

Book Reviews

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Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman

Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 241 pp.

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Absent of real-life experiences, what we know and believe about different classes of people is usually shaped by media. Of course, this is often the basis of stereotypes, when a fictional narrative ends up becoming our reality. Scholars usually analyze this phenomenon by examining media portrayals of race, gender, and sexual orientation. But stereotypes pervade many categories of people, including occupations. For example, how we perceive doctors, lawyers, politicians, or law enforcement is shaped by the ubiquitous dramas that feature such characters. Sometimes pop culture paints a picture of great heroes with lawyers like Atticus Finch and politicians like Jed Bartlet. Characters such as these may inspire us to believe in something greater or to choose similar careers. But oftentimes pop culture paints a much darker picture with doctors like Gregory House and politicians like Frank Underwood. Characters such as these leave us questioning their respective professions and may even lead us to question our humanity. Similarly, pop culture frames our perceptions of the journalism occupation. As the title of the new book by Ehrlich and Saltzman tells us, sometimes journalists are portrayed as heroes and sometimes they are portrayed as scoundrels.

Ehrlich (University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign) and Saltzman (University of Southern California and director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Project) have put together a thorough history of pop culture references to journalists. In doing so, they have isolated prominent themes, with each theme constituting a chapter. The first chapter is titled “History.” This chapter surveys works from before 1980 and finds that the conflicting depictions of journalists date back to the earliest forms of mass entertainment. The second chapter is titled “Professionalism.” This chapter highlights the works that either celebrate ethics, denounce the lack of ethics, or recognize the constant struggle with the journalist ideal. The third chapter, titled “Difference,” includes texts, which feature journalists who are outsiders in a field traditionally dominated by White heterosexual males. The fourth chapter is titled “Power.” This chapter examines another conflict in the profession—the charge of being the watchdog while also being a member of society’s elite. The next chapter, titled “Image,” looks specifically at television and photojournalists and the power of

the image to both create empathy and dehumanize. The final themed chapter is titled “War” and outlines depictions of journalists covering conflicts. These works either praise their bravery or brand them tools of propaganda.

The detail in this book is noteworthy. The authors do a masterful job supporting the themes with a multitude of examples. However, as is with any textual analysis, sometimes the work can feel like a laundry list of titles. This hurts the readability, but for academic rigor, this level of detail is needed. In addition, this work delves deep into the history of entertainment. So, for an undergraduate (and even many graduate students), this work may seem to be just an inventory of obscure media titles, thus losing the reader.

But for an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course in cinema or media studies, the student should be able to keep up with the number of lesser-known works (they may be turned on to lost classics). This book could even be used to introduce the conflicts that journalism has to deal with as a profession, through the more accessible lens of pop culture. This book is also a fantastic example for any graduate student doing a textual analysis for their own thesis or dissertation. Ultimately, anyone who studies media portrayals or public perceptions of journalists would benefit greatly from reading this book and incorporating it into their teaching and research.

Stephen Cushion

News and Politics: The Rise of Live and Interpretive Journalism. London, England: Routledge, 2014.
182 pp.

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Television news is so ubiquitous in our culture, it is easy to overlook how its technical, economic, and cultural elements have shaped message construction and processing. However, the cumulative influence of these messages is great, and the subject bears a close look.

News and Politics: The Rise of Live and Interpretive Journalism, by Stephen Cushion, is an ambitious and focused examination of an important subset of television news. Specifically, this monograph content analyzes political coverage on television news bulletins (in the United States, network evening news shows) across time (going back to the emergence of cable news channels) and comparatively (across three countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway).

Just what constitutes “journalism” varies across cultures and news institutions. However, one common element is the ideal of objectivity. The journalist may cover the story but stands apart from it. Another is layers of oversight—many eyes may sign off on a story, editing and sharpening, before it is presented to the audience. However, what if the story is constructed live, on the fly?

The study focuses on this kind of “rolling news” content. It has been made possible through technological advances such as satellite and microwave transmission of live interviews. Cable channels initially turned to this kind of coverage by the need to fill a