

Studying the Journalist in Popular Culture

Matthew C. Ehrlich
 Professor
 Department of Journalism
 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
mehrlich@illinois.edu

Studying the journalist in popular culture is doubly rewarding. First, of course, it's fun. What could be more enjoyable than immersing oneself in movies, TV shows, novels, comics, or video games, and seeing journalists doing thrilling, appalling, extraordinary things? Still, those new to the subject should be cautioned that it isn't *all* fun. One cannot simply pick and choose what one would normally like, as is ordinarily the case with popular culture. Along with the good stuff, one must accept occasional exposure to material that may come across as silly or offensive or just plain dull – popular culture has produced no small share of junk. Nevertheless, the casual spectator's junk can be the serious scholar's artifact, worthy of careful analysis with an eye toward developing a fuller and more nuanced grasp of the field. And careful, critical analysis as opposed to casual spectatorship is always the scholar's main responsibility, requiring the investment of time and hard work. That investment pays off with the second and more important reward that comes from investigating journalism's popular image: it deepens our understanding of not only journalism but also ourselves. This essay offers a few suggestions toward that end.

Journalism in Theory, Practice, and Popular Culture

A key element to look for is the unique way in which popular culture comments upon how journalism is supposed to operate in theory, and how for better or worse it has operated in practice. In theory, journalism is responsible for serving as the “lifeblood of democracy” by giving “citizens the information they need to be free and self-governing.”¹ In practice, according

to critics, journalism often has fallen short, whether through a “culture that pushes reporters to dig up scoops and attention-getting stories, write it all like the great American novel, [and] do it faster than seems humanly possible,” or through a profits-driven media system that has reduced the press to a “pathetic state.”²

Popular culture regularly has addressed both sides of the coin. For example, movies such as *All the President's Men* and *Good Night, and Good Luck* have depicted historical moments in which it seemed that the press triumphantly lived up to its theoretical ideal by exposing Watergate and McCarthyism. Other films have related real-life cases of journalistic shame, as with *Shattered Glass*'s portrayal of a young magazine writer's fabrications and *The Insider*'s story of corporate greed and cowardice in network TV news. Yet other movies—too many to count – have given the impression that “journalists are hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, dim-witted social misfits concerned only with twisting the truth into scandal and otherwise devoid of conscience, respect for basic human dignity or a healthy fear of God.”³

None of these sorts of depictions, whether positive or negative, ever should be taken as wholly faithful and literal representations of what the press has done or how it operates. Critics have pointed out that Woodward and Bernstein did not singlehandedly take down the Nixon administration and Edward R. Murrow did not rid America of McCarthy all by himself, although viewers of *All the President's Men* and *Good Night, and Good Luck* could be forgiven for believing otherwise.⁴ The historical veracity of *The Insider* has also been vociferously challenged, whereas *Shattered Glass* took creative liberties of its own.⁵ As for all those other films that have shown journalists as misfits and scandalmongers – or for that matter as all-conquering heroes who crack the case and save the day – they *are* movies, after all, which are rarely about the mundane details of everyday life. Their primary goal (which to be sure they do

not always achieve) is to relieve boredom and make money. At their best, they do both while establishing lasting artistic worth. Even not at their best, they tell morality tales about what is good and bad, what should be valued and not valued.

That process is shaped by a multitude of factors: the aspirations of creators (to “make a statement” or get rich or produce a serviceable script on demand), the conventions of genre (the hero defeating the villain and true love winning or the antihero dying an ennobling death), the demands of the entertainment industry (to “open big” or cash in on a fad or attract a desired demographic), and so forth. Those factors, which naturally vary across time and media, in turn shape the popular image of the journalist. For example, the film version of *All the President’s Men* was written by William Goldman, directed by Alan J. Pakula, and produced by co-star Robert Redford. Goldman at the time was best known for the “buddy” picture *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, whereas Pakula was noted for paranoid thrillers such as *Klute* and *The Parallax View* (the latter of which had featured a journalist protagonist). Redford was a Hollywood liberal with a pronounced antipathy toward Richard Nixon and a fascination with the contrasting personalities of Woodward and Bernstein, whose book provided the source material for the movie. In turn, the book had been influenced by suggestions from Redford and the publisher that the two reporters focus heavily on themselves and “Deep Throat”; it would make for a better story that was more likely to sell.⁶

All of that profoundly affected a movie that would be called “a milestone in the process of exalting the press while demonizing government, not to mention a significant moment in the elevation of the American journalist to mythical status.”⁷ Critics may deride such myths as being historically inaccurate and obscuring the fact that journalists are more apt to be lapdogs than watchdogs. That does not negate that the real-life “Woodstein” and the *Washington Post*

doggedly pursued the Watergate story and helped keep it in the public eye, or that the film accurately depicted the enormous effort that goes into investigative reporting and the importance of such reporting. Nor does it negate the power and necessity of myth. Watergate “offers journalists a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys.”⁸ For the rest of us, myth serves to “represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with, appreciate, and understand the complex joys and sorrows” of our shared existence. Popular culture is an important source of such “exemplary models for human life.”⁹

It is no different with works that show journalism’s warts. The writer-director of *Shattered Glass*, Billy Ray, said he intended his story to be an homage to Woodward and Bernstein – no matter that it focused on a journalist who fabricated stories and lied to cover up his deceptions. Ray wanted to emphasize that substance is more important than flash while honoring those who were “fighting the good fight,” such as the editor who finally exposed the writer’s lies and restored integrity to the magazine.¹⁰ Here, too, lessons extolling truth and honest labor – in journalism and in life – were being taught. Even the most brazenly outlandish depictions of the press teach lessons, intentionally or not. Some journalists have said they entered the profession because they had seen one of the many versions of *The Front Page* (in which the press hides a condemned killer in a desk for the sake of a scoop) and decided it looked like fun.¹¹

The point for those studying the press’s popular image is always to keep the focus squarely on journalism while moving beyond mere descriptions of the subject matter and avoiding overly simplistic interpretations of what one is seeing. One should look beneath the surface and ask what is really being suggested about what the press is and has been, what it could and should be. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that one is in fact studying a movie or

novel or video game. As such, it is never just about journalism; it is addressing popular tastes, hopes, and fears. It also is the product of a particular medium produced in a particular time, place, and fashion for a particular audience.

Mapping, Linking, Contextualizing

With that in mind, scholars can approach their subject matter in a number of ways. Three of the most important are necessarily interrelated and might be described as *mapping*, *linking*, and *contextualizing*.

Mapping refers to surveying the extraordinary amount of material that popular culture has produced about the journalist. Joe Saltzman has been the leader in this effort with his annual updates to the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Database, which as of 2008 listed more than 67,000 items including films, TV, fiction, radio, cartoons, comics, commercials, songs, and more.¹² Many of those areas have received comparatively little scholarly attention. For example, we know a lot about movies' depictions of journalism thanks to Richard Ness's monumental filmography¹³ and many other studies. We know less about television's representations of the press even though TV reaches more people than movies do and likely has more influence on popular perceptions. We know even less about radio and other media. It brings to mind the challenge posed many years ago by a professor who had amassed a vast archive of historic World War II news broadcasts: "Here are the materials, where are the scholars?"¹⁴ Researchers can help map uncharted territory and mark a path for others to follow.

Linking is connecting the study of the popular image of journalism to other research areas. If one is going to examine the depiction of female journalists, one logically should draw upon the vast literature on media representations of women and upon gender studies in general. To cite just one example, Bonnie Dow incorporated feminist theory and studies of the evolution

of the women's movement in analyzing television's *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*, each of which featured a female journalist as its protagonist. Although finding much to admire in both programs, Dow argued that both still perpetuated stereotypes, with Mary Richards portrayed as a caring nurturer and Murphy Brown as an overbearing aggressor.¹⁵

Similarly, if one wishes to study the portrayal of freedom of the press, one might examine research that has looked at changing interpretations of the First Amendment or popular culture's depictions of the law.¹⁶ If one is interested in the portrayal of a particular event in journalism history (such as *All the President's Men's* story about Watergate), one should refer to relevant historical scholarship.¹⁷ Barbie Zelizer has noted that the study of journalism benefits from the insights of many different disciplines, including sociology, history, language studies, political science, and cultural studies.¹⁸ Research on the image of the journalist in popular culture similarly can benefit from rigorous interdisciplinary analysis.

Contextualizing refers to analyzing the subject matter within the specific context in which it was produced and received with the aim of moving beyond surface interpretations. Take, for example, the HBO television series *The Wire*. The series' fifth and final season, which aired in 2008, looked in part at a big-city newspaper and a reporter who made up stories. The reporter's misdeeds won him a Pulitzer Prize, whereas the conscientious "old school" editor who shared his suspicions about the reporter with his bosses was demoted. The quick and easy reading of the program would be that it was yet another example of popular culture bashing journalism and demonstrating its diminished standing in the public eye.

Such a reading is not necessarily wrong; it just does not go far enough – it needs more context. That context is not hard to find. Products of popular culture, especially an acclaimed series such as *The Wire*, attract considerable media commentary that can be located online. Most

movies and TV series also have their own websites that provide production notes and other potentially useful background information.¹⁹ Those sorts of sources reveal that series creator David Simon was a former journalist for the *Baltimore Sun*, the very newspaper (albeit in a fictionalized form) that was the focus of *The Wire*. Simon had earned praise for his richly textured reporting on Baltimore's police and underclass, which won him book deals and inspired the TV series *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. Eventually he left the *Sun*, angered by what he felt was a growing emphasis on boosting profits and winning prizes at the expense of journalism that highlighted the social and economic inequities underlying the city's ills. He turned to HBO and *The Wire*, which over five seasons told an intricate story about the complexities and failings of Baltimore's government, labor unions, schools, police, and newspaper.²⁰

In brief, Simon was not using his series to execute a simpleminded hatchet job on the press. Certainly, he was harshly critical of what he believed journalism had become. "In place of comprehensive, complex and idiosyncratic coverage," he wrote in a *Washington Post* op-ed piece, "readers of even the most serious newspapers were offered celebrity and scandal, humor and light provocation." Yet that was only one part of Simon's broader critique of "the decline of the American empire." And it did not extend to all of journalism – not to what he believed the press once was and what it ideally should be. "I was a newspaperman from my high school paper until I left the *Sun* at age 35," he said. "I loved my newspaper and I loved working for my newspaper." Indeed, he had wanted to be a reporter from the time his father (himself a journalist) had taken him as a youth to see *The Front Page*.²¹

One can view Simon as continuing in a long line of ex-journalists who turned to writing lovingly or caustically about their former trade, just as Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur had in *The Front Page*. Some, like Simon, had told stories about the financial or moral failures of big

city newspapers. More than a half-century before *The Wire*, onetime reporter Richard Brooks wrote and directed the 1952 movie *Deadline, USA*, with Humphrey Bogart as a crusading editor whose newspaper is bought and killed by a sleazy rival paper. Twenty years before that, ex-journalist Louis Weitzenkorn penned the play *Five Star Final*, which was turned into a film in 1931. It told of the conscience-stricken editor of a tabloid paper that drives a married couple to suicide. (In dedicating the play to his former boss, Weitzenkorn wrote, “The ethics of journalism learned from him made the author of *Five Star Final* a failure as a tabloid editor.”)²² Even before that, journalists were producing novels about young reporters confronting the sordid reality of urban newspapering, with Ben Hecht’s 1921 book *Erik Dorn* being just one example.²³ The tension between journalistic ideals and reality that Simon addressed in *The Wire* is a longstanding one.

Of course, there were substantial differences between *The Wire* and the earlier films, plays, and novels. For example, Simon’s series was produced for a cable TV network and a niche audience; movies such as *Deadline, USA* and *Five Star Final* came out of the Hollywood studio system and were aimed at the masses. The continued existence of newspapers as a medium had been taken for granted through the end of the twentieth century; by the time of *The Wire*, it seemed possible that in printed form they could disappear. Again, one should never lose sight of the specific context in which a popular work was created and experienced. However, one should also keep the broader context in mind, seeing how a work relates to others that have come before it and how it speaks to issues and concerns that journalism has always confronted.

What We Don’t Know

Apart from the “unchartered territories” already discussed, much is still left to be explored in studying the popular image of the journalist. A great deal has been written about

popular depictions of the press in America, but less has been done about those in other countries, and still less in terms of cross-cultural comparisons of the journalist's image across nations.

We especially need to learn more about the effects that popular culture may or may not have on public perceptions of journalism and how people interpret such portrayals of the press. Do they affect attitudes or beliefs regarding press credibility? Is there a "Mean Journalist Syndrome" whereby popular culture cultivates the impression that journalists are sleazier than they are in real life? Are people able to "see through" such depictions? Or do those depictions actually make journalism seem more intriguing, much as *The Front Page* captivated the young David Simon and others before him? We don't really know. It will take well-designed surveys, experiments, and audience ethnography studies to start providing some answers.

Why It Matters

Regardless of what one chooses to investigate or how one investigates it, studying the image of the journalist in popular culture is important work. That is because the theoretical ideal of journalism as democracy's lifeblood is important. If popular culture is "a culture thinking out loud about itself,"²⁴ then popular works about journalism represent a long-running rumination upon our press's achievements and failures, our expectations of it and our apprehensions about it. Those works speak to the belief that self-government is enabled by responsible exercise of freedom of the press and threatened by lack of the same. The task for scholars is to listen to what they say, decipher them for others, and remember why they matter.

Endnotes

¹ Sandy Davidson and Betty Winfield, "Journalism: The Lifeblood of a Democracy," in *What Good is Journalism?: How Reporters and Editors Are Saving America's Way of Life*, eds. George Kennedy and Daryl Moen (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 18; Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007), 12.

² Lori Robertson, "Confronting the Culture," *American Journalism Review*, August-September 2005, 37, 39; Robert W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), 25.

³ Chip Rowe, "Hacks on Film," *Washington Journalism Review*, November 1992, 27.

⁴ See, for example, Edward Jay Epstein, "Did the Press Uncover Watergate?" *Commentary*, July 1974, 21-24; William E. Leuchtenburg, "All the President's Men," in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 288-291; Jack Shafer, "Edward R. Movie," *Slate.com*, 5 October 2005, <<http://www.slate.com/?id=2127595&nav=tap1/>>.

⁵ See Don Hewitt, *Tell Me a Story* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 185-206; Matthew C. Ehrlich, "Fabrication in Journalism: *Shattered Glass*," in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies*, ed. Howard Good (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 19-34.

⁶ Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 111-120.

⁷ Leuchtenburg, "All the President's Men," 291.

⁸ Michael Schudson, *Watergate in American Memory* (New York: Basic Books), 124.

⁹ Jack Lule, *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (New York: Guilford, 2001), 15. See also Orville Schell, "'We Have Been Bull-Dozed Aside'," *PressThink*, 21 July 2005, <http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2005/07/21/schl_jsc.html>.

¹⁰ Ehrlich, "Fabrication in Journalism," 29.

¹¹ Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 8-9.

¹² See <<http://ijpc.org/introdatabase.htm>>.

¹³ Richard R. Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Quoted in Donald G. Godfrey, "Researching Electronic Media History," in *Methods of Historical Analysis in Electronic Media*, ed. Donald G. Godfrey (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 4. The quote is from University of Washington Professor Milo Ryan, who created what would become known as the Milo Ryan Phonoarchive.

¹⁵ Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

¹⁶ See, for example, Michael Asimow and Shannon Mader, eds., *Law and Popular Culture: A Course Book* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).

¹⁷ One such work that looks at *All the President's Men* from a historian's perspective is Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 179-201.

¹⁸ Barbie Zelizer, *Taking Journalism Seriously* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

¹⁹ *The Wire's* website is <<http://www.hbo.com/thewire/>>.

²⁰ See Lawrence Lanahan, "Secrets of the City: What *The Wire* Reveals about Urban Journalism," *Columbia Journalism Review*, January-February 2008, 22-31.

²¹ David Simon, "Does the News Matter to Anyone Anymore?" *Washington Post*, January 20, 2008, B1; Lanahan, "Secrets of the City," 24, 31; "The Wire: First Thoughts," *Ubiquitous Marketing.com*, 7 January 2008, <<http://www.ubiquitousmarketing.com/index.php/2008/01/07/the-wire-first-thoughts>>.

²² See Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*, 57.

²³ Ben Hecht, *Erik Dorn* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1921). See also Howard Good, *Acquainted with the Night: The Image of Journalists in American Fiction, 1890-1930* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1986).

²⁴ Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson, "Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture," in *Rethinking Popular Culture*, ed. Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 23.