

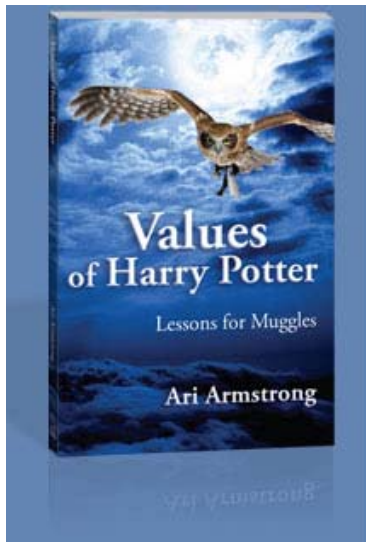


Essays

Harry Potter Series Maligned by Media Article

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by Ari Armstrong



In the *Harry Potter* series of novels by J. K. Rowling, the unethical journalist Rita Skeeter intentionally misrepresents quotes, employs deception to gather information, and smears subjects by dropping important context about them.

Unfortunately, one of Skeeter's signature techniques, dropping context, is on display in a real-life [article](#) published in 2008 by the *American Communication Journal*. This is particularly ironic given that the article, written by lead author Amanda Sturgill in collaboration with Jessica Winney and Tina Libhart, condemns Skeeter as "the epitome of the corrupt, yellow journalist stereotype."

In a media release, Sturgill criticized the Potter series, leading to such [headlines](#) as, "'Potter' bad for newspapers?"

Sturgill and her coauthors claim of the novels, "The extremely negative depiction of journalism could have an adverse effect on child readers of the series as they may not have an understanding of journalism in a broader context." However, Sturgill's article actually demonstrates through its own errors, methodological flaws, and missing context that the critical skepticism toward media encouraged by the Potter series is entirely warranted.

Furthermore, elements of the novels ignored by Sturgill's paper reveal a constructive view of journalism within the series.

Sturgill's False Ideal

Sturgill's article inappropriately contrasts the corrupt instances of journalism in the Potter series with a nonexistent perfect ideal. The paper's abstract states that, "[g]iven the prevalence of tabloid journalism and 'entertainment' news," children may fail to understand "true journalistic integrity." The paper

continues, "The ideal goal of journalism is to ensure an informed citizenry in an objective and truthful manner."

However, in the real world, journalism often falls short of its "true integrity" and ideals, and the Potter series properly encourages readers to become aware of this fact.

As Sturgill's paper grants, children are in fact inundated with "tabloid journalism and 'entertainment' news;" they often see it whenever the television is on or whenever they walk through a grocery line.

Sturgill's paper complains that, in the Potter series, "[i]ndividuals within the government" leak "information to the press" and seek publicity "to influence how subjects are perceived in print" -- practices that are prevalent in real-life journalism.

Even higher orders of journalism often fail. A few illustrative examples should suffice to secure the point.

* In 2003, Jayson Blair, while working for the *New York Times*, perhaps the most prestigious newspapers in the world, committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events," as the paper itself later admitted.

* In 2001, the *Denver Post* reported that the local Anti-Defamation League was "looking into" the political activism of Bob Glass (a friend of mine). The paper neglected to mention that Glass is Jewish and that he lost relatives in the Holocaust.

* Recently the *Las Vegas Sun* published an article by Anjeanette Damon about political candidate Sharron Angle in the context of Christian Reconstructionism, an avowedly theocratic movement. Indeed, the major focus of the article is Reconstructionism, though it interweaves discussion about Angle. As a brief aside, the author mentions, "Angle has never advocated those [Reconstructionist] views." The entire point of the article, then, is to smear Angle by association. (That said, I have serious concerns about the ways that Angle in fact wants to impose religious doctrines by legal force.)

* In 2008, the *Denver Post* published an article with claims about studies of children's health insurance. Unfortunately, when I asked about the studies, they did not in fact support the author's statements, as Dave Kopel pointed out. (I don't mean to pick on the *Denver Post*, which is generally a good paper, but that's the paper that I most closely follow.)

I suspect Sturgill would reply that the publications I mention are generally good, and the problems I discuss were mostly corrected within the realm of journalism. Sturgill's paper claims that "there is no recourse for bad journalism in the series." (The paper's claim is wrong, as I will address later.) Here my point is simply that, in real life, journalists often make mistakes (and sometimes they act unethically), and as children mature they should learn to

interact with media critically rather than blindly assume it reflects some Platonic ideal.

Moreover, the fact that inaccuracies and errors within journalism are so often corrected demonstrates the importance of a critical readership. It is exactly the sort of critical, independent thinking exemplified by Harry Potter and his allies that serves to correct journalistic mistakes. Consumers of journalism will do well to adopt the thoughtful skepticism promoted by the Potter series.

Flawed Methodology Pulls Quotes Out of Context

The express methodology of Sturgill's paper is to take quotes from the Potter series out of the context of the story. However, it is only within the context of the story that the relevant quotes may be properly understood.

Sturgill's paper explains: "Two coders completed a framing analysis of the media references in the *Harry Potter* series of children's books. ... The coders were provided with an exhaustive compendium of direct quotes from the first six books of the series that made any mention of media..."

Moreover, all countervailing evidence to the paper's thesis was simply discarded from the "frames." The paper claims that "it was discovered that there were not enough references to Muggles' journalism for it to be used as a frame." However, even minor references to Muggle [non-magical] journalism are important, as they help establish the context for normal, non-magical life (i.e., our real world).

The paper continues:

The only examples of news given [in the paper] are ones that portray it as manipulated, inaccurate and unethical. References to the Wizarding world's only other newspaper, the tabloid *The Quibbler*, and references to other forms of media such as radio were minor and not of any particular significance when weighed against the references made to corrupt, underhanded journalism.

The paper's claim about the *Quibbler* is simply false: that paper publishes a critical interview that dramatically impacts the progression of the story. (I will address this important omission in more detail later.) Likewise, radio plays a pivotal role in the series in the final book, though Sturgill's paper addresses only the first six books. (The final Potter book was published in 2007, shortly before the release of Sturgill's article.)

Interestingly, Sturgill's paper notes three examples of honest journalism before dismissing those examples as irrelevant. For example, "In the first book, Harry, while at school, learns about a break-in at an important bank vault in the wizarding world."

Sturgill's paper wrongly downplays the significance of brief instances of good journalism, which help set the context for a normal world; it omits very important instances of critical journalism (as we shall see in a future section);

and it misrepresents the significance of quotes that it does cover. I'll continue with that last point in discussing the character of Rita Skeeter.

Rita Skeeter's Role in the Novels

Critical to understanding the quotes about journalism are the plots of the novels. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the character of Rita Skeeter serves several literary functions. First, she recognizes Harry as a celebrity and turns his story (or some fictionalized version of it) into gossip news.

Notice that, far from offering a distorted vision of how journalism actually operates, the Potter series describes precisely how many journalists tend to treat celebrities. Just look at how popular media treated the romantic relationship between Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck, for example. Look at the media's (and the public's) obsession with celebrities like Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, and so on. Look at the legions of paparazzi photographers who surround virtually every major celebrity. Thus, insofar as Skeeter represents a gossip columnist pandering to the prurient tastes of her audience, she simply mirrors how real-life journalism often functions.

Skeeter serves another function in the novel's story: she reveals how well-known people can be subject to fickle public sentiment. Recall that, as Harry enters the magical world, complete strangers approach him and praise him for defeating Voldemort (which Harry barely remembers, as it happened in his infancy). In the second novel, Harry is treated to the unfounded suspicions of his classmates, who fear his suspected connection to the monster roaming the school. In *Goblet*, Harry again experiences the ups and downs of public fame. Again Harry's experiences reflect those of many real-life public figures.

Skeeter also helps to set up Harry's crisis of confidence in Professor Dumbledore, which plays out over the final book (which was not reviewed by Sturgill's paper). It is Skeeter who writes the biased biography of Dumbledore that causes Harry to doubt his former mentor. Notably, in this biography Skeeter gets her facts basically right, only she fails to grasp the full context of Dumbledore's life that makes forgiveness of his worst actions (from his youth) possible.

Obviously Rowling does not intend Skeeter to represent the typical journalist of our world. Instead, Rowling uses Skeeter to advance several of the novels' story lines.

Context Matters: Voldemort's Rise to Power

Another of Skeeter's roles in the novels is to anticipate the growing problems with media generally, a significant concern of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. As Sturgill's paper notes, a major theme of the novels, so far as media is concerned, is "government control of journalism."

It is on this point of government censorship that Sturgill and her coauthors completely fail to account for the purpose of the novels. The Potter novels

are not merely fun stories of magic in which characters happen to populate successive books. Instead, the plot arc of the novels spans the entire series. Over the first three books, Voldemort plots his return to power. In the fourth book, Voldemort succeeds in regaining his powers. In the fifth book, the Ministry of Magic refuses to acknowledge Voldemort's return to power and seeks to vilify Harry and his allies. It is in this context that the Ministry actively censors the press.

Over the span of the final two books, Voldemort seizes control of the Ministry. Voldemort, a brutal and murderous tyrant, in important ways mirrors the rise of Adolf Hitler. Under Voldemort's reign, the media indeed becomes the government's propaganda machine. That Sturgill's paper simply ignores this plot arc is shocking.

In the final three books of the series, Rowling is not writing to represent the normal state of journalism: she is writing to show what happens to a society when its government becomes corrupt and when the government then falls to the rule of a dictator. One implication of such a state of affairs is that journalism becomes subject to government manipulation and censorship.

Notice that journalism is not the only field subject to oppressive government controls: in *Order of the Phoenix*, the Hogwarts school falls under the corruptive influence of Ministry lackey Dolores Umbridge. The Minister of Magic subverts the criminal law itself by persecuting Harry over a bogus charge.

Does Sturgill wish to deny that corrupt governments often turn to censorship? Does she wish maturing children to ignore this crucial fact of history? Does she wish citizens to turn a blind eye to such problems because they do not fit neatly into coding frames?

Books about Nazi propaganda do not represent, and do not claim to represent, typical journalism in a healthy society. Neither do novels about the rise of a Hitler-like dictator, which is precisely what the Potter books are.

Context matters. Yes, particularly in the final books of the series, government agents defile the field of journalism. They do so in an era of government corruption and, eventually, dictatorship. Again the Potter books do not distort reality; they address real-life problems.

The *Quibbler's* Pivotal Interview

As noted, Sturgill's paper refers to journalism in the *Quibbler* as "minor and not of any particular significance." This claim by Sturgill's paper is ridiculous, given that the *Quibbler* publishes an interview with Harry Potter of pivotal significance.

In *Order of the Phoenix*, Hermione Granger (Harry's close friend and major ally) calls the *Quibbler* "rubbish" (page 193), a well-deserved appraisal given its penchant for publishing sensationalistic, groundless stories. However, in this frightening era of corrupt government and the accompanying censorship

of the media, the *Quibbler* soon plays a crucial role in getting the truth out to the public.

Hermione conscripts Skeeter to write the "true story. All the facts. Exactly as Harry [a first-hand witness to the relevant events] reports them. ... I want to give him [Harry] the opportunity to tell the truth!" (page 567). Rita replies, "There's no market for a story like that." Hermione retorts, "You mean the *Prophet* won't print it because Fudge [the Minister of Magic] won't let them."

Rita claims, "People just don't want to believe [Voldemort is] back" (page 567). Hermione: "So the *Daily Prophet* exists to tell people what they want to hear, does it?" Skeeter: "The *Prophet* exists to sell itself, you silly girl."

Sturgill's paper recounts the story to that point, but the paper declines to tell the rest of the story.

Luna Lovegood, daughter of the *Quibbler's* editor, says of her father, "He publishes important stories that he thinks the public needs to know" (page 568). Skeeter retorts, "I could manure my garden with the contents of that rag."

Hermione persists in her view that journalism can and properly does serve to tell the truth to the public. She tells Skeeter, "Well, this is your chance to raise the tone of it a bit, isn't it?"

Skeeter replies that nobody will take an article in the *Quibbler* seriously.

Hermione's reply is noteworthy:

Some people won't. But the *Daily Prophet's* version of the Azkaban breakout [in which Voldemort's followers escaped from prison] had some gaping holes in it. I think a lot of people will be wondering whether there isn't a better explanation of what happened, and if there's an alternative story available, even if it is published in... an *unusual* magazine -- I think they might be rather keen to read it."

Hermione ropes Skeeter into writing the article by threatening to expose her illegal means of gathering information.

Once Skeeter agrees, Hermione says, "Okay, Harry? Ready to tell the public the truth?" (Page 569)

Hermione's views of journalism are precisely the opposite of what Sturgill's paper claims the series promotes. While Hermione rightly recognizes the dangers and shortcomings of government-controlled media, she also recognizes the crucial role journalism can play in relating the truth to the public.

While Skeeter suggests that newspapers focus on sensationalistic stories in order to sell copies to gullible readers, Hermione respects readers enough to realize that they are dissatisfied with obviously shoddy journalism, and

generally they are intelligent enough to tell when a story rings true and when it does not.

For Sturgill's paper to fail to report Hermione's views of journalism, in a paper purportedly about the portrayal of journalism in the Potter series, is fantastically unprofessional and unjust toward Rowling's work.

While it is true that, within the unusual context of the series, Hermione conscripts Skeeter by blackmailing her, Hermione's lessons easily carry over to real life. Without Skeeter's assistance, Hermione could have found another writer to cover the story, or she could have written it up herself. In our world, citizen journalists often write letters, op-eds, and blog posts to advance a story. While Sturgill's paper claims that Skeeter is the only "journalist of any consequence" named in the series, this is wrong: Hermione also functions as an important journalist -- a citizen journalist -- in this case.

It is worth noting that, while *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* lies outside the scope of Sturgill's paper, it contains even more positive portrayals of journalism. The *Quibbler's* editor continues to report the truth to the public (see page 299), even though doing so gets him in deep trouble with Voldemort's minions (and he eventually relents). Moreover, Harry's allies use the radio to report the news of the resistance (see page 437).

Recourse to Bad Journalism

Sturgill's paper claims that "references to any form of accurate, non-obstructive journalism were virtually non-existent;" we have already seen that this claim is false. Sturgill's paper also wrongly claims that "there is no recourse for bad journalism in the series" and that bad "journalism always goes unpunished."

We have already seen that Hermione takes it upon herself to hold not only the *Prophet* but Skeeter accountable for bad journalism.

Contrary to the suggestion of Sturgill's paper, Harry has access to a variety of competing media outlets. He reads both the *Daily Prophet* and the Muggle news for hints about what's going on in the magical world. The *Quibbler* plays a crucial role in reporting news in the fifth and seventh books, and, as we have seen, the allies' radio network also serves as a key news outlet in the seventh book. In addition, personal contacts serve an important role in spreading the truth and countering bad journalism.

Order of the Phoenix again offers poignant examples of how characters fight for good journalism.

After the *Quibbler's* interview with Harry is published, Harry receives a stack of letters from readers. Some are unsupportive, but some recognize the truth of his account (page 579).

At the Hogwarts school, Dolores Umbridge, who has taken over the school, declares, "Any student found in possession of the magazine *The Quibbler* will be expelled" (page 581).

Hermione is thrilled by Umbridge's response, saying, "If she could have done one thing to make absolutely sure that every single person in this school will read your interview, it was banning it!"

Obviously Hermione does not support Umbridge's authoritarian control of the school, but she rightly predicts her fellow students' response. Similarly, in our world, [Banned Books Week](#) promotes works that have been banned.

Ultimately, the message of the Harry Potter series, in terms of journalism, is that the best way to fight bad journalism is to keep telling the truth. For example, finally in *Order of the Phoenix*, after the facts are too overwhelming even for the Ministry and the *Prophet* to ignore, the paper relents, reporting, "In a brief statement Friday night, Minister of Magic Cornelius Fudge confirmed that [Voldemort] has returned to this country and is active once more" (page 845).

The book's message is that, even in the face of shoddy reporting or outright censorship, ultimately the truth can prevail, if its advocates keep fighting for it.

Conclusion

Sturgill and her coauthors rightly urge educators and parents to "expose children to a wide variety of literature that demonstrates the essential role of journalism in a free society."

However, Sturgill's paper wrongly criticizes the Potter series for showing an "extremely negative depiction of journalism [that] could have an adverse effect on child readers..."

Rowling's works instead encourages children to think for themselves. (See the second chapter of my book.) The novels encourage readers neither to accept whatever they read or watch at face value, nor to uncritically reject it.

Rather, these novels encourage readers to critically examine claims, regardless of their source, for internal consistency and adherence to the facts. Furthermore, the series urges readers to fight for the truth.

Unfortunately for Sturgill and her coauthors, their paper cannot itself withstand such critical scrutiny. Their failure is particularly ironic given that they employ Rita Skeeter's technique of dropping context even as they wrongly accuse the Potter series of doing the same. If in the future Sturgill and her coauthors wish to find writers who give media a bad name, they might wish to first confirm that their nearest example is not revealed in the mirror.

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