

**Passionate and Powerful:  
Film Depictions of Women Journalists Working in Washington, D.C.**

Sammye Johnson  
Carlos Augustus de Lozano Chair in Journalism  
Department of Communication  
Trinity University  
San Antonio, TX  
sjohnson@trinity.edu

Movies, as an image-forming medium, have been influential in determining the public's attitudes toward journalists—whether male or female—since the earliest days of Hollywood. We need to pay particular attention to the film portrayals of women journalists because women currently make up the majority of those enrolled in journalism and mass communications programs and schools. They need to know what messages have been sent historically and what images are being shown today.

Are films accurate and realistic in their portrayal of women's occupational roles as reporters and broadcasters? Do movies show women journalists having successful careers, successful personal relationships, and successful marriages—or not? What do they look like, physically, and how are they depicted on and off the job? Are certain social and emotional expectations of professional women built into the plot?

Three important journalistic themes were established in 1931 by the benchmark film *The Front Page* and its immensely popular 1940 “female” remake, *His Girl Friday*.<sup>1</sup> These themes, which permeate journalism movies well into the 21st century, are:

- The press has power, both perceived and real, that can be used for good or for evil, to expose corruption, or to manipulate the public.
- Members of the press are amoral individuals, with reporters willing to lie and cheat in

their race to meet deadlines. The morals and ethics of the press are sloppy and self-serving, but there's often a humanitarian side to the best reporter in the bunch. That individual is usually likable and unwilling to perpetuate an injustice.

- The on-the-job reporting practices and techniques used by reporters are grounded in the exclusive or scoop. The story is always the prime consideration of American reporters and to get that story, they believe any reporting tricks are justified, any deceits pardonable, and any extremes understandable. Editors are at their most encouraging and generous when a reporter has an exclusive. The pursuit of the scoop is when the reporter is most loyal to the job and most fearless in tracking down crime or injustice.

Many journalism films take place in Chicago or New York City. When Washington, D.C. is used as the setting, it's almost as if the city becomes a minor character. Being a Washington newspaper or broadcast reporter is considered a plum assignment by those in the field because it involves negotiating and gaining various levels of power, plus it requires both passion and determination to succeed.

The most famous Washington, D.C. reporter movie is the 1976 *All the President's Men*, said to have caused thousands of baby boomers to major in journalism.<sup>2</sup> It was named one of the 100 most inspiring movies by the American Film Institute (AFI) in 2006.<sup>3</sup> *All the President's Men* was a turning point in the depiction of journalists, highlighting their crusader mentality and desire to uncover the truth. Equally important, serious Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein seemed to replace flamboyant reporter Hildy Johnson and editor Walter Burns as career models.

This research examines the dramatic depictions of women journalists working in Washington, D.C. in films made since that 1976 turning point. The IJPC database was used to find dramatic films with significant journalism storylines that featured women newspaper or

broadcast reporters as protagonists who were shown working in the capital. Covering a political campaign, even a presidential one, didn't fit the parameters if the setting was no longer Washington, D.C.<sup>4</sup>

Movies with female producers or publishers were eliminated in order to study the reporting component as opposed to a managerial point of view. For example, *Broadcast News* (1987) was eliminated because the Jane Craig character brilliantly played by Holly Hunter is not a reporter, but a producer with a different set of concerns and interactions.

Being a journalist had to be critical to the plot, and two films—*Gardens of Stone* (1987) and *Die Hard 2: Die Harder* (1990)—didn't make the cut because journalism isn't the critical concern.<sup>5</sup> When there was a strong journalism storyline, the woman had to be a key or leading character. Magazine writer Chloë Sevigny is a minor player in *Shattered Glass* (2003) and was not included; the film's emphasis is on the ethically challenged male character.

Comedies and science fiction disaster films were not considered. Made-for-television movies and television series were not included. Films that failed to get a theatrical release and went straight to DVD—most notably *Nothing But the Truth* in 2008<sup>6</sup>—also were eliminated.

The four final films studied, include two broadcasting and two newspaper storylines:

- ***Up Close and Personal*** (1996 drama/romance) / Broadcasting (*Michelle Pfeiffer*)
- ***Thank You for Smoking*** (2006 drama/satire) / Newspaper (*Katie Holmes*)
- ***Lions for Lambs*** (2007 drama/political thriller) / Broadcasting (*Meryl Streep*)
- ***State of Play*** (2009 drama/political thriller) / Newspaper (*Rachel McAdams*)

After viewing these films multiple times, and reviewing key research in this field,<sup>7</sup> five characteristics were determined to be shared by women journalists over time in film and fiction, dating back to the Torchy Blane movies of the 1930s and continuing through such definitive

films as “His Girl Friday,” “Meet John Doe,” and “Woman of the Year” in the 1940s. The female journalist in Washington, D.C. is attractive with sex appeal. She works hard to prove herself in the male dominated journalism field. She wants to get the big story—the exclusive or scoop—but she also has crusading journalism instincts and is determined to find out the truth behind an event or happening. Her career takes precedence, to the extent that she doesn’t have much of a personal life. She is not desperately seeking a man and she continues to be an aggressive journalist despite romantic, emotional, mental, or physical setbacks.

*Up Close and Personal* is the most romantic movie viewed and the most traditional in its storyline, with Washington, D.C. as the prize. Some critics called it a journalistic version of *A Star Is Born* because it follows a woman who rises from being a pathetically bad local weather “girl” to a smooth network anchorwoman in the capital. Michelle Pfeiffer is refashioned into a sexy journalist by her station news director, played by Robert Redford, who also places her in situations where she can prove that she is good enough to succeed in the male dominated broadcasting world.

Her mentor becomes her husband, and when that happens, we know their happiness isn’t going to last. She can’t have a career and a wonderful personal life. Conveniently, Redford dies while covering a story; we know Pfeiffer will continue to be a successful journalist despite this emotional setback. Released in 1996, *Up Close and Personal* seems to signal the end of an era, the last of the 20th century’s softly romantic attitude toward women as journalists.

*Thank You for Smoking* straddles the line between satire and drama and says a lot about public relations, lobbyists, and Washington politics in 2006. It’s a significant journalism film because it emphasizes the morals and ethics of the press while revealing the on-the-job reporting practices and techniques used by reporters in order to get an exclusive.

This film perpetuates the belief that female journalists will do anything for an exclusive, front page story, including sleeping with the source.<sup>8</sup> *Thank You for Smoking* presents the devious amorality of *Washington Probe* newspaper reporter Katie Holmes, as well as the power of the press in bringing down the big tobacco lobbyist played by Aaron Eckhart.

The young, attractive Holmes has no personal life, and she certainly has no personal moral code. When Eckhart reveals in a television interview that he let down his guard (he failed to say the magic words “off the record”) and that Holmes got the story while they were having sex, her fellow reporters are shocked. Significantly, she is punished for her lack of principles: At the movie’s end, there’s a cut to Holmes standing in a blinding snowstorm and reporting for a television station in the middle of . . . nowhere.

*The New York Times* said Holmes’s character “strained credulity as a newspaper reporter.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, several film critics ignored this aspect of the storyline in their reviews. It’s unclear whether this movie is a step forward or backward in the depiction of Washington, D.C. female reporters.

*Lions for Lambs*, which hit the movie theaters a year later in 2007, couldn’t be more different in approach or tone. Here we have Meryl Streep as a Washington, D.C. broadcast journalist interviewing Tom Cruise as a senator offering an exclusive story—one that’s big enough to get a Peabody, the top broadcasting award—about a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. We know this is a significant interview because Streep gets an entire hour alone with Cruise, without having the senator’s “PR pit bull” in the room with them.

Unlike most journalism movies revolving around a female reporter, Streep is neither glamorous nor young; she wears a plain, almost dumpy, navy jacket, navy skirt, and grey blouse with very sensible shoes. Her attraction is intellectual. This is a big step away from the sexy,

skinny stereotypes seen in most movies with women reporters as protagonists. It works because the focus in *Lions for Lambs* is on the moral code that guides Streep's journalistic role. She has already proven herself in the male dominated field as a thoughtful journalist and she's determined to find out the truth behind this particular story.

The interplay between Streep and Cruise is sometimes painful, but it's always realistic. When Cruise says he wants to go off-the-record, Streep deliberately clicks her pen off.<sup>10</sup> She knows the rules and she knows the power of the press, but so does Cruise, who alternately tries to manipulate and stroke her. Streep wants context and challenges Cruise's simplistic statements. She wants responses that aren't going to be 30-second sound bites.

There's a later scene between Streep and her editor, where he's excited about the exclusive and ready to run with it. But she stands up to him because she doesn't consider the senator's propaganda to be news. "We don't air speculations," she says passionately. "It feels bogus."

Her editor wants a story that she doesn't want to write, and points out that she's 57 years old and supports a mother who needs 24-hour care: "Who's going to snap you up?" he asks. She responds, "I can't write the story he gave me," to which the editor replies, "You really need to think about that."

The ending shows Streep in a cab driving by various Washington landmarks with tears in her eyes. Did she stand her ground or give in? It's ambiguous.

*State of Play*, a political thriller released in 2009, offers an up-to-date storyline for what's happening now in the Washington, D.C. newspaper industry. Rachel McAdams is a young gossip blogger who is told to work with long-time *Washington Globe* metro reporter Russell Crowe on a fast-breaking political scandal and potentially career-making story. We see the clash between new social media and old school investigative reporting in how the story is gathered,

sourced, and written.

McAdams is pretty, perky, and persistent, irritating Crowe with her approach to news and information. She publishes first in order to take ownership of the scoop and worries about validation later. McAdams' opinionated blogger mentality is at odds with Crowe's crusader journalism ethics and methodical work habits. Their pairing works—it's not Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*, or even Woodward and Bernstein. Yet they play to their individual strengths in eventually getting the big story and showing that the power of the press remains significant.

In his review, film critic Roger Ebert asked whether *State of Play* might be the last definitive newspaper movie—and answered no: “Because no matter what happens to newspapers, the newspaper is a durable movie genre. Shouting ‘stop the presses’ is ever so much more exciting than shouting ‘stop the upload.’”<sup>11</sup>

It's clear that in this new media blogosphere, the female reporter is still going to be attractive, gutsy, passionate, and focused on her career; she's not worried about personal relationships. It's also clear at the end of *State of Play* that McAdams now understands about the need to get to the truth through solid investigative reporting because some stories are too complicated for blogs. They need the power of the newspaper front page.

These four films present a snapshot of the woman journalist in Washington, D.C. today as a powerful and passionate individual. She may be young and in need of mentoring by a male figure (*Up Close and Personal* and *State of Play*), she may be a seasoned journalist (*Lions for Lambs*), or she may go way too far (morally and ethically) to get the scoop (*Thank You for Smoking*). Nevertheless, she understands both the real and perceived power of the press. She doesn't have a romantic relationship going on, and that's fine with her because her career comes

first. The Washington, D.C. woman journalist still measures up to Joe Saltzman's classic definition of being an "aggressive, self-assured, independent female reporter," who "more often than not outwits, outfoxes, and outreports every male reporter in sight."<sup>12</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Sammye Johnson, "The Reel World: Images of Women Reporters as Reflectors of Journalistic Practices," paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada, August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Rosie Gray, "All The President's Men Remixed With 'Sabotage' Almost Makes Journalism Seem Edgy, Glamorous," *The Village Voice*, September 21, 2011, [http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2011/09/all\\_the\\_preside.php](http://blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2011/09/all_the_preside.php).

<sup>3</sup> According to the American Film Institute, these are "movies that inspire with characters of vision and conviction who face adversity and often make a personal sacrifice for the greater good. Whether these films end happily or not, they are ultimately triumphant—both filling audiences with hope and empowering them with the spirit of human potential." *All the President's Men* was number 34 on the list of 100 films.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ides of March* (2011) wasn't included because the reporter is from *The New York Times* and she's covering a presidential campaign, particularly the primary in Ohio. Working for a Washington newspaper while based in London or Europe also meant the film was not studied. *The Internecine Project* (1974) was eliminated because the woman was a Washington newspaper political correspondent stationed in London.

<sup>5</sup> Although the female love interest was a reporter in *Gardens of Stone* (1987), the film didn't revolve around her professional persona. *Die Hard 2: Die Harder* (1990) is an action thriller about terrorists and airplanes. However, there's a great line where the female reporter played by Sheila McCarthy says to rugged hero Bruce Willis: "You give me this story and I'll have your baby," to which Willis replies, "Not the kind of ride I'm looking for."

<sup>6</sup> *Nothing But the Truth* is a political thriller, with Kate Beckinsale as a reporter for the Washington, D.C. *Capital Sun-Times* who refuses to reveal her source for her story that tells the identity of a covert CIA operative. The article is front-page news, winning Beckinsale a Pulitzer Prize. The young, attractive Beckinsale, backed by her husband, her editor (played by Angela Bassett), and the newspaper's in-house attorney, maintains her stand all the way up the U.S. District Court, which cites her with contempt and throws her in jail. Beckinsale's journalistically moral and ethical stance eventually alienates her husband and son and shows her as a woman who places her job above family. *Nothing But the Truth* frames the power of the press in terms of personal and professional integrity, with supporting themes such as having a career versus

marriage and motherhood and upholding the First Amendment versus national security issues. As a reporter role model, the thin, brunette Beckinsale is gutsy, passionate, and determined to stay true to her moral center. According to director Rob Lurie, *Nothing But the Truth* was inspired by the case of journalist Judith Miller of *The New York Times*, who was jailed for contempt of court in 2005 for refusing to reveal her source to a grand jury for an article that named CIA operative Valerie Plame. Revealing a covert CIA's identity is a treasonous offense, and the person who leaked the name to the reporter is considered a threat to national security.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Loren Ghiglione, "The American Journalist: Fiction Versus Fact," a presentation to the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA, October 17, 1990, <http://ijpc.org/ghiglione.htm>; Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press*, (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1990); Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism, and the Movies* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998); Joe Saltzman, "Analyzing the Images of the Journalist in Popular Culture: A Unique Method of Studying the Public's Perception of Its Journalists and the News Media," *The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* website, 2005, online at <http://ijpc.org/uploads/files/AEJMC%20Paper%20San%20Antonio%20Saltzman%202005.pdf>; Stacy L. Spaulding and Maurine H. Beasley, "Crime, Romance and Sex: Washington Women Journalists in Recent Popular Fiction," a presentation to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Entertainment Studies Interest Group, Kansas City, MO, August 2003; and Joe Saltzman, "Sob Sisters: The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture," *The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, 2003, 2, online at <http://www.ijpc.org/uploads/files/sobsessay.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Other films where the female journalist sleeps with the source include *Electric Horseman* (1979) and *Absence of Malice* (1981).

<sup>9</sup> Manohla Dargis, "Smoke 'Em if You Got 'Em; His Career Depends on It," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2006, online at [http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/movies/17smok.html?\\_r=0](http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/movies/17smok.html?_r=0).

<sup>10</sup> Although Streep is a broadcast journalist, *Lions for Lambs* seems more like a newspaper movie, with Streep wearing glasses as she takes notes in a slim notebook. We never see any broadcasting equipment and her previous work is represented by a *Time* magazine cover story. The confrontational scene with her editor was shot at the *Los Angeles Times* and it plays like a newspaper film.

<sup>11</sup> Roger Ebert, "Review: *State of Play*," April 15, 2009, online at [www.rogerebert.com/reviews/state-of-play-2009](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/state-of-play-2009).

<sup>12</sup> Joe Saltzman, *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film* (Los Angeles: Norman Lear Center, University of Southern California, 2002), 54-55.