

Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film

Remarks at USC Literary Luncheon, March 27, 2002, Doheny Memorial Library, by Joe Saltzman

Frank Capra was one of the most popular American directors in film history. So it may not be surprising that Capra and his writers were responsible for much of what Americans thought they knew about their journalists in the twentieth century. Americans' perceptions of journalism and journalists were indelibly imprinted on the national psyche through the popular Capra films, which brought reporters, columnists, editors and media tycoons to flesh-and-blood life from the late 1920s through the 1930s and 1940s and into the early 1950s. No one synthesized the images of the journalist found in other films, novels and Broadway plays better than Frank Capra and his writers.



Capra's familiar images still focus our thinking today — whether they be the energetic, opportunistic reporter who would do anything for a scoop; or the tough, sarcastic sob sister trying desperately to outdo her male competition; or the cynical big-city newspaper editor committed to getting the story first even if it means strangling his reporters to do it; or the morally bankrupt, ruthless publisher who uses the power of the press for his or her own ends.

These images of the journalist, complete with every cliché of the newspaper world, originated in hundreds of novels and silent films in the early years of the twentieth century. They were polished up, honed, and presented to the public in unforgettable ways by Capra and his writers.

In nine major films — starting with *The Power of the Press* in 1928, continuing through the much-copied *It Happened One Night* in 1934, and ending with the lackluster *Here Comes the Groom* in 1951 — Capra

and his writers created big-city smart-alecky journalists and their greedy bosses who would come to represent everything the public believed about the mass media. Many of the archetypes created in these films were reinvented in later decades and, with little variation, turned into radio and television newspeople who were just as circulation-hungry and cynical as their prototypes. Frank Capra made more than fifty films, thirty-six of them feature films between 1926 and 1961, and social critics believe he "had a profound emotional and psychological effect on more than three generations of American audiences."

From the beginning, Capra had an intimate relationship with newspapers. As a youngster, he peddled the *Los Angeles Times* for ten years, stuffing the papers — inserting one section of the Sunday edition into the other — each Saturday night from nine until two in the morning. The smell of newsprint was all over him. One biographer said Capra even had a fleeting youthful ambition of becoming a reporter.

Capra's best friend was Myles Connolly, a Boston Irishman and hard-boiled newspaper reporter for the *Boston Post*. Like so many other newspapermen and playwrights in the early 1930s, Connolly had come to Hollywood to make his fortune. Capra used him as a sounding board. For example, in *It Happened One Night*, according to Capra, it was Connolly's idea to turn Peter Warne, a self-employed chemist in the original short story on which the film is based, into "a guy we all know and like. Maybe a tough, crusading reporter — at outs with his pig-headed editor."

Capra's key writers were either former newspapermen or Broadway playwrights who knew the type intimately. Robert Riskin, his primary collaborator, a self-made man, a streetwise poet, playwright, and producer, became the social conscience of the Capra films. He knew the newspaper world so well that many historians still refer to him as a former newspaperman. Jo Swerling, a bespectacled, rumpled, cigar chain-smoking newspaper veteran, worked for newspapers in Chicago, Boston, and New York for a dozen years and, like Capra, had sold newspapers as a kid. Sidney Buchman, a college-educated playwright and film writer, came with a great ear for fast-talking, urban-slang dialogue.

The Male Journalist

Capra's depiction of the newspaperman, like most other filmmakers' portrayals of journalists, relied heavily on former newsmen's remembrances and Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's famous play and subsequent movie, *The Front Page*. From 1928 to 1951, Capra's reporters were standard movie urban newshawks.

The early newspaper films established the male journalist's persona so irrevocably that even illiterate and uneducated moviegoers knew that a reporter would do anything for a story — denigrate the institution of marriage, break the law, or wink at a double suicide that builds circulation. Just as they knew that any newspaper film would be filled with an unredeemed cynicism, staccato, flippant dialogue, breezy informality, brutal insensitivity to love and law alike, and the punchy wisecrack.

The Sob Sisters

Capra and his writers also understood what silent film scenario writers discovered at the turn of the

century: Female reporters were perfect for the movies. Films offered the meatiest roles for female actors and, with male reporters, they created the perfect battleground of the sexes — the underrated girl reporter challenged to prove she's as capable as the male, and the boy reporter confident that no girl could possibly keep pace with him. The sob sister became a popular newspaper hero.

From the beginning, women reporters were independent, hard-boiled dames ready and willing to do anything their male counterparts would do to get that story. The sob sister always has to prove herself. She has to persuade the males around her that she is worthy of their respect. She often screws up before winning her stripes, but, by and large, she is an independent, hardworking reporter who never lets her newspaper down.

Male screenwriters, perhaps worried that these sob sisters were too independent and too feisty for the times, would make sure that by the final reel, these self-sufficient females would succumb to love, longing for what 1930s audiences were sure every woman really wanted — a man, marriage, and children. Capra's sob sisters were no different. In turn, she pined for the ace reporter whom she finally won in the end, or killed the city editor to protect the man she loved, or fell in love with (and presumably married) a man she ridiculed in print or controlled for most of the film.

The Editor

Capra's editors are basically good guys in the tradition of movie newspaper editors, always trying to do the best job they can under very trying conditions. The editors have to put out a newspaper that kills the competition using lazy, often drunken, reporters, and they have to answer to amoral, circulation-hungry publishers who only want to see results, not excuses. No wonder they drink too much, yell too much, and always seem disappointed in their best friends, the reporters who fill their city room. Yet they are loyal to their reporters and often the reporter's last best friend. Behind all the yelling and name-calling, when they see their reporters in serious trouble, they're always there to lend a helping hand.

Newspaper editors seldom have first names, and if they do, no one much remembers them. They are married to their jobs, and nothing else matters. Editors are shown to be thorough professionals, contemptuous of reporters who can't make deadlines or miss stories because of booze or incompetence. The story is always more important than the people involved. The success of the newspaper, its triumph over all competition, is more important than anything else. With few exceptions, when the newspaper is threatened or when it's just a slow news day, morality, ethics, and everything else be damned. Just get the front-page story that will humble the competition. These editors live for their newspapers and will do anything to make sure their daily paper is a success, no matter what the personal cost, no matter how many lies or distortions or fakery or elaborate schemes it takes. The end always justifies the means — nothing is more important than getting the public to buy and read their newspapers.

The Publishers and Media Tycoons

In Capra's world, the hardworking male or female journalist might do anything for a story, but by the end of the film he or she usually does the right thing even if it means giving up his or her job. By contrast, Capra saved his venom for the owner of the newspaper, the publisher, the media tycoon.

They are among the most vicious media villains in all of film history. They are the ones who create the moral chaos in which reporters and editors struggle to survive.

Most of the big-city publishers in movies are greedy, hypocritical, amoral businessmen and women who, in the words of one historian, spouted "smarmy journalistic platitudes to dignify circulation stunts or camouflage unholy political ambitions."

The unrepentant scoundrel ends up being the media tycoon, the publisher, the man or woman with all the power to manipulate public opinion for his or her own personal benefit. Evil publishers destroy the public trust and put their own political or financial gain above all else.

Perhaps the reason the films of Frank Capra seem so timeless today is because Capra and his writers understood that control of media by a single individual or corporation is the greatest threat to American democracy. That modern concept was never more clearly defined in popular culture than it is in Capra's films involving journalists.

Reporters. Editors. Media Tycoons. Nothing I can say equals the images themselves. You'll see many of them in a 30-minute compilation I've put together especially for this occasion. Here are some of the most memorable images of the journalist to be found in Frank Capra films.

VIDEOTAPE:

Journalist Images in Capra Films

1. The Male Journalist

It Happened One Night (1934)

Peter Warne (Clark Gable)

New York Mail Reporter

A drunken Warne is first seen in a phone booth arguing with his angry editor as a group of drunken reporters offers boisterous support. One slurred voice says, "Shh. Quiet. This is history in the making....There's a man biting a dog in there." "Hey, listen, monkey face; when you fired me, you fired the best newshound your filthy scandal sheet ever had." "Say, listen, you wouldn't know a newspaper story if it reached up and kicked you in the pants. Yeah, sure, sure. I got all your copy. Why didn't you tell me you were going to write it in Greek? I'd start a new department." "That was free verse, you gashouse palooka!" "What the dickens was free about it? It cost this paper a gob of dough. And I'm here to tell you it's not gonna cost us any more." The argument ends after the editor finds out that Warne has reversed the charges: "What. Why you? Say, listen, you. When you get back to New York, you keep far away from this office. You're fired. You don't work here any more and you never will." Editor Gordon hangs up, but Warne, not wanting to be embarrassed in front of his colleagues, stays on the phone and keeps talking to a dead line: "Oh, so you're changing your tune, hey? You're a little late with your apologies. I wouldn't go back to work for you if you begged me on your hands and knees, and I hope this will be a lesson to you." Saving face, the reporter hangs up to the congratulations of his colleagues. "Did we tell that baby?" cries one reporter. Warne agrees: "I don't need any more of his lip," and takes another drink out of a half-empty whiskey bottle. "When you tell him, you tell him, Pete," says another reporter. "I guess he knows now how I feel about his job," Warne says. "I bet he does too," say a couple of reporters together.

Platinum Blonde, 1931

Stew Smith (Robert Williams)

Evening Post Reporter

City editor Conroy is sitting at his desk. "Hey, Stew! Stew Smith!" he screams across the newsroom. The reporter answers, "Me?" The city editor cries out, "You double-crossing hound. Come over here." Conroy is furious. Smith types "nuts" on the paper stuck in his typewriter and goes to the city editor's desk: "Now listen, boss. If you're going to kick about that expense account —" Conroy interrupts him, "You call yourself a reporter?" Smith answers, "Well, it has been alleged — yes —" The angry city editor ignores his answer: "Why, you wouldn't know news if you fell into a mess of it, nose first. So you're the bright lad that's never been scooped." "Not on my own beat, no," he says. "No? Well, where were you when that happened?" The editor throws the copy of the *Tribune* furiously at the reporter. "I've heard of people being scooped on their own funerals, but this. Holy mackerel. Why, it's news when Ann Schuyler gets her fingernails manicured, but this. She

gets married to one of our own reporters, and the *Tribune* beats us to it." Conroy notices that a group of reporters has surrounded his desk to see what all the fuss is about. Conroy barks, "Well! What do you guys want? Go on, get back to your desks. Go back to your work."

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)
Diz Moore (Thomas Mitchell)
Washington Press Corps

"Take this," he shouts into the phone. "This is the most titanic battle of modern times. A David without even a slingshot rises to do battle against the mighty Goliath, the Taylor machine, allegedly crooked inside and out. Yeah, and for my money you can cut out the allegedly."

Here Comes the Groom (1951)
Pete Garvey (Bing Crosby)
Boston Morning Press

"Let me tell you something, George. Don't believe a thing you read in your paper unless it's got the old Pete Garvey byline on it. You hear me?"

Stew Smith, Platinum Blonde

You're still working for this paper, aren't you? Or are you?" A chastened Smith says, "Yes, sir." "Well, it's your business to get news. And here you had a story right in your own lap and you let the *Tribune* scoop us on it. Making a first-class, grade-A monkey out of me. Well, if it ever happens again — just don't bother about coming back. That's all." The city editor dismisses the reporter.

Mr. Smith and the Washington Press Corps

Smith sees three reporters reading their handiwork and knocks one of them to the ground. He sees another reporter laughing at his story in a newspaper and promptly decks him, throwing the newspaper on top of him. The angry Mr. Smith grabs an older reporter getting into a taxicab and punches the surprised reporter, who falls backward into the cab seat. He passes another reporter in the lobby of a government building and slams him to the ground beneath a portrait of George Washington. Nosey and two other reporters see Smith coming toward them and run for cover. Capra cuts to the authentic seal of the reporters' safe haven — the National Press Club of Washington. Nosey runs into the club, up to the bar, and into Diz Moore, who says, "Hello, Nosey. Who let you in here?" Farrell (Jack Carson), a reporter drinking with Moore adds, "Why aren't you out chasing ambulances?" Nosey shouts, "That guy Smith is punching everybody he meets. Just got away from him." He then sees Smith charging through the door. "Oh, oh. Tarzan!" and runs away as the other reporters grab Smith and forcefully sit him down. Nosey sticks his head up from behind a counter and says, "Boys, meet Senator Smith." The reporters laugh, and one says, "You act like a man with something on your mind." The angry Smith yells back: "Why don't you tell the people the truth for a change?" "Oh," says one reporter, "the truth. The man wants the truth." And the other reporters, including Moore, pick up the chant. "The man wants the truth." Moore asks, "What is the truth?..." to which another reporter adds, "How do you want it, Senator, dished out or in a bottle?" Smith responds, "People of this country pick up their papers and what do they read?" Here the film subtly changes tone and shows that the cynical reporters, drunk or not, are just doing their job, a job that has to be done because Senator Smith got to Washington the wrong way — as an unelected appointee of a powerful political and media machine. Diz Moore tries to set the young senator straight: "Well, this morning they read that an incompetent clown had arrived in Washington, parading like a member of the Senate." Smith lunges to punch Moore and is restrained by the laughing reporters. Smith begins to tell Moore, "If you'd thought as much about being honest as you do about being smart — " and is interrupted by Moore, who says: "Honest? Why, we're the only ones who can afford to be honest in what we tell the voters. We don't have to be reelected like politicians." The reporters laugh and pat Moore on the back, shouting, "Hear, hear." Reporter Farrell adds, "For instance, we tell 'em when phonies or crackpots come here to make their laws." Other reporters have their say: "If it's truth you want, what are you doing in the Senate?" "What do you know about laws or making laws or what the people need?" Smith tries to answer, "I don't pretend to know." "Then," asks Moore, "what are you doing in the Senate?" Before Smith can answer, another reporter says, "What's he doing? Why, honorary appointment." The reporters laugh uproariously. A seasoned reporter takes Smith to task: "When the country needs men up there who know and have courage as it never did before, he's just going to decorate a chair and get himself honored." Another reporter breaks into laughter, saying, "Oh, but he'll vote, sure, just like his colleague tells him to." Moore adds, "Yes sir, like a Christmas Tiger, he'll nod his head and vote," as the other reporters chime in, "Yes." Then Moore really lets him have it: "You're not a senator. You're an honorary stooge. You oughtta be shown up." Other reporters agree: "Have a drink, Senator." "It tastes better than the truth." Laughter. A chastened Smith gets up and slowly walks out. Moore turns and follows him, patting him on the back as if everything will be okay, "Hey, Senator. Don't let it get you down. A hundred years from now nobody will know the difference."

2.The Female Reporter

Hollywood's Sob Sisters
Meet John Doe (1941)
Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck)
Bulletin

The film opens with a time-worn plaque against the side of a building — "The Bulletin, Est. 1862, a free press for a free people" — being shattered by a pneumatic chisel obliterating all the lettering. A new shiny steel plaque takes its place — "The New Bulletin: A streamlined newspaper for a streamlined era." Inside, a sign painter is putting the new managing editor's name on the glass door.

Red, a flip office boy (Bennie Bartlett), comes out, and everyone in the room watches him. He has a small sheet of paper in his clipboard. He emits a short whistle through his teeth and points at an employee (Del Gibbs), who salutes and leaves. The copy boy now goes through the same procedure with two other older

employees. All watch him, terror written in their eyes. He then points his finger to a woman and runs a finger across his throat and jerks his thumb toward the managing editor's office. One journalist after another is given notice. Four employees file out of the managing editor's office, and Mitchell is one of them. She stops and impulsively turns and goes back in. She begs the editor, Connell (James Gleason), for her job, saying she has a mother and two kid sisters to support. Connell has no patience with her. He has more important things on his mind: "Sorry, sister. I was sent down here to clean house. I told you, I can't use your column anymore. It's lavender and old lace." Mitchell says she'll take a pay cut from thirty dollars to even twenty dollars. "I'll do anything you say," she tells him. "It isn't the money. We're after circulation. What we need is fireworks. People who can hit with sledgehammers — start arguments," he tells her. "Oh, I can do that. I know this town inside out. Oh, give me a chance, please," she begs, but Connell is too busy firing other people. He yells at her as she goes out, "Cashier's got your check... Hey you, sister, dHeyon't forget to get out your last column before you pick up your check." An angry Mitchell goes back to her office wanting to tear the building down. She kicks her wastebasket as an old printer named Joe (Edward McWade) comes in saying, "You're a couple of sticks shy in your column, Ann." She shouts at him: "Big rich slob like D.B. Norton buys a paper and forty heads are chopped off." Joe is surprised: "Did you get it too?" She looks at him. "Yeah. You too?" He nods yes and she hugs him: "Oh, Joe. Oh, I'm sorry, darling. Why don't we tear the building down?" Joe tells her, "Before you do, Ann, perhaps you'd better finish this column." She grabs the paper: "Yeah, lavender and old lace. Wait, Joe, wait." She sits down at the typewriter, and her eyes widen as a fiendish idea strikes her: "Wants fireworks, huh? Okay!" She begins to pound furiously, her jaw set. Mitchell gathers up all her things, picks up a book from the desk, and throws it at Connell's office, breaking the glass and just missing the sign painter's head.

Mr. Deeds Goes To Town (1936)

Babe Bennett (Jean Arthur)

Daily Mail

City editor MacWade reads Bennett's story, eyes sparkling while Bennett is sprawled on a chair in his office doing tricks with a coin. He reads her story aloud: "...This is one of the many startling statements made by Longfellow Deeds — New York's new Cinderella Man..." He looks up, laughs, and says, "Cinderella Man! That's sensational, Babe! Sensational!" Shades of Capra's *Platinum Blonde*, only this time it's not the reporter who falls into great wealth. Bennett explains how she got the exclusive: "It took some high-powered acting, believe me," she says. "Did it?" the city editor asks. "I was the world's sweetest ingénue," she answers. MacWade: "Is he really that big a sap?" Bennett: "He's the original. There are no carbon copies of that one." The editor doesn't care about her deceit. He is ecstatic. His newspaper is scooping the town: "Cinderella Man! Babe, you stuck a tag on that hick that'll stick to him the rest of his life..." They laugh as MacWade says, "Can you imagine [Deeds's public relations man] Cobb's face when he reads this?" They both laugh and Bennett says, "If we could sell tickets, we'd make a fortune." The ethical ramifications of a reporter pretending to be someone else to get a story doesn't concern either of them and didn't matter much to a 1930s audience. MacWade can't get enough details. "How'd you get the picture?" Bennett tells him, "Had the boys follow us." "Marvelous," says the editor, who keeps reading the story, laughing uproariously. "Beautiful. What happened after that?" She says, "I don't know. I had to duck to get the story out. He was so far gone, he didn't even miss me." The editor is deliriously happy with his ace reporter: "You're a genius, Babe — a genius!" He laughs. He cautions her not to show her face in the office again. "I'll tell everybody you're on your vacation. They'll never know where the stories are coming from. Stick close to him, Babe — you can get an exclusive story out of him every day for a month. We'll have the other papers crazy. Babe, I could kiss you." Bennett sidesteps the editor, saying, "Oh, no. No. Our deal was for a month's vacation." "Sure." "With pay!" As Bennett walks out the door, MacWade yells after her: "You'll get it, Babe. You'll get it."

Forbidden (1932)

Lulu Smith (Barbara Stanwyck)

Mary Sunshine, Advice-to-the-Lovelorn Columnist

Holland: "Can you write?" She starts to answer, but he keeps talking: "You're hired. I know just the job for you. Sit down. One of our boys is quitting today." Holland introduces Lulu Smith to an old-time journalist named Nick (Harry Holman), who's quitting. "Nick, this is Miss Lulu Smith. She's going to take your place." Nick greets her. "Give her the lowdown," says Holland. "Thank you, Mr. Holland," Smith says. He answers, "It's all right. I'll collect my commission later." The old journalist takes Smith into his office ("This way, miss. Okay, boss") and tells her, "Sit there, m'am. I'll be glad to tell you anything you want to know." Smith asks, "Well, I'd like to know what job I'm taking." He explains she's taking over his column, the advice-to-the-lovelorn column. "Didn't the lovelorn column used to be run by Mary Sunshine?" Smith asks. "That's me," the old-timer says. "Anybody who runs this column is Mary Sunshine. You're going to be Mary Sunshine now." "What do I have to do?" she asks. "Well, if you play solitaire, it will help to pass the time away. You get stacks of letters every day. Hundreds of 'em. You take out six for the column and the rest, dump 'em under there," Nick tells her. Smith is shocked: "Well, don't you read them?" He laughs: "No, they're all alike."

Ann Mitchell, Meet John Doe

"Listen, you great big wonderful genius of a newspaperman! You came down here to shoot some life into this dying paper, didn't you? Well, the whole town's curious about John Doe and, boom, just like that you're going to bury him. There's enough circulation in that man to start a shortage in the ink market!" "In what man?" "John Doe." "What John Doe?" "Our John Doe. The one I made up!" "Look, genius. Now, look. Suppose there was a John Doe and he walked into this office. What would you do? Find him a job and forget about the whole business, I suppose, huh? Not me. I'd make a deal with him." The editor is curious: "A deal?" Mitchell goes on: "Sure. When you get hold of a stunt that sells papers, you don't drop it like a hot potato."

Lulu Smith, Forbidden

"You'll never make a newspaperwoman." "Am I fired?" "No. I still think you'll make a newspaperman."

Babe Bennett, Mr. Deeds Comes to Town

I'm crucifying him," she adds. Her friend says, "You started out to be a successful newspaperwoman, didn't you?" Bennett acts as if she's looking for a fight: "Yeah, then what?" "Search me," says her friend. Bennett then shows that the hardhearted reporter is really a softie: "He's got goodness... Do you know what that is?... No — of course you don't. We've forgotten. We're too busy being smart-alecks." She sits at her typewriter: "Too busy in a crazy competition for nothing." Capra then goes to a montage of Bennett typing her story and the story going to press followed by headlines ("Cinderella Man Fire-Eating Demon — Punches Photographer") and photographs. Readers are laughing.

Ann Mitchell, Meet John Doe

Mitchell is working at the typewriter, finishes typing, takes the paper out of the typewriter, crumples it out and throws it on the floor. She buries her head on the typewriter. Her dog picks up the crumpled piece of paper and puts it in the wastebasket next to the desk.

3. The Editors

Platinum Blonde (1931)

Conroy (Edmund Breese)

Evening Post

When we first meet him, Conroy is in the middle of a loud, busy city room with a scowl on his puss, yelling into a phone: "Yeah, well, that's all I ever get from you guys, a lot of hard-luck stories. Now, you come back here and I'll give you an assignment. It will be your last interview — with the cashier." Conroy hangs up and yells for his ace reporter. A young reporter asks the editor if he can have "a crack" at Smith's front-page story. Conroy barks at him: "You? If you ever got your foot into a drawing room, you'd step on a sliding rug. Stew is the only man that's got brains enough to handle this. Scram. Beat it." He asks the copyboy, Spud, if he's found Stew Smith. "Well, did you look in the — " asks Conroy. "First place I looked," answers the copyboy. Conroy: "Not there, eh? For cryin' out loud, where is that — ? Well, go and dig him up. Stew! Stew Smith!" The copyboy points out that Smith and sob sister Gallagher are hiding behind a screen. Conroy picks up a phone book and throws it at the screen, revealing the two reporters. The newsroom erupts in laughter, but Conroy isn't laughing. He's glaring fiercely. "Come over here!" he shouts. "Look, I quit," Smith says. "Yeah?" "Yeah." "Yeah." The brave reporter answers: "You're always picking on me. It took me three hours to get those little gadgets in those holes, and you screw it up in a minute. Hey, look." He turns over his hand puzzle to Conroy, who is momentarily captivated by the toy. "Not as easy as it looks, is it?" says Smith. The disgusted Conroy puts it down: "Aagh! No wonder you're batty. Would it be imposing too much upon you if I asked you to do a little work today? Just to sort of break the monotony?" Smith answers, "With me, you can always do business."

Mr. Deeds Goes To Town (1936)

MacWade (George Bancroft)

Daily Mail

Every time he blows his nose, it's news. A corn-fed bohunk like that falling into the Semple fortune is hot copy. But it's got to be personal. It's got to have an angle. What does he think about? How does it feel to be a millionaire? Is he gonna get married? What does he think of New York? Is he smart? Is he dumb? A million angles. He's been here three days, and what have you numskulls brought in? Any half-wit novice could have done better." The cardinal rule for reporters in these situations is to keep quiet. But one reporter says, "Yeah, we tried to — " MacWade shuts him up: "Am I talking too loud? Or annoying anybody?" Another reporter refers to Cornelius (Corny) Cobb, a hardened ex-newspaperman who works for the new heir but isn't talking: "You know Corny Cobb. He's keeping him under lock and key." MacWade isn't eager to hear much about Cobb from his reporters. "Cobb, Cobb!" shouts the editor. "Never mind about Cobb. Use what little brains you've got. Find out something for yourselves, you imbecilic stupes! Now get out of here before I really tell you what I think of you. Go on, get out!" The reporters and photographers scramble to their feet. One of the reporters mumbles something as he passes MacWade on the way to the door. The alert city editor says, "What was that?" The reporter, thinking fast on his feet, says, "Huh? I said you were, uh, you had dirty plaster."

It Happened One Night (1934)

Joe Gordon (Charles C. Wilson)

New York Mail

Warne then shows up at Gordon's office to give him the scoop of a lifetime. Gordon's secretary warns him not to go in: "He'll shoot you on sight." Warne tells her, "I haven't been shot at for days," and then barges into Gordon's office. "Get out of here," cries the editor. "Now listen, Joe..." Gordon isn't interested in his former reporter's malarkey: "Don't 'Joe' me." The savvy editor has been there before. Finally Warne calms him down. "Okay, Joe," says the reporter. "Listen — you know I've always liked you. Anytime I could do you a great turn — anytime I ran across a story I thought was good — I always came running to you with it, didn't I? Well, I got one now. Those wires I sent you were on the level. It's the biggest scoop of the year. I'm giving it to you, Joe." Warne says he has already written the story. All he wants is a thousand dollars. Gordon explodes: "A thousand bucks! Get out of here." A fast-talking Warne explains: "Don't get sore, Joe. This is something you've got to do for me. I need a thousand bucks — and I need it quick. I'm in a jam." The editor softens: "What's the thousand bucks for?" Warne tells him the heiress is going to marry someone else. Gordon says, "You're drunk." "Would an exclusive story like that be worth a thousand bucks to you?" asks the reporter, knowing the answer even before he asks the question. "Yeah, if it was on the level," says the editor, who then asks the key question: Who's the heiress going to marry? Warne tells Gordon he's the guy. "You? Now I know you're drunk," says the editor, who grabs his hat. "I'm going home. Don't annoy me anymore." Gordon tries to leave, but Warne stops him: "Oh, for heaven's sake, Joe, stop being an editor for a minute." When a defeated Warne returns to the newsroom to give back the money, even the editor is sympathetic. Warne shows his bravado by saying he's sorry and that the story was "just a little gag of mine. I thought I'd have some fun with it." "Yeah. Sure. Had me going for a while too" the editor says. "Wouldn't have made a bad story at that." Warne says almost to himself. "No, great. But that's the way things go," the editor says, trying to console Warne. "You think you've got a great yarn — then something comes along — messes up the finish — and there you are." Warne asks pensively, "Yeah, where am I?" The editor slips a bill into Warne's coat pocket and says, "When you sober up — come in and talk to me." All the editor can think of is to offer the reporter the solace of his old newspaper job to salve his wounded heart.

Meet John Doe (1941)

Henry Connell (James Gleason)

New Bulletin

"Miss Mitchell, do me a favor, will you. Go on out and get married and have a lot of babies — but stay out of newspaper business!" Pop cautions: "Better get that story in, Hank. It's getting late." But Mitchell, sensing victory, won't give up. "You're supposed to be a smart guy. If it was raining hundred-dollar bills, you'd be out looking for a dime you lost someplace." As Mitchell starts to leave, Connell says: "Holy smokes! Wasting my time listening to this mad woman." The managing editor still wants nothing to do with Mitchell's crazy scheme when an assistant comes in with the *Chronicle*, the *Bulletin*'s competition. "Look, chief. Look what the *Chronicle* is running on John Doe. They say it's a fake." Connell is furious. The integrity of his newspaper has been questioned. "Why, the no-good — " He reads the story aloud: "John Doe story amateur journalism. It's palpably phony. It's a wonder anyone is taking it seriously." What do you think of those

guys?" Mitchell sees her chance: "That's fine. That's fine. Now fall right into their laps. Go ahead. Say John Doe walked in and called the whole thing off. You know what that's going to sound like on top of this?"

Connell's dander is up. "'Amateur journalism.' Huh? Why, the bunch of sophomores! I can teach them more about..." The last thing Connell wants to do is admit his newspaper faked a story. When he sees a bunch of derelict-looking men in the office all claiming they wrote the John Doe letter, he finally relents. "Tell them all to wait," says Mitchell. "Look, Mr. Connell — one of those men is your John Doe. They're desperate and will do anything for a cup of coffee. Pick one out and you can make the *Chronicle* eat their words." Connell says, "I'm beginning to like this." Pop Dwyer, an old-time journalist, issues a warning: "If you ask me, Hank, you're playing around with dynamite." But the editor's competitive fires overrule reason: "No, no, no, the gal's right. We can't let the *Chronicle* get the laugh on us. We've got to produce a John Doe now. 'Amateur journalism,' huh? I'll show those guys." Mitchell sees she's in the driver's seat and threatens a little blackmail if she doesn't get her job back: "Sure, and there's no reason for them to find out the truth, either. Because, naturally, I won't say anything." Connell: "Okay, sister, you get your job back." Mitchell: "Plus a bonus." Connell: "What bonus?" She pulls out a piece of paper and says, "Oh, the bonus of a thousand dollars the *Chronicle* was going to pay me for this little document. You'll find it says, er, 'I, Ann Mitchell, hereby certify that the John Doe letter was created by me.'..." The editor growls back: "I can read. I can read." Mitchell: "Sorry." Connell: "You think this is worth a thousand dollars, do you?" Mitchell answers carefully: "Oh, the *Chronicle* would consider it dirt cheap." Connell, half-admiringly: "Packs everything, including a gun. Okay, sister, you've got yourself a deal."

Joe Gordon, *It Happened One Night*

Warne swears his story is on the level. He tells the editor, "You know, a guy can't propose to a gal without a cent in the world, can he?" The editor believes him: "What a story! On her way to join her husband, Ellen Andrews..." "That's it, that's it," says Warne. Gordon says, "Lemme see that a minute," and takes Warne's story out of his hand. After reading Warne's story, Gordon is sold and gives the reporter the money. Warne runs out of the office, kissing the secretary: "Goodbye, Agnes. Oh, you're beautiful. All women are beautiful." Gordon tells his secretary, "For my dough, he's still the best newspaperman in the business." Gordon moves quickly, grabbing his phone: "Get Hank, quick. Oh boy! What a yarn! What a yarn! Hank. Hold up the morning edition. Break down the front page. We're going to have a complete new layout. Send in a couple of rewrite men. And Hank, listen, don't do a thing — I've got a story that'll make your hair curl." Another phone keeps ringing. Hank picks it up and shouts into it, "Don't annoy me. I'm busy." Gordon is obsessed with Warne's story, shouting one order after another: "Dig up all the pictures on that Andrews kid... And Hank, listen, get Healy out of bed. I want a cartoon and I want it quick." He describes the kind of exaggerated cartoon he wants and then impatiently grabs the second phone. "What is it? Huh?" Another reporter tells him that the heiress just phoned her father to pick her up. Gordon is overwhelmed by the news. He asks the reporter if he's crazy, listens to his story, sees it's on the level, and then tells him to grab a car and stay with the heiress. He then picks up the other phone and says, "Get Hank again," then screams for his secretary to get him a doctor: "I'm going to have a nervous breakdown." He speaks into the phone: "Hank — forget what I just told you. I'm just having a nightmare, that's all!" He hangs up and turns to his secretary: "You call up the police department. Tell them to find Peter Warne. Send out a general alarm. I want that dirty crook pinched." Gordon doesn't let personal anger get in the way of a front-page story. The two rewrite men show up, and Gordon shouts at them: "Shove everything off the front page. Ellen Andrews just phoned her father — she's coming home... Now spread it all over the place. Play it up big. Here's your lead: 'Love Triumphant!' Go on. Hop to it!" The two men run out. Gordon looks into the wastebasket, picks up Warne's crumpled story, and stares at it. He still can't believe what just happened.

Forbidden (1932)

Al Holland (Ralph Bellamy)

Daily Record

Holland is in his element when he's on the phone talking to one of his reporters between bites of a coffee-dunked doughnut. He is complaining about the poor timing of a wealthy man's death — he died after Holland's deadline: "Yeah? Yeah? That dirty dog. I always knew he'd die before the afternoon papers. Well, get the lead out of your pants and go down and get me a diagram of the apartment. We'll get a love nest angle, fill it full of dotted lines with a great big cross to mark the spot. A doublecross — the guy never advertised. Is there a diary? That's all right, we'll write one here. Yeah." Holland immediately picks up another upright phone. "Yeah. What? Did you tell him you were from the *Record*? They wouldn't let you in anyway, huh? That's all right. I'll fix him." He then gets on the intercom, shouting, "Listen, Red. That goose-necked park commissioner is going monaced on us. I want you to write a squib about him every day and misspell his name every time you use it. Yeah." Later, as managing editor, Holland will tell reporters to lay off the misspelling of the park commissioner's name because "the guy apologized." Holland barks at anyone who talks to him. "What do you want, boy?" he says to the old-time assistant standing next to his desk. "She said it was personal" is the timid answer. "Why didn't you tell me?" Holland shouts. As the man tries to answer: "Well, I tried..." Holland jams his doughnut into his assistant's mouth. Holland hurriedly walks away from his desk and through the newsroom, a newsroom he obviously owns. When a reporter tries to stop him — "Hey Mr. Holland, how about that —" Holland shouts, "No!" "Well, that settles it," the reporter grumbles as Holland keeps walking, paying attention to every little detail under his command. "Hey, who left this light on? Turn it out, somebody."

Here Comes the Groom (1951)

George Degnan (Robert Keith)

Boston Morning Express

"'Wanted: a mother.' That's not sob stuff, that's good human interest... Do you realize that over three hundred war orphans have been adopted right here in Boston alone? Fire him? Fire Pete Garvey? Me? Why, I wouldn't fire him if... All right, you can get yourself another editor, Mr. F.C." The publisher, "F.C.," is never seen in the film or heard from again. Degnan slams down the phone. "He's perfectly right. I should fire him." He screams for his secretary, who is standing next to him: "Get me Pete Garvey." The angry editor is miffed over Garvey's sentimental story about French war orphans. Degnan's secretary finally gets Pete on the phone: "Hello, Pete. Hiya, Toots." The editor screams: "Give me that phone." The secretary tells him, "Now don't snap your twig, Mr. Degnan. He's doing a wonderful job." The editor doesn't want to talk to the secretary: "Give me that phone." But his secretary won't give up: "At least smile. Yelling won't bring him back." Degnan gets on the phone as his secretary pushes out some other editors who want to see the boss. Chastised by his secretary, Degnan mockingly tells his reporter: "Peter, dear. I miss you, Peter. I've told you by letter, by cable, by carrier pigeon that I miss you, Peter. Now it's costing me an overseas telephone call to tell you I miss you, Peter." The editor is furious: "Get your... get yourself back here immediately or you're fired." Garvey, on the phone in Paris, is surrounded by war orphans. He's tossing around a baseball. The editor is still yelling: "Why didn't you answer my cables, you —" Garvey interrupts him to say, "George, George, there's children in the room. Nix." Degnan goes on, "I'm taking you off salary, so help me. You get back here on the first plane or you can stay in Paris forever. Now, are you coming back or not?"

Al Holland, Forbidden

Holland: "What sort of a woman are you, anyway? What are you saving yourself for?" She tells the editor he's already married to his newspaper. He tells her: "Nah, it's you." The moment is destroyed and Smith's observations verified, when Holland's assistant yells out that a reporter is on the phone. There's a gang fight on the South Side. "Tell him to hold the wire," screams Holland as he runs to his desk and grabs the phone: "Hello, Ike. Yeah. Yeah. Great. Sure. Grab a cab." Holland

tells his assistant to get a couple of photogs down there right away. Then he starts yelling out reporters' names, ordering one of them out of the washroom and onto the story.

George Degnan, *Here Comes the Groom*

"Look, Pete, we need a hypo, something sensational. I've got just the idea for you. The Far East... Yeah, that's the hot spot. Burma. Indochina. Hong Kong. Just the place for the old Pete Garvey and his sizzling typewriter." For a second, Garvey remembers he's a reporter and is interested: "Far East, huh? Now you're beginning to reach me, George. You're getting through to me."

Al Holland, *Forbidden*

"Now listen, you guys. We've uncovered some real dope, and I want you guys to get busy on it. It's the biggest thing that ever hit us. You know what I mean. We finally got the name of the hospital where the child was born and the name of the mother, Jane Doe." His phone rings and he answers it: "Yeah. Nah, save that for the final edition. Yeah." He hangs up and says to his reporters: "So between the three of you, you oughtta be able to find out who Jane Doe is." The reporters are skeptical. "I know a haystack where we can find a swell needle," says one. "I'm going in for crystal gazing myself," says another. Holland snarls, "So, it's too much for you? I'm running a school for journalism, am I? I've gotta lead you guys around by the nose, do I, and show you? Now listen here, you fellers. Get this through your thick skulls..." With phones ringing, Holland lays out his plans, showing his true reporting skills: "I want the name of the nurse who handled the case. I want to get her right here in this office. If she squawks, promise her anything. I want a photostatic copy of the birth certificate and the hospital admission card. I want you to find out what became of Jane Doe after she left the hospital, where she went, where she worked, what she did." He starts pounding his desk: "I want Jane Doe right here in this office. And if you punks can't handle it, I'll find somebody who can." Smith walks in: "Busy, Mr. Holland?" The editor sees her: "Oh, hello, Lovelorn. Stick around." One of the reporters asks, "Say, boss, what's it all about?" The managing editor runs over his question: "Read the *Record*, son, and ask your questions on the outside. I wouldn't trust my own mother with this story.... All right. Court's adjourned. Court's adjourned."

4. The Publishers and Media Tycoons

State of the Union (1948)

Kay Thorndyke (Angela Lansbury)

Thorndyke Press

Thorndyke keeps the editors waiting and then apologizes for the delay. She launches into a speech of such condescension and disdain that it rivals anything the more vicious D.B. Norton ever says in *Meet John Doe*. She starts off with a bit of self-deprecation: "First of all, I'd like to thank you all for the very fine job you've done. You haven't always followed my advice in the past, but you have been very lenient considering your boss is a woman and still under sixty." The editors politely laugh, and Kay Thorndyke moves into high gear: "I've asked you all to come here today because in this matter, at least, there can be no deviation from my instructions. I want the Republican convention deadlocked." An editor interrupts, "Who are we working for, the Democrats?" She answers: "You're working for the *Thorndyke Press* and the *Thorndyke Press* will have its own candidate. That's why that convention must be deadlocked, and it won't be unless the leading candidates are so sore at each other that they won't combine forces. Is that clear?" Thorndyke then ticks off each potential candidate she wants defeated: "I want Dewey sore at Taft, Taft sore at Vandenberg, Vandenberg sore at Stassen, and all of them sore at Eisenhower... and MacArthur. Use their wives, their kids, their Aunt Marthas. But get them sore. Dig up anything you can, and if you can't dig it up..." Capra and his writers stop short of having her say, "then make it up," but the implication is clear. An editor protests, "Chief, I've got nothing against your candidate. We all know who it is. And I'll work for him in any way that I legitimately can, but that's as far as I can go." Without blinking an eye, Thorndyke stares at him and says, "Mr. Bradbury, would you feel happier working for some other newspaper?" He answers, "Yes, I think I would." She says, "I think that can be arranged." The editor leaves. "Anyone else?" she asks. "Now's the time. On this issue I'm quite prepared to replace all of you."

The other editors, obviously dismayed and even horrified at this naked display of media abuse, quit en masse as she dismisses all of them.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939)

Jim Taylor (Edward Arnold)

Media Tycoon and Political Boss

Jim Taylor to his top editor Hendricks: "I want you to keep everything that Smith says or any other pro-Smith stuff coming from Washington out of all of our newspapers, do you understand? And out of all the others you can line up in the state. Yeah. Yeah, those broken-down opposition papers... that don't want to play ball with us, I want you to tie up for twenty-four hours.... Stall their deliveries, push them off the street. I don't care what you do. Just bury them for twenty-four hours. That will give me plenty of time. And you, well, you defend the machine. Hit this guy. Oh, the usual thing, criminal and blocking a relief bill and starving the people. And Hendricks, get the hoi polloi excited. Have them send protests, letters, wires, anything you like and buy up every minute you can get of every two-watt radio station in the state and keep them spouting against Smith. I don't care what it costs. Pay out. Come on, get moving. Get the whole state moving."

Meet John Doe (1941)

D.B. Norton (Edward Arnold)

New Bulletin

"Listen to me, my son. Before you lose your head completely, may I remind you that I picked you up out of the gutter and I can throw you right back there again! You've got a nerve accusing people of things! These gentlemen and I know what's best for the John Does of America, regardless of what tramps like you think. Get off that righteous horse of yours and come to your senses. You're the fake! We believe in what we're doing. You're the one that was paid the thirty pieces of silver!"

Have you forgotten that? Well, I haven't! You're a fake, John Doe, and I can prove it! You're the big hero that's supposed to jump off tall buildings and things. Do you remember? What do you suppose your precious John Does will say when they find out that you never had any intention of doing it? That you were being paid to say so? You're lucky if they don't run you out of the country! Why, with the newspapers and the radio stations that these gentlemen control, we can kill the John Doe movement deadlier than a doornail, and we'll do it, too, the moment you step out of line. Now, if you still want to go to that convention and shoot your trap off, you go ahead and do it!" A shocked John Doe can't believe anyone would be so vile: "Do you mean to tell me you'd try to kill the John Doe movement if you can't use it to get what you want?" The publisher declares: "You bet your bottom dollar we would."

Kay Thorndyke, *State of the Union*

In a meeting during the broadcast with businessmen, labor leaders, and other political brokers, Thorndyke makes it clear who is the real power. When one of them says he wants to talk to Matthews, since "he's the candidate," Thorndyke shuts him up immediately: "As far as you're concerned, I'm the candidate, and you'll do as I say, or, so help me I'll break you in my newspapers....Make up your mind." The man says he'll go along. "As for the rest of you," Thorndyke continues, "you'll stick to your bargains....If you have any problems, come to me with them."

Jim Taylor, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

Taylor: "...we've got to keep hammering at this man until we smash him." The senator's secretary, Saunders, now a true believer in Smith's cause, has rallied the press behind him, but Moore sets her straight: "This is murder. You've gotta call him off. He's getting nowhere." She doesn't understand: "What are you talking about?" Moore: "Not one word of what he's saying is being printed in that state...Taylor has practically every paper in the state lined up, and he's feeding them doctored-up junk." Saunders asks incredulously: "One man is muzzling the whole state?" Moore: "And how!" Saunders sarcastically says: "Freedom of the press." Then Saunders gets an idea: She calls up Smith's mother and explains what is happening: "Jeff has a paper there, *Boy Stuff*, right?...Well, look, they aren't letting what Jeff says get printed in the state. Now, if I give you a draft of it over the phone right now" — she motions to Moore to start writing it down — "can you print it up and spread a billion copies of it? Swell! Get ready to take it down, will you, Mrs. Smith?" Smith's mother, surrounded by the Boy Rangers, issues the order: "Boys, everything about Jeff. Get pencils and paper quick."

Capra goes to one of his breathless montages to show the effect Taylor has on the news coverage of Smith's filibuster. He cuts between Taylor's machine manipulating the media and public opinion, the false newspaper reports on Smith's filibuster, and the Boy Rangers' attempt to fight Taylor by printing and distributing a special issue of *Boy Stuff* to counteract the lies being printed and broadcast about Smith. Few films show the abuse of the power of the press by unscrupulous publishers any better than Capra does in the film's frantic finale. Taylor, in shirtsleeves, is screeching into the phone as Capra cuts back to Saunders dictating Moore's story over the phone. "Here's your front-page editorial," declares Taylor. "A convicted thief representing you holds the floor of the United States Senate." Smith's Boy Rangers move into action. Capra intercuts between lines of professional big-city linotype machines and the boys setting their type by hand. "Smith Lies, Says Senate" is the Taylor newspaper headline. "Jeff Tells Truth! Shows Taylor Up" is the headline on *Boy Stuff*'s special edition. We see each paper coming off the press — Taylor's professional edition on high-speed presses, the Boy Rangers' newspaper being printed by a hand press. The competing papers are ready for delivery. It's five A.M. Hundreds of boys pass their newspapers out to people in trucks and cars. They stick copies of the special Jeff edition into mailboxes. They hand them to everyone they see. Back at Taylor's newsroom, a reporter runs in holding Smith's newspaper: "*Boy Stuff*, peddled by nine million kids," he yells. The editor shouts: "Well, what are you standing there for? Get the boys out. Kill it!" Taylor's hoodlums attack Smith's Boy Rangers, stopping them from distributing his paper. In a vicious montage, we see the goons pushing kids down and grabbing stacks of newspapers, throwing them into a Taylor machine truck. Other henchmen show up at the *Boy Stuff* press. One slaps a kid, the others grab the remaining newspapers. A Taylor machine truck runs over one of the boy's wagons. Meanwhile, the Taylor newspapers are being hawked all over the city. To make sure that there is nothing left but contempt for Taylor, Capra's final montage shows a car full of Boy Rangers with a sign, "Hurray for Jeff Smith" and a boy blowing his trumpet, being run off the road by a truck of Taylor's goons. Capra cuts away from this horrific scene as the sounds of screaming children and a horrendous crash are heard.

[TAPE ENDS]

That final shot showing the Taylor machine goons going after kids is unforgettable.

As one critic put it, "The unavoidable impression is that the children have been horrifyingly killed or maimed in the collision."

There were hundreds of journalists and newsrooms on the screen and in novels before Frank Capra and his writers took over the genre, and there were hundreds of journalists and newsrooms on the screen long after Capra stopped making movies. But few films had the impact, or the staying power, of a Capra production. Of the thousands of newspaper films made in the twentieth century, few have been seen by more people, especially on television and home video, than Capra films. Many of the images of the journalist we see today are descendants from Capra films reinvented through the years in movies and television. They were repeatedly copied when the films were popular, and they are now part of our culture ripe for reincarnation.

The basic image of the journalist from the silent days of the movies to the media-drenched days of the early twenty-first century is that of the flawed hero fighting everyone and anything to get the facts out to the public. The reporter or editor could get away with anything as long as the end result was *in the*

public interest. The journalist could lie, cheat, distort, bribe, betray, or violate any ethical code as long as the journalist exposed corruption, solved a murder, caught a thief, or saved an innocent. Most films about journalism end with the reporter or editor winning the battle, if not the war.

At the same time, the most indelible image might well be that of the journalist as scoundrel, as evil, as the worst of villains because these journalists use the precious commodity of public confidence in the press for their own selfish ends. If the journalist uses the power of the media for his or her own personal, political, or financial gain, if the end result is *not in the public interest*, then no matter what the journalist does, no matter how much he or she struggles with his or her conscience or tries to do the right thing, evil has won out. The only possible salvation is resigning and leaving the profession — or death.

Betraying the public trust is one of the great sins of democracy, and whether it is a journalist or a politician who does the dirty deed, it is so despicable that it lingers and festers in the memory, gradually overwhelming any heroic deed. That is why Capra's true villains, the media tycoons — the cartoonish Jim Taylor, the frightening D.B. Norton, and the Machiavellian Kay Thorndyke — seem as real today as they did when they were created. Their goals and tactics are familiar to everyone, and real-life parallels in modern media abound. That may be the reason so many people are skeptical of the motives of such media billionaires as Ted Turner and Rupert Murdoch.

These conflicting images of the journalist contribute to the love-hate relationship between the American people and their media that is at the center of the public's confusion about the media in American society today. Surveys continue to show that most Americans want a free press that is always there to protect them from authority and give them a free flow of diverse information. But those same surveys also show that most Americans harbor a deep suspicion about the media, worrying about their perceived power, their meanness and negativism, their attacks on institutions and people, their intrusiveness and callousness, their arrogance and bias.

Anyone watching a Frank Capra film involving journalists would understand the dichotomy. It's in every image of the journalist he helped put on the screen, in the countless images that came before him and in the countless images that came after him.

These images, whether on the movie or television screen, and augmented by real-life experiences and examples, have been absorbed by generations through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They have more power in the American consciousness than the real thing.

In the end, it doesn't matter whether these images are true or not. They make up the image of the journalist in which we believe and upon which we act. And that's even scarier than Capra's monstrous villain...media mogul D.B. Norton's sinister smile into the camera as he lights up a cigar and contemplates his next move.