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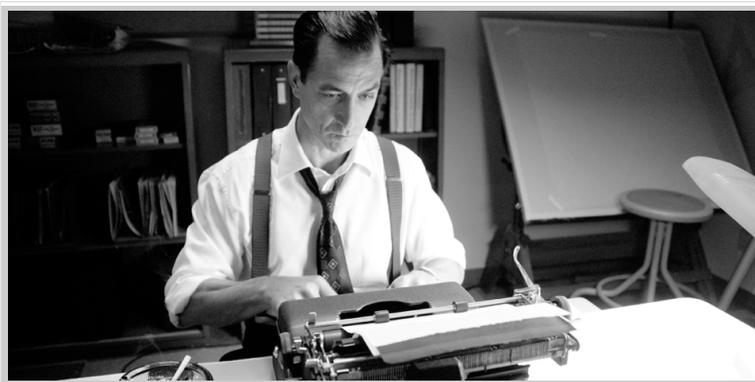
For journalism alumni of City University London

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Hollywood's hacks: Journalists in film through the ages

Posted on [March 19, 2012](#) by [admin](#)



Good Night and Good Luck, image courtesy of the Guardian

Hollywood needs journalists. As well as writing the reviews that end up on publicity posters, hacks give the movies some of their favourite tropes. Where would the disaster film be without the sombre news anchor to fill in the plot, or the biopic without the pack of nosy reporters, notebooks waving and flashbulbs popping?

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But when it puts them front and centre, Tinseltown tends to treat journalists with respect, even reverence. That may be a measure of the difference between America's straight-laced newspaper culture and the brash British press. Like Woodward and Bernstein in *All The President's Men* (1977), Hollywood's hacks speak truth to power and stand for freedom.

The trouble is that the reality of a journalist's job – moving words around a page, waiting for the phone to ring – can look, well, dull. In the golden era of newspaper films, including *His Girl Friday* (1937), *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Deadline USA* (1952), the whirr of presses and the newsroom's bustle were enough to set the pulse racing. But an office of people tapping away on Macs isn't very cinematic. Perhaps that's why recent journalism films, from *Almost Famous* to *The Rum Diary*, have often been period pieces.

XCity takes a look at 10 journalistic "types" – the way Hollywood imagines them.



His Girl Friday, image courtesy of the Guardian

1. The Power Couple

Case study: Walter Burns (Cary Grant) and Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) in *His Girl Friday* (1940) Howard Hawks's remake of *The Front Page* transformed the sparring reporters into a divorced couple. Hildy, a hotshot reporter, left Walter Burns after he cancelled their honeymoon to cover a mining disaster. Now Walter's chasing Hildy, Hildy's chasing a scoop, and both will go to any lengths to get what they want.

We say: Work-life balance? Pah! Never has journalism seemed more exciting than among the film's clacking typewriters, candlestick phones and breakneck wit.



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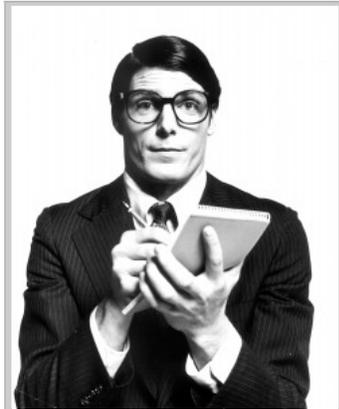
Roman Holiday, image courtesy of the Guardian

2. The Gentleman

Case study: Joe Bradley (Gregory Peck) in **Roman Holiday** (1953)

Bradley, an American expat reporter in Rome, finds Audrey Hepburn semi-conscious in the street and takes her home. No, not like that – this is Gregory Peck! Realising the girl is a princess fleeing her royal chores, Bradley pitches his editor a scoop, but after a scooter ride and a smooch with Audrey, he drops the story.

We say: He won't be getting a job at The Sun on Sunday with that attitude.



Clark Kent

3. The Star Reporter

Case study: Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) in **Superman** (1978)

When Superman rescues her from a helicopter crash, Lois is quick to add the flying vigilante to her contacts book. She bags a thorough, hard-hitting interview with the caped hunk, beginning with "Are you married?", then progressing to "What colour underwear am I wearing?" The Pulitzer's in the bag.

We say: For all her supposed investigative skills, Lois fails to see through Clark Kent's elaborate disguise – a pair of spectacles.



Almost Famous, image courtesy of the Guardian

4. The Hanger-On

Case study: William Miller (Patrick Fugit) in **Almost Famous** (2000)

In Cameron Crowe's 1970s nostalgia trip, teenage wannabe hack William can't believe his luck when Rolling Stone send him on tour with Stillwater – his favourite band. Real-life legend Lester Bangs (Philip Seymour Hoffman) warns him against befriending his heroes, but William pays little heed – and pays the price when the band sabotage his feature.

We say: Faced with today's media-trained stars, Bangs's advice is tougher than ever to follow.



Good Night and Good Luck image courtesy of the Guardian

5. The Voice of Reason

Case study: Edward R. Murrow (David Strathairn) in **Good Night, and Good Luck** (2005)

"We cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home," says Murrow in George Clooney's celebration of journalism at its high-minded best. In the sharp-suited 1950s, the Murrow heroically fights McCarthyism from his anchorman's chair. Though it recalls a less tolerant era, the film suggests that today's television has lost its moral purpose.

We say: Murrow's pulpit reporting is very fine, but it gave rise to Keith Olbermann and Bill O'Reilly. Long live the bland BBC.



The Devil Wears Prada, image courtesy of the Guardian

6. The Doormat

Case study: Andrea Sachs (Anne Hathaway) in **The Devil Wears Prada** (2006)

Fresh-faced graduate Andrea dreams of being an investigative journalist, but finds herself enslaved to a fearsome fashion editor (based on Vogue's Anna Wintour, and deliciously played by Meryl Streep). In a bizarre, bitchy world, Andrea starts going native. The film repeats all the old fashion clichés, and entirely fails to make Hathaway look frumpy, but scores high in the guilty pleasure stakes.

We say: Therapeutic viewing if your blood runs cold at the words “fashion cupboard”.



7. The SHOUTY EDITOR

Case study: Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren) in *State of Play* (2008)

Investigating a pair of suspicious deaths, Washington Globe reporter Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) unravels a web of scandal. Mirren plays his indomitable editor, who – thanks to her staff's incompetence and the paper's falling sales – is ANGRY ALL THE TIME. If she wasn't female and British, Mirren's gruff boss with a heart of gold would be the archetypal Hollywood editor.

We say: Bill Nighy's twinkling, unflappable editor in the original BBC series was much more fun.



8. The Kiss-and-Tell Columnist

Case study: Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker) in *Sex and the City* (2008)

In the HBO show's movie incarnation, Carrie hires an assistant (Jennifer Hudson). It's easy to get snowed under when “work” means endless lunches mining your friends' bedroom misadventures for life lessons. Sex and the City's “column” conceit may be grating (and don't mention the dire sequel), but it's worth remembering how taboo-busting the show once was.

We say: How can a journalist afford a new pair of Manolo Blahniks every episode?





Tintin, image courtesy of the Guardian

9. The Boy Wonder

Case study: Tintin (Jamie Bell) in [The Adventures of Tintin](#) (2011)

His creator Hergé gave Tintin's age as a tender 17, yet the boy reporter can already shoot, ride a motorbike and fly a biplane – skills sadly absent from most journalism courses.

Steven Spielberg's motion capture version ratchets up the action a notch further, though the script drops in the odd reference to our hero's supposed career. Still, we never see him actually write a story...

We say: OK, but can he tweet?



The Rum Diary

10. The Long Luncher

Case study: Paul Kemp (Johnny Depp) in [The Rum Diary](#) (2011)

Withnail and I's Bruce Robinson directed this uneven adaptation of an early novel by gonzo great Hunter S Thompson. Depp plays Paul Kemp, a reporter moonlighting on a local paper in Puerto Rico. A Tintin gone way off the rails, Kemp is seduced by the sunshine, by a beautiful blonde (Amber Heard) and by every journalist's twin nemeses – PR and the hotel mini-bar.

We say: Show us the alcoholic hack who looks like Johnny Depp.

Edward Randell

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