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Not quite like in the movies

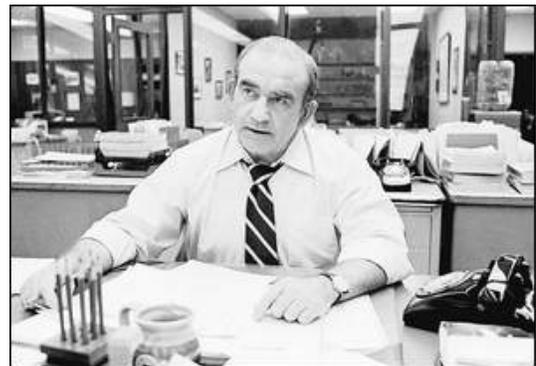
Real newsrooms different from the reel ones

By **Rebecca Rothbaum**

Poughkeepsie Journal

From the corruption-busting crusader to the sleazy ambulance chaser, the fast-talking wisacre to the ambition-driven loner, the reporter in film has a history that is as old as Hollywood itself, a stock character who has shaped the public's perception of journalism as much as it has reflected it.

Not that this image has anything to do with reality. Or that it matters.



AP Photos

Ed Asner is shown in character as he portrays the city editor of the Los Angeles Tribune behind his office desk on the television drama "Lou Grant" in Los Angeles, Ca., Jan. 13, 1978.

"The reality is that few people ever witness a journalist in action," Joe Saltzman, professor of journalism at the University of Southern California, where he heads the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project, said in an e-mail interview. "They rarely visit a newspaper or magazine office or a broadcast newsroom or any other place where journalists work to report the news of the day. Yet they have a very specific idea of what a journalist is and what he or she does."

In great part, he added, that's because they have seen journalists in movies and television, not to mention in plays, cartoons, novels and comic books. "The Front Page," the 1931 adaptation of former newspaperman Ben Hecht's and Charles McArthur's play of the same name, was the first and most influential of these films; it was remade four times, most memorably the Howard Hawks-directed "His Girl Friday," starring Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell. The story, which was recast as a romance between a man and a woman, centers around an editor's desperate attempts to keep his star reporter on for one last story, and established one of the most prevailing stereotypes about journalists.

Created ruthless stereotype

"It shaped several generations' thinking that reporters would do anything for a story and that editors would do anything to make sure that reporter got the story," Saltzman said. "Nothing could stand in the way of getting that story — not ethics, not the law, not even love."

It also featured the kind of electric dialogue that would define the genre — showing up years later in such newsroom portraits as the late '70s television series "Lou Grant," in which Ed Asner played the loud-mouthed editor of an L.A. daily. Such cinematic banter might be appealing, but as most reporters know, it is also woefully misleading. As former long-time Poughkeepsie Journal reporter Carol Trapani put in a recent interview, "if we were all that witty, we would be on television, too."

Hecht was one of a number of former newspaper writers enlisted by Hollywood to turn out scripts for its talkies. As a result, the movies throughout the 1930s and '40s were peppered with reporter-characters —

both nostalgic nods to the writers' former lives and also convenient vehicles for moving the plot along. By Saltzman's accounting, almost every major actor of the period played a journalist. That may have helped endear their characters to audiences, despite the fact that often these characters were morally flawed — and only accidental or unintentional heroes — as Howard Good, a professor at the State University of New York at New Paltz, pointed out.

It is common for the journalists of today to complain they are increasingly vilified by movies — and, to be sure, movies such as "Cronicas," the recent John Leguizamo-vehicle about a sleazy tabloid reporter are a far cry from such true-stories of journalistic bravery and persistence as "The Killing Fields" and "All the President's Men." But Good, the author of five books on journalism in cinema, argues the image of the journalist has always been "murky when you look at it more closely." Just take the 1951 Kirk Douglas film "Ace in the Hole," he said, about a self-interested reporter at a small New Mexico newspaper who delays the rescue efforts of a man trapped in a mine in order to create a better story.

In general, Good cautions against taking any of these films too literally; the best of them often paint real issues in broad strokes and can be "read" as metaphors. He pointed to "Deadline USA," which features Humphrey Bogart as the tough editor of the fictional New York Day, trying to expose a mob ring even as the owners of his paper are about to sell it to a trashy tabloid rival.

Still, experts such as Saltzman and Good and working journalists agreed that on occasion Hollywood gets it right with films and television shows that have captured — or come close to capturing — what reporters and their editors really do and the newsrooms where they do it.

"Of course, 'All the President's Men' is the obvious one," said John Flanagan, a copy editor who has been at the Poughkeepsie Journal for 37 years. The

adaptation of Watergate-breaking Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's now-classic book, the film offers plenty of glamour from stars Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford but most journalists point to its unusual focus on the often tedious and extensive research required by investigative reporting.

Although, as Trapani, who now works for the Brunswick Beacon in Shallotte, N.C., pointed out, it is not quite an accurate depiction of what goes on at, say, a community newspaper. In fact, she remembers seeing the movie while a reporter at the Poughkeepsie Journal, struck by what at the time seemed cutting-edge equipment in the Washington Post newsroom.

She cited "Lou Grant" as a more accurate portrayal, recalling her early days at the Journal in the late '60s, when the newsroom was a more freewheeling place and it was not uncommon for editors to hurl stinging critiques at reporters on the other side of the room.

TV portrayals accurate

Saltzman, too, agreed that some of the most accurate portrayals of journalists have come on the small screen. "Murphy Brown," "Mary Tyler Moore," and "Lou Grant" managed to approximate not only what happens in newsroom but also the families that form there, he said.

Sometimes those families are actual — such as the husband-and-wife team portrayed in the 1994 film "The Paper," about the stressed-out city editor (Michael Keaton) of a New York City tabloid whose workaholic habits are taking a toll on his marriage to a very pregnant former reporter (Marisa Tomei). The movie struck a chord with the Journal's public editor Kathy Norton and her husband, Gerry McNulty, who was at the time the paper's city editor.

"The husband-wife thing was very familiar," Norton said. "Just trying to balance that very crazy professional life with your personal one."

She remembers laughing out loud while McNulty watched some of the scenes stone-faced.

"Despite the fact that it was a typical Hollywood film, it was realistic in its depiction of the stress city editors face," said McNulty, now a professor of journalism at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, who insisted he enjoyed the film. "You're always on the firing line," forced to deal with angry readers, disgruntled reporters and answer to higher-ups whenever something goes amiss.

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