



[BeastStyle](#) 09.17.14 by Lloyd Grove

## **Hollywood Thinks Journalists Are Sexy Again**

Three big and small screen projects about journalism are in the works. Viewers' hunger for deadlines, scoops, hungry reporters, and ruthless editors appears insatiable.

Earlier this year, Sarah Jessica Parker was on a flight with her three young children, on their way to a spring break vacation, when she suddenly started weeping.

“I burst into tears on Jet Blue,” the *Sex and the City* star tells me. “And I had to ask for a rather scratchy napkin to use, because I was embarrassed to be crying in front of my children inexplicably.”

Parker, with a book galley in hand, had just gotten to the end of [\*Busted: A Tale of Corruption and Betrayal in the City of Brotherly Love\*](#). It’s a riveting, funny and ultimately tear-jerking chronicle by Wendy Ruderman and Barbara Laker, two investigative reporters for the financially-strapped *Philadelphia Daily News*, about how they won the Pulitzer Prize and risked body and soul (Laker was beaten up by street thugs, Ruderman’s marriage collapsed) to expose a ring of dirty cops while their newspaper was crumbling beneath their feet.

Parker’s sobs were a good omen, and proof positive that the journalism business—no matter how diminished, insolvent, distrusted and ailing it sometimes seems in the year 2014—remains a healthy Hollywood staple, a source of endless comedy and drama.

Indeed, there are at least three journalism-focused projects in the works, and the actress and fashion icon is now committed to portraying a Ruderman- or Laker-like character in a television series based on their book and produced by Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, with David Frankel (*The Devil Wears Prada*) directing—his father, Max Frankel, was executive editor of *The New York Times*—and writer Don Roos (*Marley & Me*, *The Opposite of Sex*) toiling away on a two-hour pilot to be shot next year on location in Philadelphia.

“It’s a very compelling story and it’s small,” says Parker, who is planning to spend the day in Philly with Ruderman and Laker in a couple of weeks, “and I like those small stories. I like those quiet triumphs because they mean a huge amount. I like these two unlikely women who sacrificed an enormous amount personally to cover the story, and who stayed with it and had an editor who believed in them, at a newspaper that was floundering.”

Ruderman, who like Laker is a consultant on the project, recalls being taken aback during a recent conference call when SKE production executive Carla Hacken declared: “One thing I really like about your book is that it beautifully captured the end of an industry.” Ruderman says: “Barbara and I sort of laughed. ‘Well, gee. OK. Thank you.’”

*Busted* is not the only journalism-inspired Hollywood project in various stages of production. Robert Redford, who famously portrayed Bob Woodward in 1976’s Oscar-winning [\*All The President’s Men\*](#), is set to play Dan Rather in *Truth*. The movie is based on former CBS News producer Mary Mapes’s memoir of the 2004 controversy involving the CBS anchorman’s career-damaging *60 Minutes* report on President George W. Bush’s checkered and allegedly AWOL stint in the Texas Air National Guard. (Cate Blanchett—who played a courageous Irish crime reporter in 2003’s *Veronica Guerin*—is attached to portray Mapes.)

Meanwhile, Sony Pictures Entertainment recently announced that George Clooney—whose father Nick is a retired local TV anchorman and news director in Lexington, Kentucky—will helm a movie adaptation of *Hack Attack*, Guardian journalist Nick Davies’ book-length expose’ of the Fleet Street phone-hacking scandal that tainted Rupert Murdoch.

“I think all movies that are centered in the world of journalism are ultimately about integrity,” says writer-director Billy Ray, whose 2003 film *Shattered Glass* dramatized *New Republic* writer Stephen Glass’ serial fabrication scandal. “They all come down on the tension of truth versus the convenient lie. When you’re writing a movie, you are always looking for ways to test your characters’ integrity, because that’s how we find out who they are. So setting them in the journalism context fits very naturally into what movies are good at.” What’s more, Ray adds, most people still understand—despite the Obama administration’s aggressive legal juggernaut against press leaks of classified material—that journalism is a constitutionally-protected enterprise that is essential to a healthy democracy.

Movies and television series about the newsbiz—filled with colorful, gruff, seedy, unscrupulous and, very occasionally, heroic characters—have entertained audiences at least since [The Front Page](#), the 1931 Ben Hecht screwball comedy (adapted from the 1928 hit Broadway show) in which Adolph Menjou and Pat O’Brien played a sneaky tabloid editor and a slippery reporter, respectively, trying to outwit each other while snagging a last interview with a man on his way to the gallows.

That film was so successful that it was remade several times, most memorably as 1940’s *His Girl Friday* starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in the editor and reporter roles, while Walter Matthau and Jack Lemmon reprised the comedy for director Billy Wilder in 1974. A comprehensive list of movies and television series about [journalism](#) also would have to include *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Network* (1976), *Absence of Malice* (1981), *Broadcast News* (1987), *The Paper* (1994), *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), and, more recently, HBO’s *The Wire* and *The Newsroom*.

Sarah Jessica Parker, who grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, reading *The Enquirer* and *The Post*, has printer’s ink in her blood. She recalls that her biological father, Stephen Parker, was a poet and journalist who wrote for *Time* magazine, and that Wally Forste, her step-grandfather from her mother’s second marriage, was a sportswriter for the Cincinnati *Post*.

Reading Ruderman and Laker’s memoir, she says, “reminded me what it means to be a local reporter and how important those journalists are, what it means to care about your community, what it means to persevere, and how scary it can be to go up against corruption, even on a local level.”

Manhattan resident Parker adds: “I live in the West Village, and the paper that I get, the [WestView News](#), is one that I really count on for local news about politics and the community. I’m dead serious. God forbid that somebody should throw my issue out before I read it. I’m in a rage. I go crazy.”

Yet Parker doubts that her son James, the 11-year-old boy she shares with her actor-husband Matthew Broderick, will consume newspapers with the same voraciousness, if at all. Like most people three times his age, he tends to learn what’s happening via interchangeable sources on the Internet—which Billy Ray argues makes the newsbiz even more relevant as a subject for Hollywood.

“In my childhood and for the greater portion of my life, you had to go find the news,” says Ray, who is 53. “Then you had to go out your front door and pick up a newspaper and read it, or you had to turn on the television to the network news to find out what was going on in the world. Now, the news just comes at *you*. You turn on your phone and there it is, coming right at you. You are instantly bombarded with updates, which can range from the Russian invasion of Ukraine to the latest fashions of the Kardashians—and it all comes at you with no differentiation in terms of the importance of those particular topics.”

Ray continues: “Like it or not, we’re all in the journalism consumption business. And that changes the fundamental rule of how movies approach journalism. It’s no longer this rarefied occupation protected by the Constitution. It turns all of it into the daily fish-wrap. Which makes the idea of a movie about journalism more universal, and therefore more commercial, but a little bit less noble, too.”