briefly mentioning them or redirecting attention to the urgent need for military recruitment.

In an attempt to address the first concern, Keelor states, "I think the answers should be expressed in more positive terms. For example, answer number 1 begins with the statement that "Women in Uniform need be no less feminine than before they enlisted." This is a defensive argument." (*Memorandum for Mr. Clifford Sutter from Mary Keelor*, August 1944,The National Archives, Box. 588). Rather than affirming the concerns of those opposing female enrollment in the military, Keelor found that empowerment and exaggeration of common aspects of femininity was a more effective way to quell the worries of the public. Aspects of published materials

targeting women, such as the fashion of auxiliary uniforms (both in America and abroad) the use of red lipstick, and the potential to earn additional money for shopping, all exemplified this new approach.

Figure 3. Magazine Advertisement for U.S. Cadet Nurse Recruitment, The National Archives Series 208.

Keelor further emphasizes, "What incentive is there to enlist when the statement suggests that 'life for women in uniform differs little from life for women out of uniform'? Firstly, this assertion is inaccurate. Secondly, even if it were accurate, it would be the responsibility of advertising to identify and capitalize on any discernible differences." (*Memorandum for Mr. Clifford Sutter from Mary Keelor*, The National Archives, Box. 588). Transitioning from advocating for female empowerment, Keelor offers a critique of potential misinformation within this specific campaign. Her critique underscores the crucial importance of presenting accurate information and crafting effective messaging in recruitment efforts. It highlights the necessity of addressing and promoting the genuine advantages and opportunities available to women in the military, without resorting to embellishment when criticism is unavoidable.

The *Womanpower* campaign was specifically designed to address pressing concerns related to workforce participation. One of its editorials, “Where Women are Needed Desperately,” featured a comprehensive Q&A section tackling immediate queries such as, “What

is a war job", "How many hours will I have to work", or "I don't need the money so what will my friends think" (The National Archives, Series 208, Box. 590, pp. 6-7). The manner in which these questions were approached exuded a strong nationalist sentiment, emphasizing vital wartime efforts over any potential societal reservations among female constituents. For example, the answer to "I'm married and my husband will object" read, "Not if he understands the dire need. Many married women can work and manage their household affairs too. Often the husband cooperates on household tasks— as a war measure!" ("Where Women are Needed Desperately", pp. 6-7). Although not outrightly challenging societal norms, the choice to highlight the husband's potential cooperation in household tasks as a wartime necessity aimed to mitigate male resistance rooted in the unconventional notion of female employment rather than solely being the caretaker of the home.

In addition to measuring direct recruitment, the OWI compiled critiques of *Womanpower* in order to monitor public concern regarding the campaign. These critiques centered around the prevailing concern of a potentially permanent female workforce following World War II, "While editorials on *Womanpower* are scarce, those that do exist express apprehension, with four times as many focusing on the fear that too many women would desire to retain their jobs post-war, rather than addressing the current imperative of mobilizing women for the war effort" (*Womanpower* Folder, The National Archives, Series 208, Box. 587). The perceived "apathy" of women towards war work was posited as a possible explanation for this discrepancy. Though cognizant of these concerns, Keelor's office continued to prioritize female recruitment over job retention strategies post-war but did not remove these elements from their messaging as seen in later publications.

In an effort to avert a recurrence of such outcomes and address these pressing concerns, the Conference of Post-War Employment convened on May 5th, 1944. In his address to the conference, "The Problem of the Postwar Employment of Women," Brigadier General Frank T. Hines unequivocally stated that "henceforth, women must be integral to all postwar employment plans, given their invaluable contributions in both the armed forces and factories" (OWI Records, Box 588). However, it was also acknowledged that returning male veterans would have precedence in reclaiming their former positions in the workforce, should they choose to do so.

This recognition of the unique challenges faced by both genders was echoed by the OWI's Women's Advisory Committee in their official statement, advocating for a

comprehensive post-war program. They proposed the implementation of experimental initiatives during the conversion period following troop demobilization. These initiatives attempted to ensure full employment for those currently in the workforce and the decommissioned troops returning home (Statement from the Women's Advisory Committee of Post-War Employment and Cutbacks, The National Archives, Box 589). The ultimate result of these efforts is seen in Table 1:

Table 1. Employed Women in U.S. Labor Positions

Year	Women Workers as a percentage of all workers	Women workers as a percentage of all women
1940	25%	29%
1945	36%	38%
1947	28%	32%
1950	29%	34%

U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 1969 *Handbook on Women Workers* (1969), p. 10; and U.S. Department of Labor, *Manpower Report of the President* (1973), p. 129.

Though there was a marked decline immediately after the war which was caused by the reconversion and the return of veterans (which was inevitable to a degree), "the numbers of women in the economy resumed their upward march" even though this march did not meet the precipice that was present at the peak of World War II (Sinclair, 1983, p. 298). Despite the challenges posed by the post-war economic restructuring and the reintegration of male soldiers into the workforce, women persisted in their pursuit of economic participation. The resilience of women in the face of these obstacles highlights their determination and underscores the gradual but steady progress towards gender equality in the labor market, exemplified by the postwar career of Catherine Lanham herself. While the pace may not have matched the extraordinary surge witnessed during wartime, the ongoing increase in female workforce participation signals a significant shift in societal norms and opportunities for women in the post-war era. Furthermore, Lanham's career trajectory exemplifies these evolving roles and opportunities. Beyond her significant contributions within the OWI, Lanham leveraged her platform to amplify her voice and advocate for female empowerment. Through her book, *How to Say Yes to Life: A Woman's Guide to Beating the Blahs,* and various magazine pieces which she authored, she challenged societal norms and stereotypes of what a woman's role was in the postwar labor environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research sheds light on the understudied role of female directorship in the Office of War Information. My exploration of archival materials, including correspondence, published work, and internal records, details the continuous and influential participation of these women, whose work challenged gender norms and contributed to some of the most renowned domestic propaganda campaigns during World War II. I address a notable gap in the existing literature that often focuses on women's contributions in specific roles, such as factory work or military service, but neglects the examination of women in professional settings, especially high governmental offices.

The establishment of the OWI in 1942 marked a significant development in the history of wartime propaganda, building on the experiences of the Committee on Public Information during World War I. The directors of various offices within the OWI, predominantly men, played crucial roles in shaping the narrative of the war for both domestic and international audiences. I focus on two female directors, Catherine Lanham and Mary Keelor, who assumed leadership positions in the OWI during the final years of the war. These women used their positions as avenues not just for aiding the war effort, but also for fostering enduring transformations in societal perceptions of women and their abilities. Lanham's oversight of the Security of War Information Department, particularly her role in the *Careless Talk Costs Lives* campaign, demonstrated a strategic approach to propaganda that appealed to individual self-interest and a sense of duty. Keelor, as the Program Manager for the Recruitment of Women, spearheaded campaigns like *Womanpower* and played a crucial role in recruiting women into various branches of the armed forces. The *Womanpower* campaign, while successful in recruiting women for wartime jobs, faced scrutiny for not adequately addressing concerns about the potential impact on femininity and the uncertain post-war labor landscape. In examining the recruitment efforts for women into the military, my research emphasizes Mary Keelor's strategic approach to countering public apprehensions. By focusing on positive aspects of femininity and empowerment, Keelor sought to dispel fears and encourage women to actively participate in the war effort.

Lanham and Keelor’s experiences as women and as propagandists could explain why they did not treat their positions in the OWI as a temporary aberration as exemplified by their records. Their dual roles meant that they were not only tasked with conveying information in

accordance with their statistics but also with shaping public perception and morale during the Second World War, all while operating in a male-dominated field. Their gender influenced both the content and tone of their propaganda efforts, as they would have understood the unique challenges faced by women during wartime and sought to address them in their messaging, whether directly or indirectly. As such, Lanham and Keelor likely viewed their positions within the OWI not only as a means to contribute to the war effort but also as opportunities to effect lasting change in societal attitudes towards women and their capabilities.

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