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Manning, S. (2018). Television and the Decline of Cinema-Going in Northern Ireland, 1953–1963. *Media History*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2018.1446129>

**Published in:**  
Media History

**Document Version:**  
Peer reviewed version

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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# TELEVISION AND THE DECLINE OF CINEMA-GOING IN POST-WAR NORTHERN IRELAND, 1953–1963

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## **Abstract**

This article assesses the impact of television ownership on cinema attendance in post-war Northern Ireland. It downplays a monocausal relationship between cinema and television, and emphasises the range of social, economic and political factors that led to cinema closures. While the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II acted as a catalyst for television ownership, it did not fundamentally alter patterns of cinema attendance. This research counters claims that cinema exhibitors were unresponsive to population shifts and examines the relatively large number of cinemas that opened in Northern Ireland in the 1950s. It then examines the impact of commercial television and documents the reasons for cinema closures in Northern Ireland's two largest cities: Belfast and Derry.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Sean O'Connell, Stuart Hanson, Mark Benson and Conor Campbell for their comments and suggestions on drafts of this article. I am very grateful to Lorraine Barry, who generously created the map of Northern Ireland included in this work.

## **Keywords**

cinema, cinema-going, television, Northern Ireland, Belfast, Derry

## **Introduction**

Following the Second World War, cinema-going was the most popular form of commercial entertainment and UK cinema attendance peaked in 1946 with 1.6 billion admissions.<sup>1</sup> As post-war austerity gave way to increased affluence and a burgeoning consumer society, the composition of cinema audiences and the nature of cinema attendance changed. During the 1950s, rising incomes, population shifts, the growth of television, new forms of youth culture and a greater range of leisure activities all contributed to a rapid decline in cinema attendance. By 1963, UK cinema admissions fell to 367 million.<sup>2</sup> Cinema closures followed and these were

more likely in areas where television was more firmly established. It is difficult to argue with Joe Moran's assertion that cinemas 'began seriously to decline in the late 1950s as their mainly working-class audiences acquired TVs on a large scale'.<sup>3</sup> However, the causes of cinema's decline have provided a source of debate for social scientists and historians. In 1962, economist John Spraos cited the closure of neighbourhood cinemas, increased travel distances, less frequent public transport and higher admission prices as key factors.<sup>4</sup> Historians have subsequently followed this lead, avoiding monocausal explanations and placing greater emphasis on the changing nature of consumer capitalism and the arrival of the 'affluent society'.<sup>5</sup> Barry Doyle, furthermore, used Board of Trade statistics to show how regional variations in the introduction of television, alongside the size, age and location of existing cinemas, impacted the geography of cinema's decline in Great Britain.<sup>6</sup>

One flaw of these assessments is that they exclude Northern Ireland from their analysis, partly since records of cinema attendance were collected separately from the rest of the UK. This article fills this lacuna and investigates the impact of television ownership on cinema attendance in Northern Ireland from the introduction of BBC television in 1953 to the opening of UTV's Strabane transmitter in 1963. Though Northern Ireland's population of 1.4 million was relatively small, this article offers further evidence of the geographical diversity of UK cinema attendance and builds on the work of historians who show the place-specific nature of cinema attendance.<sup>7</sup> It also bridges the gap between British and Irish studies of cinema-going and complements Kevin Rockett's existing work on film exhibition and distribution in Ireland.<sup>8</sup> Northern Ireland's lower wages and higher unemployment delayed the diffusion of television ownership, which was consistently lower than other regions in England, Scotland and Wales. This meant that cinema attendance remained strong until the mid-1950s. The evidence presented here suggests that independent exhibitors in Northern Ireland were more responsive to population shifts than their UK counterparts, constructing several new cinemas. This did not, however, prevent long-term declines in cinema attendance and the number of cinemas in Northern Ireland fell from 130 in 1958 to 107 in 1963.<sup>9</sup> While many Irish households received British television signal, Irish television (RTÉ) did not broadcast until 1961.<sup>10</sup> This was one of the reasons why cinema attendance declined later in the Irish Republic, where it peaked in 1954 with 54.1 million recorded admissions and fell to 30 million by 1965.<sup>11</sup>

Rex Cathcart and Robert Savage have traced the development of television services in Northern Ireland.<sup>12</sup> These accounts, however, do not consider television's impact on alternative leisure activities. In a previous article, I assessed how local geography, changes in the life cycle and the closure of cinemas influenced cinema-going practices in a working-class Belfast

community.<sup>13</sup> While this included a discussion of the relative impact of BBC and ITV, the present article expands on these findings, places them in a broader geographical context and introduces evidence from across the region. Records of Entertainments Duty kept by the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance detail alterations in tax rates and contain the dutiable admissions for the majority of Northern Ireland cinemas, which provide a valuable insight into cinema attendance and audience habits.<sup>14</sup> While previous accounts have been overly reliant on statistical data, this article also uses a broad range of qualitative sources, such as local newspapers, trade journals and oral history testimony.<sup>15</sup> It follows the multi-method approach adopted by a group of Belgian cinema historians, who advocated the use of ethnographic methods alongside records of film programming and exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

### **The introduction of television and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II**

The BBC television service opened in 1936, broadcasting to a limited audience in London and the Home Counties. The service was suspended in 1939, but after reopening in 1946, gradually spread throughout the UK regions. From 1948 to 1953, UK cinema admissions fell 15.2 per cent from 1.51 billion to 1.28 million.<sup>17</sup> In the same period, Northern Ireland admissions fell by 13.97 per cent from 32.98 million to 28.37 million.<sup>18</sup> From May 1953, the temporary Glencairn transmitter relayed the BBC signal from Scotland's Kirk O'Shotts transmitter to Belfast and the surrounding area.<sup>19</sup> On 2 June 1953, over twenty million UK viewers watched the television broadcast of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and it is rightly cited as a catalyst for increased television ownership. The number of UK television licences increased by 51.6 per cent from 2.14 million in March 1953 to 3.25 million in March 1954.<sup>20</sup> In Northern Ireland, the number of television licences increased dramatically from an extremely low base of 558 in 1953 to 10,353 in 1954.<sup>21</sup> Given the limited range of the television signal, 97.7 per cent of these licences were held in Antrim or Down.<sup>22</sup>

Television sets were beyond the means of many working-class households and, in their 1954 survey of Belfast estates built by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust, Field and Neill found that only nine of 363 families had one in their home.<sup>23</sup> This meant that television footage of the coronation was experienced largely as a communal event. Approximately 20,000 Belfast residents watched television footage of the ceremony in private homes or public spaces.<sup>24</sup> Oral history interviews recorded with Belfast residents reveal that memories of the coronation were often linked to the absence of television in households and early experiences of television were

often shared with friends and relatives. Jean McVeigh was born in 1943 raised in a Roman Catholic Belfast household. Her house was so busy that she was sent to the local cinema:

It was the only TV set in the entire city of Belfast apart from the one in the shop window up the street. And our house was absolutely packed with people to watch the coronation. So, my mother wanted rid of at least three of us and she gave me a shilling to take my brother Brendan and my younger brother David to the Broadway.<sup>25</sup>

The coronation was experienced often as both a televisual and a cinematic event. David McIlwaine visited friends in the seaside resort of Bangor, County Down, where he watched the ceremony. He recalled that ‘it was really wonderful in 1953 to be able to see the coronation in black and white and on wee small screens. But, you could say, you could brag, I saw it on TV. And then you saw it in the cinema perhaps a week later’.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the communal nature of television broadcasts, low levels of television ownership meant that, alongside radio, press reports and local street parties, cinema screenings were central to coronation experiences. Cinemas went to great lengths to obtain and promote newsreels and full-length feature films of the coronation and it is likely that this footage was viewed by more residents than the television coverage. In Belfast, on the evening of the coronation, the managers of the Crumlin and the Gaumont drove ‘to Nutt’s Corner [airfield] to pick up the shots of scenes along the Coronation route for exhibition to their patrons at 10-30 o’clock the same night’. On 3 June, further sequences were ‘flown over by special plane’ and exhibited for the remainder of the week at both cinemas.<sup>27</sup> The Belfast Corporation considered the event so important that they arranged for 25,000 schoolchildren to view the coronation footage.<sup>28</sup> Matinees were organised at several cinemas and one report stated that the 2,000 children in attendance at the Royal Hippodrome ‘cheered to the echo’.<sup>29</sup>

In 1953, the full-length Technicolor feature *A Queen is Crowned* (UK, 1953) was the highest grossing film at the British box-office.<sup>30</sup> It broke the attendance record at Belfast’s Imperial cinema when it was screened nine times daily for five weeks.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the film was so popular in a centrally located cinema indicates that it appealed to patrons from both sides of the community. While the film clearly appealed to Unionist sentiment, the pageantry and spectacle of the occasion was also central to its attraction. As one *Belfast Telegraph* reviewer commented, ‘Hollywood at its brightest and best has never produced anything as colossal’.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, its exhibition was controversial in other towns and bombs were

planted to prevent screenings. On 15 June, a bomb destroyed the balcony of Newry's Savoy cinema.<sup>33</sup> While the cinema was repaired for the showing of *A Queen is Crowned*, the *Northern Whig* reported that '[p]olice were on duty outside and inside other police in civilian clothing mingled with the audience'.<sup>34</sup> In July, a further explosion at the Banbridge Picture House did not prevent it screening the film.<sup>35</sup> *A Queen is Crowned* was far more successful than ABC's rival film *Elizabeth is Queen* (UK, 1953) and shorter films such as Movietone's twenty-minute feature *Coronation Day* (UK, 1953). Despite this, the *Northern Whig* reported that patrons were 'in no mood to discriminate' between films, adding that 'anyone who finds the queue too long at one cinema makes his way to another'.<sup>36</sup> Screenings of these films were also combined with stage shows to enhance the spectacle of the event. ABC's in-house magazine reported that a stage show presented at the Belfast Ritz to accompany *Elizabeth is Queen* 'was the most successful they have ever run'.<sup>37</sup>

Cinemas in Northern Ireland also provided footage for those living in the Republic of Ireland, who had no access to television. Following threats from Sinn Féin and the Irish Anti-Partition League, no Dublin cinemas exhibited footage of the coronation. The *Cork Examiner* stated that there was 'a genuine interest among thousands of ordinary people who profess no allegiance to the Crown'.<sup>38</sup> Many Dubliners, therefore, took advantage of the Great Northern Railway's special fares and travelled from Dublin to Belfast to view Coronation films. On 10 June, 400 passengers boarded the early train from Dublin to Belfast. So many people turned up at the train station, that an extra train left fifteen minutes later, carrying a further 500 passengers.<sup>39</sup> One Belfast cinema manager claimed that he had received 3,000 letters and anticipated that 30,000 of the 50,000 patrons who would see the film in its first week would travel from the Irish Republic. 'They are falling over themselves to come here', he claimed.<sup>40</sup> This figure was likely an exaggeration and the manager of a large Belfast cinema claimed that he received around 1,000 patrons from across the border. The manager of a smaller cinema stated that 'we probably had about 300 Southerners here during the week. We had expected a great many more'.<sup>41</sup>

While the coronation led to increased sales of television sets, it did little to fundamentally alter patterns of cinema attendance in Northern Ireland. Recorded admissions even increased slightly from 28.37 million in 1953 to 28.84 million in 1954, which may have been a direct result of the popularity of coronation films.<sup>42</sup> Viewers may also have been perturbed by the lack of regional programming and Robert Savage states that when 'when television arrived in Northern Ireland, it was primarily a relay station, transmitting programmes from London with very little home-produced material'.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, the impact of increased

television ownership was generational. In October 1952, one local resident told the *Belfast Telegraph*:

I want to meet someone who will let me “look-in” on Coronation Day. Eventually I hope my home will have T.V. but as a young person and a cinema fan I do not think it will keep people from the pictures. It will be very nice to see shows at home but getting out and meeting friends has more attractions.<sup>44</sup>

For adolescents, the cinema still held an important social function, such as a space for courtship free from parental supervision. Meanwhile, John Spraos suggested that convenience of home entertainment, the absence of repeat viewing costs and the diversion of household funds for rental and hire purchase agreements led homeowners away from the cinema, who were happier to spend their leisure time in a domestic setting.<sup>45</sup>

### **New Cinemas in Northern Ireland**

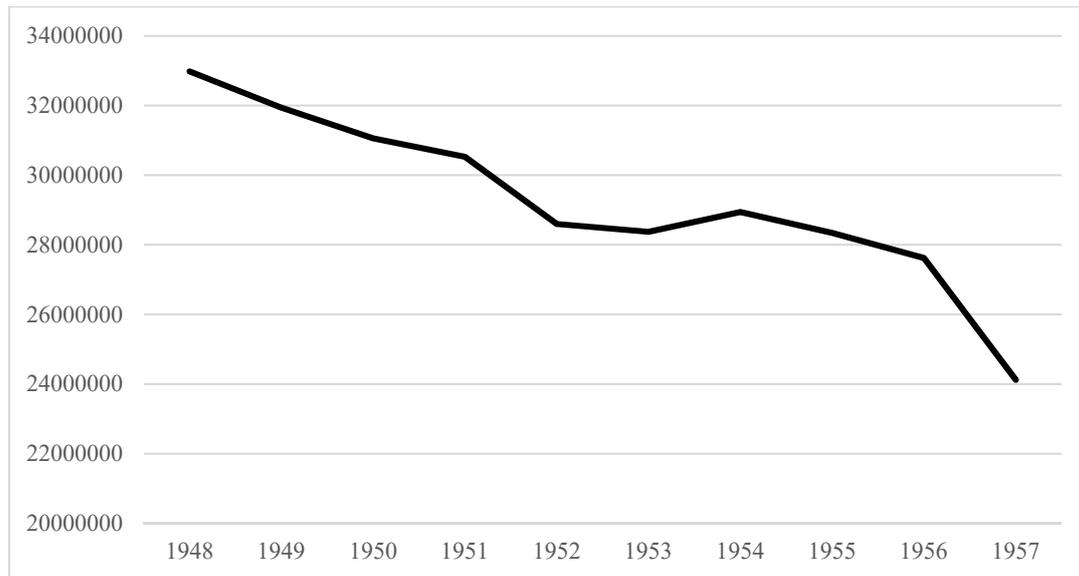
While cinema attendance increased throughout the Second World War, building restrictions prevented the construction of new cinemas.<sup>46</sup> Though these restrictions were lifted in the mid-1950s, few cinemas were built as cinema attendance entered steep decline. The *Kinematograph Year Book* records that only 39 new UK cinemas opened between 1955 and 1958.<sup>47</sup> Given this low rate of cinema construction, it is remarkable that, in the same period, eight new cinemas opened in Northern Ireland. These were all located in Antrim and Down, the counties with the greatest levels of television ownership. Docherty *et al* noted that ‘[i]nstead of re-siting the cinemas and following the audience to the new housing estates, the film industry struck back at the technological level’.<sup>48</sup> Cinema exhibitors responded to declining attendances by asserting their technical superiority over television with new technologies such as 3D, CinemaScope, Todd-AO and VistaVision. In Northern Ireland, independent exhibitors were more responsive to population shifts than their counterparts in Great Britain, opening new cinemas in areas with the greatest levels of television ownership. They could not, however, push back the tide of long-term decline and admissions fell significantly from the late 1950s.



**Figure 1: New cinemas in Northern Ireland, 1955–1960.**

From 1953 to 1957, UK cinema admissions fell by 28.75 per cent from 1,285 billion to 915 million.<sup>49</sup> Despite the introduction of BBC television in Northern Ireland, the decline was less precipitous and recorded admissions fell by 14.98 per cent from 28.37 million in 1953 to 24.12 million in 1957 (see figure 2).<sup>50</sup> It was not until July 1955 that the erection of the permanent Divis transmitter brought television signal to over two-thirds of Northern Ireland's population. Figure 3 shows that residents of Armagh, Fermanagh and Tyrone only obtained television sets in significant numbers from 1956 onwards. The majority of licences were still held in Antrim and Down, and, in December 1956, the *Belfast Telegraph* stated that 42,000 of Northern Ireland's 51,000 television licences were 'in the area of greater Belfast'.<sup>51</sup> In December 1957, the opening of BBC's Sheriff's Mountain transmitter brought television coverage to 96 per cent of the population, including residents in Derry, Strabane, Newtownstewart, Dungiven and Limavady. By 1960, there were 142,789 licences in Northern Ireland and this figure increased to 206,000 in 1963.<sup>52</sup> These figures, however, should be treated with caution as there were a significant number of television owners who did not purchase television licences. In 1959, the *Belfast Telegraph* suggested that Northern Ireland had the highest proportion of unlicensed viewers in the UK and Media research company

Television Audience Measurement estimated that as many as 23,000 television sets in Northern Ireland remained unlicensed.<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 2:** Recorded admissions in Northern Ireland cinemas, 1948–57.

Source: Reduction in rate of Entertainments Duty, 9 June 1958, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/A/12, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.

| <b>Year ending 31 March</b> | <b>Antrim and Down</b> | <b>Armagh</b> | <b>Fermanagh and Tyrone</b> | <b>Londonderry</b> | <b>Northern Ireland</b> |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 1954                        | 10,113                 | 43            | 60                          | 137                | 10,353                  |
| 1955                        | 23,535                 | 34            | 68                          | 171                | 23,808                  |
| 1956                        | 38,953                 | 1,486         | 827                         | 940                | 42,206                  |
| 1957                        | 56,198                 | 3,343         | 1,729                       | 2,078              | 63,348                  |
| 1958                        | 72,187                 | 5,075         | 3,226                       | 5,002              | 85,490                  |
| 1959                        | 86,094                 | 6,896         | 5,092                       | 8,506              | 106,588                 |
| 1960                        | 112,231                | 9,933         | 7,911                       | 12,705             | 142,780                 |

**Figure 3:** Television licences in Northern Ireland, 1954–60.

Source: British Broadcasting Corporation, *BBC Handbook*. London: BBC, 1955–61.

In post-war Belfast, slum clearance, new housing developments and employment changes resulted in centrifugal population shifts. Between 1951 and 1961, the population of Belfast County Borough fell by 6.3 per cent from 443,671 to 415,856. In the same period, the population of County Antrim increased by 18.5 per cent from 231,149 to 273,905, and the population of County Down increased by 10.7 per cent from 241,181 to 266,939.<sup>54</sup> These post-war shifts, alongside relaxations on building restrictions, led to the construction of new cinemas to serve Belfast's suburban housing developments and satellite towns in Antrim and Down. In March 1955, the 1,050-seat Lido was the first cinema opened in post-war Northern Ireland. Its north Belfast location was near to many of the new housing developments built by the Northern

Ireland Housing Executive. At its opening, former Lord Mayor Sir James Norritt stated that it ‘filled a long felt want in that growing district of the city’.<sup>55</sup> In June 1955, the Tivoli, Finaghy, opened to serve the expanding suburbs of south Belfast. During its construction, Rank subsidiary company Odeon (N.I.) purchased the cinema from Irish Theatres. Despite efforts to construct a new Belfast city centre cinema, it was the only new cinema that the Rank Organisation opened in the period under review.

In December 1955, the 925-seat Iveagh cinema opened in Banbridge, County Down, with the capacity to screen CinemaScope and VistaVision films. The *Banbridge Chronicle* commented that its out-of-town location meant that it had the ‘advantage of being built on a site which has a car park for about 100 cars’.<sup>56</sup> Cinema owner Derek Finney reassured patrons that ‘the actual distance from town is not so great. It is only 400 yards from Bridge Street and about 450 yards from Church Square. I think most patrons will find it convenient’. He added that it was ‘a great advance’ on the existing Banbridge Picture House, ‘which has more than served its day’.<sup>57</sup> Despite this statement, plans were announced to renovate the old cinema and introduce CinemaScope. Admissions at the Banbridge Picture House fell from 273,581 in 1952–3 to 76,495 in 1956–7.<sup>58</sup> In the latter year, admissions at the Iveagh totalled 288,123 and attendance figures at both cinemas totalled 364,618, demonstrating the extra demand for cinema seats in Banbridge.<sup>59</sup>

In September 1956, the Belfast-based Supreme Group opened two new cinemas in Northern Ireland. The 1,000-seat New Reo in Ballyclare, County Antrim, replaced the town’s existing cinema and its owner stated that ‘he hoped to serve a population of almost 10,000 in the Ballyclare area’.<sup>60</sup> The 1,000-seat Metro, Dundonald, was located just outside the Belfast city boundary. Its owner, T. J. Furey, claimed that while the competition of television and high levels of Entertainments Duty made the Metro a ‘calculated risk’, it ‘had long been needed at Dundonald’.<sup>61</sup> At its opening, Secretary to the Northern Ireland cabinet Sir Robert Grandson hoped that the people of this rapidly growing district... would appreciate what efforts were being made to bring the best in cinema entertainment their way’.<sup>62</sup> The Metro lasted only until March 1961, when the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that the building was available to let. It claimed that ‘[f]or two years after its opening the Metro attracted large crowds. But in 1958, when the general fall-off in picture-going began, it also felt the effect’.<sup>63</sup>

Rathcoole was one of the post-war housing estates constructed by the Northern Ireland Housing Trust. In 1955, one resident lamented that ‘the estate empties at nine o’clock on Saturday morning and it’s that way till late at night—all the entertainment’s in Belfast’.<sup>64</sup>

Cinema exhibitors saw this demand on the new estate and the 918-seat Alpha opened in April 1957. *Kine Weekly* reported that the Alpha ‘is in the middle of a new housing estate with a present population of about 6,000. The area has a potential population of 10,000 to 12,000’.<sup>65</sup> The Alpha’s facilities reflected its increasingly younger audience’s diverse range of leisure activities. It contained a ground floor café and, in October 1959 it opened the first milk bar in a Northern Ireland cinema.<sup>66</sup>

In December 1957, the 400-seat Comber cinema was ‘built on a site adjacent to the Comber Picture House... to augment the facilities of the older cinema’. Its owners hoped to draw patrons ‘from the new housing areas on the south-east side of Belfast, four miles away’.<sup>67</sup> Noel Spence grew up in Comber and commented that while ‘the new cinema was very classy’, the decision ‘to build a new cinema in fifty-seven was kind of an act of faith with TV becoming a real menace - but they did it anyhow and for many years Comber cinema was very successful and very popular locally’.<sup>68</sup> *Kine Weekly* commented that many of the new cinemas were developed close to new housing estates and believed that independent exhibitors had greater freedom to expand their operations as ‘the big circuits are tied closely to plans which must take into account the health of the industry in the United Kingdom as a whole’.<sup>69</sup> ABC and Rank opened relatively few new UK cinemas, even in areas of high population growth, and focused their efforts on modernising existing city centre sites.<sup>70</sup>

In July 1958, the £27,000 New Antrim Cinema was the final new cinema building opened in the 1950s. *Kine Weekly* commented that the ‘town of Antrim has grown appreciably in recent years and the directors are confident that despite the competition of television the venture will prove a success’.<sup>71</sup> Other cinemas renovated their premises and altered their programmes to compete with television. In December 1958, Belfast’s Mayfair cinema reopened as Ireland’s first news and cartoon cinema. Its owners stated that ‘[it] is one type of cinema which to-day is successfully competing against television. It offers something which can’t be got on TV – coloured cartoon and coloured travelogues. The latter are becoming very popular’.<sup>72</sup>

### **The decline of cinema-going**

Despite their investment in new cinemas, Northern Ireland exhibitors could not push back the tide of long-term declines in attendance. In September 1955, commercial television arrived in the London region with the launch of ITV. Regional franchises were then established across the United Kingdom. Prior to UTV’s 1959 launch, a small minority of Northern Ireland viewers received signal from ITV’s Winter Hill transmitter in Lancashire and, in 1956, reporter Robert

Ray attended a ‘commercial TV party’ in Belfast’s working-class Ardoyne district.<sup>73</sup> In 1956, *Kine Weekly* observed that while declines in cinema attendance were less than severe than in other UK regions, ‘the sales figure of TV sets in Belfast is nearly 40,000—equivalent to the seating capacity in the city’s cinemas’.<sup>74</sup> In Northern Ireland, the number of recorded admissions fell significantly from 1957, though this was as much to do with tax concessions for cheaper tickets as it was for actual declines in attendance.<sup>75</sup> There is no doubt, however, that audiences fell from the late 1950s as working-class families obtained television sets, often using rental and hire purchase.

To what extent was there a direct causal relationship between the increase in television ownership and cinema closures? The number of television licences in Northern Ireland increased from 42,206 in 1956 to 142,780 in 1960, when there were 33 licences per 100 families.<sup>76</sup> While this was still significantly lower than the equivalent figures for England, Scotland and Wales (see figure 4), cinemas still closed from 1956 onwards. According to figures in the *Kinematoagraph Year Book*, the number of cinemas in Northern Ireland increased from 120 in 1950 to 130 in 1958.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, from 1950 to 1959, the number of cinemas in Wales declined from 348 to 299, and in Scotland, from 600 to 464.<sup>78</sup> In Northern Ireland, high taxation, population shifts, dilapidated buildings, rising fixed costs, new housing developments and the possibility of converting cinema buildings for more profitable usage were all cited as reasons for cinema closures. After Belfast’s Gaiety cinema ceased business in 1956, the *Irish Independent* claimed that it was ‘the North’s first casualty in the cinema versus television war’.<sup>79</sup> Despite this claim, it was only at the end of the 1950s that television was seen as the central threat to cinema attendance in Northern Ireland. By 1958, the increasing competition of television, the continuation of Entertainments Duty and recent increases in valuation rates meant that Northern Ireland exhibitors were ‘looking to the future with only cautious optimism’.<sup>80</sup> *Belfast Telegraph* reporter Gordon Duffield claimed that the Belfast cinema industry was fighting for its life. While he highlighted television as cinema’s ‘great enemy’, Duffield believed that Entertainments Duty placed an unfair burden on cinema exhibitors. He added that ‘[r]unning costs and overheads have increased from anything from 200 to 400 per cent. since the war—yet cinema prices have gone up only a fraction of that figure’.<sup>81</sup>

| Year ending<br>31 March | England | Northern<br>Ireland | Scotland | Wales | United<br>Kingdom |
|-------------------------|---------|---------------------|----------|-------|-------------------|
| 1957                    | 46.16   | 14.56               | 31.52    | 38.7  | 43.53             |
| 1958                    | 52.8    | 19.63               | 39.51    | 46.24 | 50.31             |
| 1959                    | 60.64   | 24.4                | 49.25    | 54.98 | 57.31             |
| 1960                    | 67.57   | 32.55               | 58.97    | 62.86 | 64.45             |

**Figure 4:** Percentage of families owning television licences, 1957–60.

Source: British Broadcasting Corporation, *BBC Handbook*. London: BBC, 1958–61.

Ulster Television (UTV) launched on 31 October 1959 and its Black Mountain transmitter served over 80 per cent of Northern Ireland’s population.<sup>82</sup> The introduction of UTV was a key turning point in the decline of cinema-going in Northern Ireland. Newspaper reports suggested that ‘attendances dropped 20 per cent. in the first months of UTV’ and from 1959 to 1960, Entertainments Duty payments from cinema tickets fell by 29.8 per cent.<sup>83</sup> UTV offered new programme formats aimed primarily at working-class audiences. Robert Savage notes that, in its early years, UTV produced few programmes made in Northern Ireland and relied heavily on American and British imports.<sup>84</sup> In 1961, the headmaster of Knockbreda Secondary Intermediate School claimed that 6 out of 10 schoolchildren preferred television to the cinema, and 8 out of 10 preferred UTV to BBC programmes. Westerns, quizzes and children’s programmes were particularly popular and one child stated that ‘BBC programmes are for the older people and UTV for the younger people’.<sup>85</sup> Viewing figures confirm the popularity of UTV and, in the week ending 25 November 1962, the most viewed television programme was ITV game show *Take Your Pick*, which was watched in 83 per cent of homes. In contrast, American western *Bronco* was the most popular BBC programme, which was viewed in 59 per cent of homes.<sup>86</sup>

UTV’s impact was felt most in Belfast, where twelve cinemas closed from October 1959 to the end of 1962. The majority of these were inner-city and suburban cinemas, and from 1960 reports of cinema closures tended to place greater emphasis on the impact of television. When the West End Picture House closed, a representative stated that it could not ‘compete any more with television and the growth of motoring and outside sport... People’s habits are changing, and a night out at the cinema doesn’t mean the same as it did. Independent owners haven’t a chance today’.<sup>87</sup> In 1960, *Kine Weekly* commented that there was a ‘growing demand for more showmanship in Northern Ireland cinemas’, adding that exhibitors ‘seem still to be hesitant to “go out and get” their patrons’.<sup>88</sup> It believed that except for *Hercules Unchained* (Italy, 1958), Northern Ireland exhibitors had not made the most of television promotion. In 1961, it stated that as sixty per cent of the UTV audience was within Belfast ‘a campaign

mounted even by a cinema itself could be directly beneficial'.<sup>89</sup> Cinemas did, nonetheless, benefit from UTV programing. *Preview*, its entertainment magazine show, featured clips of newly released films and was one of Northern Ireland's most watched programmes in 1962.<sup>90</sup>

In Derry, the delayed arrival of BBC television was one of the reasons cinema attendance remained buoyant in the mid-1950s. Figure 5 shows that recorded admissions rose slightly from 2.03 million in 1953 to 2.16 million in 1957. Following test transmissions from the BBC's Sheriff's Mountain transmitter, the *Londonderry Sentinel* reported that 'almost at once, there was a rush for television sets, which one firm sold at a three-figure rate per week'.<sup>91</sup> Television ownership subsequently increased and licences in County Londonderry rose from 2,078 in 1957 to 12,705 in 1960.<sup>92</sup> Large British exhibitors responded to the competition of television by improving and modernising their existing cinemas. In 1960, Associated British Cinemas rebuilt the Rialto as the ABC. *Kine Weekly* commented that, while it was the first cinema built since the introduction of UTV, the lack of signal [in Derry] meant that it was 'unlikely to be affected as much by the growth of television as most other cinemas in the Province'.<sup>93</sup> Cinema manager F. Hyland told the press that:

we have got to compete with the armchair comfort of television in the home, but it has been found that with the provision of good programmes and a high standard of comfort, the cinema has something that the public will still want to go to the cinema. That is the trend across the water.<sup>94</sup>

| <b>Cinema</b>     | <b>1953</b>      | <b>1957</b>      |
|-------------------|------------------|------------------|
| City              | 316,920          | 418,018          |
| St. Columb's Hall | 251,295          | 266,729          |
| Midland           | 209,749          | 211,339          |
| Palace            | 428,142          | 423,903          |
| Rialto            | 348,225          | 359,583          |
| Strand            | 474,355          | 484,540          |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>2,028,686</b> | <b>2,164,112</b> |

**Figure 5:** Dutiable admissions at Derry cinemas, years ending March 1953 and 1957.

Source: Entertainments Duty weekly returns, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/C/2/85-90, 132-137, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.

By 1960, *Belfast Telegraph* reporter Martin Wallace reported that Ulster cinemas were 'feeling the cold wind of change. Close to a dozen have closed in recent years, and others will follow'. Belfast's suburban cinemas were hardest hit and Wallace stated that while 'a visit to the city centre is still a "night out"—a visit to the local cinema is not. It is the old,

uncomfortable, cheaper cinemas which have mostly closed'.<sup>95</sup> Suburban cinemas responded to a lack of new films by diversifying their programmes and introducing stage shows. From 1960 to 1961, Belfast's Troxy cinema hosted 'international wrestling' with 'stars of TV, a talent competition presented by comedian Frank Carson and a Christmas pantomime of *Little Red Riding Hood*. It also resorted to nudist films and, in October 1962, *Kine Weekly* claimed that it was 'instrumental in introducing nudist films to the Ulster public'. It added that, although *West End Jungle* (UK, 1961) was playing at the Troxy, 'the Belfast public is no longer as easily led by an X certificate or by a nudist poster, and some observers say that the demand for sensational films, particularly of the nude variety, is already on the wane'.<sup>96</sup>

There were generational differences in the decline of cinema attendance and Wallace argued that 'cinemas can still count on a young audience, particularly as teenagers have more money in their pockets. But this is not the basis of a large and profitable industry'.<sup>97</sup> Norman Campbell's testimony also shows these generational differences. He stated that television ownership 'didn't affect my personal cinema attendance too much. But on reflection, I think it affected the cinema attendance for mothers and fathers, because it was now possible to sit in at night'.<sup>98</sup> Margaret McDonough's testimony also shows the contrast between experiences of television and cinema:

you went to the cinema to get out and to be with friends or to be with a boyfriend or something. When television came, when we got television first of all it was just BBC. And then, then ITV came, but for a long time it was just two channels and if you'd been in with your parents, there's a lot of people, there might have been six of you in the room watching television.<sup>99</sup>

By the early 1960s, teenagers had more disposable income and there was a greater range of goods and services to spend their money on. When asked by the *Belfast Telegraph* what people of her age did in the evening, eighteen-year-old Pauline McCourt responded that '[t]elevision's only for young children and old people. Jiving's the thing—that's what most of us do around this part of Belfast at night'.<sup>100</sup> While members of this age group stopped going to the cinema as regularly as they had done, exhibitors benefited from the fact that they spent more on individual trips. In March 1962, for instance, youth-oriented Cliff Richard musical *The Young Ones* (UK, 1961) set a new box-office record on the Saturday of its first week at Belfast's upmarket Ritz cinema.<sup>101</sup>

A key characteristic of Northern Ireland's post-war cinema exhibition industry was the Rank Organisation's late arrival in the province. At the end of the Second World War, the company, which operated the Odeon and Gaumont chains, controlled one Belfast cinema, the Classic. In the mid-1950s, Odeon (N.I.) Ltd. purchased the two largest local chains—Curran Theatres and Irish Theatres—and by 1958 operated 23 Northern Ireland cinemas.<sup>102</sup> In April 1958, the Rank Organisation claimed that it was 'determined to fight television locally' and was reconstructing many of its Northern Ireland cinemas to attract larger audiences.<sup>103</sup> From 1959 to 1962, Odeon (N.I.) closed many of its smaller cinemas and completed a programme of 'modernisation, renovation and reorganisation' of its most important cinemas.<sup>104</sup>

In 1959, it renovated Derry's Strand cinema and reopened it as the Odeon. The *Derry Journal* stated that a 'brilliant neon name-sign, that adds colour to the street view, combined with a new canopy and a re-decorated front, provides the immediate outdoor evidence of an attractive large-scale renovation scheme undertaken by the cinema's new owners'.<sup>105</sup> In Belfast, Rank renovated profitable suburban cinemas, such as the Regal, the Stadium and the Astoria and there was greater standardisation in their décor and fittings. In November 1960, it purchased the Grand Opera House and the Royal Hippodrome.<sup>106</sup> The former's seating capacity was reduced to give 'maximum comfort' and a new licensed bar gave it a 'trim sophisticated look'.<sup>107</sup> The Hippodrome underwent significant renovations and reopened as the Odeon. When the Edwardian façade was covered in aluminium cladding, the *Belfast Telegraph* commented that the exterior had received a 'thorough facelift'.<sup>108</sup>

Even with the abolition of Entertainments Duty in 1961, *Kine Weekly* claimed that the 'pattern of cinema holdings in Northern Ireland, despite the rationalization period of the last two years, is not yet steady'.<sup>109</sup> In 1962, two Derry cinemas closed: the Midland and St. Columb's Hall. Though it is significant that these closures occurred prior to the opening of UTV's Strabane transmitter in February 1963, their owners were no doubt aware of the impact of commercial television on cinema attendance in other areas. Odeon (N.I.) purchased the Midland from Curran Theatres in 1957. When it closed in February 1962, a company spokesman cited the fact that it 'stands in the path of a road widening scheme' as the main reason for closure. He added that it was:

an old building and would require a lot done to it if it was to be brought up to the high standards of our theatres elsewhere... we feel unable to spend the money to enable us to give the standard of comfort which the public demands.<sup>110</sup>

After the final performance, the *Londonderry Sentinel* commented that regular patrons who ‘enjoyed the Midland’s friendly atmosphere, will now content themselves with watching television’.<sup>111</sup> This example illustrates Docherty et al’s thesis that the decline in cinema audiences cannot be wholly accounted for by the increase in TV licences and the closure of local cinemas had a significant impact on attendance.<sup>112</sup> In May, St. Columb’s Hall stopped film exhibition. Committee Secretary P.J. Downey stated that while television had ‘adversely affected attendance’, the main reason for its closure was ‘that there were so few suitable films being made nowadays and that the Hall could not get any suitable first-run productions. This was because of the fact that such films were tied up by the big circuits’.<sup>113</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This article supports the work of cinema historians who downplay a monocausal relationship between cinema and television, and who emphasise the place-specific nature of cinema attendance. It provides new evidence of the geographical diversity of cinema’s decline in the United Kingdom, the impact of television and the response of cinema exhibitors in Northern Ireland. It foregrounds long-term economic and social changes and downplays the impact of events such as the coronation, which did little to alter the social appeal of the cinema for young people. New cinemas were a relative rarity in the 1950s and, even though Northern Ireland exhibitors were more responsive to population shifts than their UK counterparts, the construction of new cinemas did little to prevent long-term declines in cinema attendance. While increased television ownership clearly impacted cinema-going, it is difficult to disentangle the myriad range of factors that exhibitors cited for cinema closures, such as rising overheads, high rates of taxations, population shifts and new forms of entertainment. Though the rise in consumer culture, increased affluence and a shift towards home-centred activities affected leisure habits, high unemployment rates and low average wages delayed their impact in Northern Ireland

The use of a broad range of quantitative and qualitative sources provides evidence of both the nature of cinema’s decline and the response of audiences, exhibitors and the press. While quantitative sources reveal trends in cinema attendance and television ownership, they tell us little about the nature of people’s changing leisure habits. Oral history testimony and newspaper reports reveal the communal nature of television, generational differences in its impact and the reasons why people chose cinema-going or television viewing. It should not be forgotten, furthermore, that these two leisure activities were not always in direct competition

and the range of leisure activities available to young people expanded greatly in the post-war period.

This evidence also reveals geographical variations within Northern Ireland. This is a theme ripe for exploration and further research on small towns and rural locations in Northern Ireland would complement recent studies on this subject.<sup>114</sup> While cinema closures were most widespread in Belfast, Derry cinemas closed despite the absence of commercial television. Outside of these cities, there was greater confidence in cinema exhibition. The Whitehead Cinema, County Antrim, closed in October 1961 and re-opened as the Strand in November 1962. *Kine Weekly* claimed that this provided an ‘indication of the new found health of the cinema industry in Northern Ireland’.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, greater access to television meant that cinema attendance declined earlier than in the Republic of Ireland and this had a clear impact on the built environment. In 1963, the *Irish Independent* stated that in contrast to Dublin, ‘Belfast City centre is “dead” at night. It all began with television... London property men have virtually torn the heart out of Belfast’s cinema and theatre-land and left behind a great emptiness... A city cannot lose its places of entertainment without losing much of its character as well’.<sup>116</sup> There were further cinema closures in the mid-1960s and the onset of the Troubles exacerbated cinema closures with the Lido, the Tivoli and the Alpha all closing in the 1970s. The new Comber cinema closed in 1984 and the Iveagh was the only 1950s cinema to survive the multiplex era, shutting its doors in 2001.

## Notes

1. Dyja, ed. *Film and Television Handbook*, 39.
2. *Ibid.*, 39.
3. Moran, *Armchair Nation*, 115.
4. Spraos, *Decline of the Cinema*.
5. For instance, see Docherty et al., *The Last Picture Show?* and Hanson, *Cinema Exhibition in Britain*.
6. Doyle, "The Geography of Cinemagoing," 59–71.
7. For instance, see Griffith, *The Cinema and Cinema-Going in Scotland*, Jancovich et al., *The Place of the Audience* and Miskell, *A Social History of the Cinema in Wales*.
8. Rockett, *Film Exhibition and Distribution*.
9. *Kinematograph Year Book 1958*, 409–14; *Kinematograph and Television Year Book 1963*, 353–56.
10. Joe Moran claims that, following the introduction of UTV in 1959, there were 90,000 television sets in the Irish Republic and a 'feature of the skyline in Irish towns was the multitude of especially tall aerials erected to pick up the distant signals of British transmitters'. Moran, *Armchair Nation*, 129.
11. Rockett, *Film Exhibition and Distribution*, 461.
12. Cathcart, *BBC in Northern Ireland* and Savage, *Television and Irish Society*, 318–82.
13. Manning, "Post-War Cinema-Going," 539–55.
14. Excise Duty Branch, Records of Entertainments Duty, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/A-D, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
15. The oral history testimony is drawn from the author's interviews with twenty residents of Northern Ireland born between 1925 and 1950. All participants were required to sign consent forms and ethical approval was received from Queen's University Belfast's Research Ethics Committee. These thematic, semi-structured interviews focused on the social background of the participants, cinema-going practices, film preferences, leisure habits and the wider social history of post-war Northern Ireland. For further information on the use of ethnographic research in cinema history, see Kuhn, Biltreyst and Meers, "Memories of Cinemagoing and Film Experience," 3–16.
16. Biltreyst, Lotze and Meers, "Triangulation in historical audience research," 690–715.
17. Dyja, ed. *Film and Television Handbook*, 39.
18. Reduction in rate of Entertainments Duty, 9 June 1958, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/A/12, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
19. Moran, *Armchair Nation*, 74–75.
20. *BBC Handbook 1955*, 159.
21. *Digest of Statistics Northern Ireland 1961*, 61.
22. *BBC Handbook 1955*, 61.
23. Field and Neill, *New Housing Estates in Belfast*, 43.
24. *Belfast Newsletter*, June 3, 1953.
25. McVeigh, Jean. Interview by author. Belfast, April 2, 2014.
26. McIlwaine, David. Interview by author. Cultra, County Down, July 9, 2015.
27. *Belfast Telegraph*, May 29, 1953.
28. Minutes of the General Purposes and Finance Committee, Belfast Corporation, March 18, 1953, McClay Library, Queen's University Belfast.
29. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 4, 1953.
30. James Chapman, "A Queen is Crowned", 82.
31. *Belfast Telegraph*, July 8, 1959.
32. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 6, 1953.
33. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 15, 1953.

34. *Northern Whig*, June 26, 1953.
35. *Belfast Telegraph*, July 17, 1953.
36. *Northern Whig*, June 9, 1953.
37. *The ABC News*, August 1953.
38. *Cork Examiner*, June 11, 1953.
39. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 10, 1953.
40. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 3, 1953; *Kinematograph Weekly*, June 11, 1953.
41. *Sunday Independent*, June 14, 1953.
42. Reduction in rate of Entertainments Duty, 9 June 1958, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/A/12, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
43. Savage, *Television and Irish Society*, 325. For information on the small number of programmes produced for BBC Northern Ireland, see Hill, *Cinema and Northern Ireland*, 52–60.
44. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 27, 1952.
45. Spraos, *Decline of the Cinema*.
46. For further details on wartime restrictions, see Farmer, *Cinemagoing in Wartime Britain*.
47. *Kinematograph Year Book 1958*, 509; *Kinematograph & Television Year Book 1963*, 445.
48. Docherty et al, *The Last Picture Show?*, 28.
49. Dyja, ed. *Film and Television Handbook*, 39.
50. Reduction in rate of Entertainments Duty, 9 June 1958, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/A/12, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
51. *Belfast Telegraph*, December 3, 1956.
52. Rockett, *Film Exhibition and Distribution*. 139.
53. *Belfast Telegraph*, January 28, 1959; April 17, 1959.
54. Government of Northern Ireland, *Census of Population*, xxvii.
55. *Belfast News-Letter*, March 28, 1955.
56. *Banbridge Chronicle*, December 14, 1955.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Entertainments Duty weekly returns, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/C/2/65, 122, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
59. Entertainments Duty weekly returns, Ministry of Finance, FIN/15/6/C/2/113, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast.
60. *Kinematograph Weekly*, September 27, 1956.
61. *Belfast Telegraph*, August 31, 1956.
62. *Kinematograph Weekly*, September 6, 1956.
63. *Belfast Telegraph*, April 21, 1961.
64. *Belfast Telegraph*, December 5, 1955.
65. *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 4, 1957.
66. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 2, 1959.
67. *Kinematograph Weekly*, December 26, 1957.
68. Spence, Noel. Interview by author. Comber, County Down, March 26, 2014.
69. *Kinematograph Weekly*, December 26, 1957.
70. Hanson, *Cinema Exhibition in Britain*, 94–99.
71. *Kinematograph Weekly*, July 10, 1958.
72. *Belfast Telegraph*, December 17, 1958.
73. *Belfast Telegraph*, June 4, 1956; June 11, 1956.
74. *Kinematograph Weekly*, July 5, 1956.
75. For changes in rates of Entertainments Duty, see Rockett, *Film Exhibition and Distribution*, 125–40. In Northern Ireland, receipts from Entertainments Duty paid by cinemas

- fell from £640,246 in 1956–57 to £140,988 in 1960–61. Payments ceased after 27 May 1961. *Digest of Statistics Northern Ireland 1961*, 74.
76. *BBC Handbook 1957*, 200; *BBC Handbook 1961*, 172.
  77. *Kinematograph Year Book 1950*, 465–70; *Kinematograph Year Book 1958*, 409–14.
  78. Spraos, *Decline of the Cinema*, p. 34.
  79. *Irish Independent*, June 1, 1957.
  80. *Kinematograph Weekly*, January 2, 1958.
  81. *Belfast Telegraph*, February 14, 1958.
  82. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 31, 1959.
  83. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 5, 1960; *Digest of Statistics Northern Ireland 1961*, 74.
  84. Savage, *Television and Irish Society*, 335–6.
  85. *Belfast Telegraph*, December 12, 1961.
  86. *ITV 1963: A Comprehensive Guide to Independent Television*, 135.
  87. *Belfast Telegraph*, May 16, 1960.
  88. *Kinematograph Weekly*, October 20, 1960.
  89. *Kinematograph Weekly*, June 15 1961.
  90. *Kinematograph Weekly*, October 11, 1962; December 13, 1962.
  91. *Londonderry Sentinel*, December 12, 1957.
  92. *BBC Handbook 1958*, 214; *BBC Handbook 1961*, 172.
  93. *Kinematograph Weekly*, June 9, 1960.
  94. *Londonderry Sentinel*, August 26, 1959.
  95. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 5, 1960.
  96. *Kinematograph Weekly*, October 18, 1961.
  97. *Belfast Telegraph*, October 5, 1960.
  98. Campbell, Norman. Interview by author, Belfast, June 4, 2014.
  99. McDonough, Margaret. Belfast, May 18, 2015.
  100. *Belfast Telegraph*, September 14, 1960.
  101. *Kinematograph Weekly*, March 1, 1962.
  102. *Kinematograph Year Book 1958*, 212.
  103. *Belfast Telegraph*, April 12, 1958.
  104. *Ideal Kinema*, February 8, 1962.
  105. *Derry Journal*, May 1, 1959.
  106. *Belfast Telegraph*, November 18, 1960.
  107. *Ideal Kinema*, February 8, 1962.
  108. *Belfast Telegraph*, September 28, 1961.
  109. *Kinematograph Weekly*, October 12, 1961.
  110. *Derry Journal*, February 2, 1962.
  111. *Londonderry Sentinel*, February 21, 1962.
  112. Docherty et al, *The Last Picture Show*, 23–29.
  113. *Derry Journal*, February 23, 1962.
  114. For instance, see Thissen and Zimmermans, eds. *Cinema Beyond the City*.
  115. *Kinematograph Weekly*, November 11, 1962.
  116. *Irish Independent*, August 5, 1963.

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