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Orson Welles in Citizen Kane

The on-screen image of the roving reporter has captivated British filmgoers since the very beginnings of cinema. Even before the advent of the “talkies”, Charlie Chaplin made his on-screen debut playing swindler-come-journalist Edgar English in *Making a Living* (1914, director: Henry Lehrman). From Cary Grant’s determined editor in *His Girl Friday* (1940, dir: Howard

Hawks), to Courtney Cox Arquette's ambitious TV journalist in the horror flick series *Scream* (1996, dir: Wes Craven), journalists on film have offered fantasy, fun and escapism to millions. Yet amid the plaudits paid to some of the most abiding Hollywood movies, it is easy to forget that Britain has an impressive canon of celluloid journalists of its own.

That could be changing, now it has emerged that three new high-profile, British-led or inspired productions are in the pipeline. The film rights to Rod Beacham's play, *Lies Have Been Told*, about the life and demise of infamous *Mirror* proprietor Robert Maxwell, have been bought by Hollywood producer Edward R Pressman, the man behind blockbuster *American Psycho* among others. Pressman is reported in *The Guardian* as saying: "Maxwell's story is *Citizen Kane* meets *Wall Street*". Meanwhile, Hollywood heart-throb Brad Pitt is set to play UK reporter Cal McCaffrey in a film version of the 2003 BBC mini-series *State of Play*. And according to *The Observer*, BBC Films is in advanced talks with financial backers over *Embeds*, the tale of an embedded newspaper journalist's travails in Iraq.

The best examples

Representations of journalists in UK films have ranged from the crusading to the unscrupulous to the romantic, with often a smattering of all three characteristics. By necessity, films have tended to over-dramatise the essentially routine nature of everyday newsroom activity. Nevertheless, each in its different way offers fascinating insights and parallels with real-world news production. As a product of their times, it is intriguing to witness how British films have depicted emerging concerns about the journalistic media, such as dumbing down, work-life balance, the woman's role in the newsroom, and unethical behaviour. However, little research has been done on British media representations of journalists.

Matthew C Ehrlich's excellent book *Journalism in the Movies* (Illinois, 2004) comprehensively charts the Hollywood depiction of American journalists with its rich array of stereotypes and exaggerations. Similarly, the University of Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication has a fascinating website on the *Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* (www.ijpc.org), but its main focus is the USA. The films recurrently cited as the best examples of journalism on film are typically from the U.S., such as *All The President's Men* (1976, dir: Alan J. Pakula) and, more recently, George Clooney's treatment of Edward Murrow's public clash with Senator Joseph

McCarthy, in *Good Night, and Good Luck*. But what about some of the riveting UK examples, which are all too often overlooked?

I am completing a new book exploring the way journalism ethics have been treated in journalism films, not just in Hollywood but globally, and I have identified a number of British films and TV programmes depicting journalists in the course of my research. Admittedly, I have found that compared with Hollywood, fewer UK or European films feature journalists. There are a number of reasons that may explain this, cultural as well as practical. Firstly, the U.S. media have been seen historically as defenders of freedom of information, as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution in the First Amendment. While the UK and other countries have professional ethical codes of conduct for journalists, these documents are consensual and self-policing rather than being legally binding. Secondly, if we look at the history of film production, many journalists were conscripted to Hollywood in the 1920s and 30s as screenwriters. They appealed to the studio system because they could write sharp, wisecracking, screwball humour to tight production deadlines, and accepted far less money than their more literary screenwriter counterparts.

Despite the comparative lack of celluloid reporters in British production, journalism has nonetheless made a significant impact on the large and small screen. From crusaders to hapless hacks, there are many British examples worthy of analysis for their timely insights and commentary on real-world issues. One of the earliest examples of the journalist on screen here was in *Doss House* (1933, dir: John Baxter). Running for less than an hour, this British social drama depicts a night spent by an undercover reporter in a hostel for down-and-outs in the Bloomsbury area of central London. Disguised as a tramp, the reporter is on the hunt for an escaped convict. As well as telling the story, the film attempts to crusade subtly by illuminating the grim conditions the disadvantaged had to contend with. However, the image of the journalist as a defender of social justice was quite unusual in British cinema.

In *Sensation!* (1936, dir: Brian Desmond Hurst), the British film version of the stage play *The Murder Gang*, written by George Munroe and Basil Dean, a gang of competitive crime reporters race each other to the scene of every major killing in town. The film exposes every trick in the journalist's notebook as they try to out-scoop one another. One of the most ruthless reporters is the *Daily Post*'s Pat Heaton who harangues and tricks the wife of a suspect in order to obtain evidence. Journalists are portrayed as slapdash,

shoddy and corrupt in comparison with the detective, who is meticulous in his fact-finding.

Post-Second World War productions in particular cemented the representation of the newsman – mostly, male journalists were shown – as a self-seeking opportunist. *Brighton Rock* (1947, dir: John Boulting), the murder thriller based on the novel of the same name by Graham Greene, is set in a malevolent and dark 1930s Brighton. Alan Wheatley plays Fred Hale, a seedy crime reporter for the *Daily Messenger* sent by his editor to the seaside town to distribute prize competition cards. Unfortunately, he is recognised by Pinky Brown (Richard Attenborough) as the journalist whose story about Pinky's former gang leader inadvertently led to his demise. Hale's fate is sealed at the hands of the ruthless yet baby-faced hoodlum at the end of Brighton Pier. Greene, a film critic in the 1930s writing in *The Spectator*, compared British newspaper films adversely with American examples.

Brighton Rock is in stark contrast to representations on film of American newspapermen and women, who came to symbolise key elements of the American dream – the upholders of freedom, the exposers of corruption and the protectors of democracy. The troubled figure of Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*, the newspaper proprietor apparently modelled on William Randolph Hearst, was symbolic of cultural life to Americans used to seeing cinema as a mirror of reality rather than an art form. *Observer* film critic Phillip French has argued that non-American cinema has a different relationship with reality: "Europeans... have seen the cinema as an art form but not central to life, and the newspaperman as a marginal, somewhat disreputable person."

Dilemmas of journalists

The fact that British newspaper proprietors enjoyed privilege and titles not shared by the working journalist – still do, come to that – did not go unnoticed by film-makers, which may help to explain the prevalence of the hard-drinking and crepuscular over the crusading in film representations. Certainly in the 1950s and 60s, British cinema continued to portray journalists as marginal figures, living on the boundaries of society, sometimes ill-equipped at forming lasting human relationships. Frequently they faced dilemmas in trying to reconcile their personal and professional identities. *Front Page Story* (1954, dir: Gordon Parry) follows a day in the life of *Daily World* news editor John Grant (Jack Hawkins).

Grant must negotiate the pressures from his proprietor and editor to find

sufficient sensational coverage to fill his pages. Simultaneously, he has to manage a diverse team of journalists, ranging from the bitter and cynical to the downright careerist. An underlying sub-plot is the stress and strain, the all-consuming heady nature of competition the industry places on Grant's marriage. This is manifested through the clatter of typewriters and looming deadlines. The figure of Grant is at the nexus of myriad factors, often conflicting, that journalists contend with when trying to produce news.

Edward Judd's embittered and shambolic Peter Stenning is a *Daily Express* reporter battling with alcoholism as he struggles to come to terms with his failed marriage in *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961, dir: Val Guest). This film contains one of the most striking plotlines of any British journalism movie, as reporters try to piece together why the planet is overheating and heading towards imminent disaster. Legendary *Express* editor Arthur Christiansen plays a cameo, as himself, directing the newsroom's attempts to break down official secrecy to get to the facts. The sweltering heat and suffocating mists on the River Thames serve as a visual metaphor for the claustrophobia felt during the Cold War, especially as secret nuclear testing appears to be responsible for tilting the Earth off its axis. With his career and mental fitness in nosedive, Stenning is kept in check by cynical science reporter colleague Maguire, played by Leo McKern.

Stenning: Here's another planet trying to contact us... Are you receiving me? Are you receiving me? You are? Well get knotted!

Maguire: Must have been one hell of a big bang to give these seismograph readings.

Stenning: Tell me all about sunspots, Daddy!

Maguire: Sunspots are caused when the rays of the sun beat down on an unprotected torso thus causing a sun rash similar to acne.

Stenning: I thought it was clean living that did that.

The fact that director and co-writer Val Guest used to work in the London offices of *The Hollywood Reporter* may explain the realism of the on-screen newsroom. There is a daunting banner festooned across the room, bearing the order "IMPACT! Get it in your first sentence, get it in your headlines, and in pictures most of all." The ever-present clock and calendar dominate the *mise en scène* as constant reminders of the life-or-death struggle to save humanity – and to produce a definitive front-page splash whatever the outcome.

This film and those that came after it were much more likely to expose the culture of secrecy and the notion of a secret state out of control. The thriller

Defence of the Realm (1985, dir: David Drury) has been likened to the great U.S. paranoia movie *The Parallax View* (1974, dir: Alan J. Pakula) in terms of the journalist having to work like a detective to expose conspiracy at the highest levels. Gabriel Byrne plays driven young reporter Nick Mullen from the *Daily Dispatch*. He stumbles upon a thread linking an MP with a KGB agent. The tone of the film reflected the real hostility to the siting of American nuclear weapons in Britain, and conveyed fears of excessive State secrecy highlighted by the prosecutions of Sarah Tisdall and Clive Ponting under the Official Secrets Act. In the film, Mullen uncovers a terrifying nuclear near-miss, which challenges his initial sceptical and apolitical sensibility. Keeping him in check is his sometime mentor, Vernon Bayliss (Denholm Elliott), who symbolises the hard-drinking, cynical vision of Fleet Street, while also embodying investigative journalistic values increasingly threatened by editors' preference for info-tainment over hard news.

Her pants on full view

There have been too few female journalists in British films, and certainly nothing to match the fast-talking wise-cracking Hildy in *His Girl Friday* (1940, dir: Howard Hawks) – although, admittedly, the role of Hildy was written for and filled by a male actor in stage versions of the original play, *The Front Page*. Though set in Ireland, *Veronica Guerin* (2003, dir: Joel Schumacher) is a UK/U.S./Irish co-production telling the true story of the Irish *Sunday Independent* journalist assassinated by drug dealers. The film has all the characteristics of a war film, the battleground being the streets of Dublin under siege by the scourge of heroin and associated crime. As a female journalist, Guerin (Cate Blanchett) is, on the one hand, depicted as a crusading reporter, while also seen as neglectful to the point of reckless in exposing her husband and child to potential reprisals. Further dichotomies are conveyed in the way Guerin is shown to be fame-hungry and career-driven, but also prepared to take grave personal risks in the public interest.

Becoming a television journalist is seen as a means to self-improvement by the character Bridget Jones in the eponymous *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001, dir: Sharon Maguire) and the sequel, *Edge of Reason*. In pursuing her ambition, Bridget (Renée Zellweger) must accept any assignment she is offered, even if it means hurtling down a fireman's pole with her derriere and big pants on full view to the nation. However comical, the film struck a chord with career-conscious young woman at a time when much media appears to

epitomise glamour, wealth and autonomy. The film highlights some of the sexism and typecasting young women journalists face as they try to achieve equality with men.

It is not only women journalists who have been portrayed as objects of humour in British cinema. A hilarious scene in *Notting Hill* (1999, dir: Roger Michell) features Hugh Grant's character pretending to be a reporter for *Horse and Hound*. In order to bypass security surrounding his new film star girlfriend, bookshop owner William Thacker bumbles through a raft of ill-thought-through questions every time a press agent enters the interview room and is then dragged off by the publicity team to interview the rest of the blockbuster cast. Any journalist recalling their first nervous attempts at the face-to-face interview will identify with the scene, and indeed I use it in my training of journalists as a cautionary tale.

If and when those major new productions of journalistic subjects reach the big screen, it will be fascinating to see whether they stimulate a deeper interest in the workings of the British news media, and journalists' relationship with the State, as they have done in the U.S. It was widely reported after the release of *All the President's Men* that there was a surge in young people wanting to enter journalism in order to "make a difference" and to challenge the status quo. Perhaps a new raft of films will inspire greater idealism and dynamism on the part of the next generation of reporters.

Sarah Niblock is reader in journalism and MA journalism convenor at Brunel University, London. Her book on journalists in film (as yet untitled) will be published by Reaktion Books as part of their Locations series later this year. She co-authored News Production: Theory and Practice (Routledge, co-author David Machin).