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Howard Rosenberg:

## Prescient Frank Capra Saved the Black Hats for Media Tycoons

Director Frank Capra, who died in 1991, was not known as a futurist, but he was one.

"It's a Wonderful Life" is his best-known work. Yet in thumbing through a dandy new book that recalls an area of his moviemaking not often cited, I've been noting how prophetic he and his writers were when creating crises and conflicts for their many media characters.

The book is "Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film." On the cover, in the 1934 movie "It Happened One Night," is Clark Gable as hard-boiled New York Mail reporter Pete Warne ("Hey, listen, monkey face; when you fired me, you fired the best newshound your filthy scandal sheet ever had"). Yeah, that's the way we all talk. The author is Joe Saltzman, a first-rate news documentarian and a professor and associate dean in USC's Annenberg School for Communication.

Although his focus is Capra's screen work, Saltzman at one point widens his commentary to images of journalists in all movies, including a category of jerk with whom some of you may be familiar.

"Critics," writes Saltzman about movie portrayals of these heartless newspaper cads, "often write columns as well as reviews, and many are cold-blooded, unscrupulous journalists who use their power to get what they want when they want it and collect their pound of flesh whenever they feel like it."

And that's bad?

The drama critic in Capra's 1944 adaptation of "Arsenic and Old Lace" would be insufferable "if he wasn't played so ingratiatingly by Cary Grant," notes Saltzman in his book (which can be purchased through the Web site [www.ijpc.org](http://www.ijpc.org)).

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But no Capra journalists are gleaming heroes, which Saltzman believes may be a genesis of today's broad mistrust of media. It's not such a wonderful life for his newshounds. They're flawed, from Stew Smith (Robert Williams), who drinks too much in "Platinum Blonde" (1931), to Diz Moore (Thomas Mitchell), who drinks too much in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939), to columnist Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck), who doesn't drink too much in "Meet John Doe" (1941). All she does is fabricate a story.

"Capra's editors and reporters may do terrible things, but they're really nice guys," Saltzman said this week. The Big Nasties lurk elsewhere. One reason Saltzman chose Capra as a subject "was that he was so ahead of his time in realizing who the real villains of journalism were." And? "All of the vicious villains in Capra films were tycoons," Saltzman said. "What Capra and Robert Riskin [the writer who was his primary collaborator] predicted is how the media would be controlled by them."

He's speaking now of today's sprawling archipelagos of media interests. The gargantuan ones are AOL Time Warner, Viacom Inc., Walt Disney Co. and Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., each having potential, through their splayed radii of communications, to manipulate the information we receive and control what we think and think about. On a smaller scale, but right there with them, is this paper's media-conglomerate owner, Tribune Co.

As media critic Mark Crispin Miller has written:

"The true cause of the enormous ills that now dismay so many Americans--the universal sleaze and 'dumbing down,' the flood-tide of corporate propaganda, the terminal insanity of United States politics--has risen not from any grand decline in national character ... but from the inevitable toxic influence of those few corporations that have monopolized our culture."

Speaking as a monopolizer, I plead guilty. Even if Miller is overstating a bit, though, the trend of growing influence by a few corporations--that own movies, book publishing, magazines, newspapers, over-the-air television, cable and you name it--is extremely troubling.

What would Capra do about it if he were making movies today? "He'd go after AOL Time Warner, Disney and all the rest," Saltzman said. "He'd probably make a movie with a TV reporter, someone at a local station, showing how people there were fighting against a takeover."

In other words, Capra opposed centering media control in fewer and fewer hands, which at once widens the reach of the messenger and narrows and homogenizes the message. "That attitude was a key part of his thinking in the '30s and '40s," Saltzman said. "He was afraid of this control of the media."

Even though the vast bulk of Capra's films were made before the TV era, and his journalists largely mirrored newspaper cliches of the time, their

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reflections of expanding power in media boardrooms apply more than ever.

Released in 1948 and based on a stage play, for example, "State of the Union" has Spencer Tracy as a presidential candidate who makes compromises and alters his values to accommodate the ambitions of a ruthless newspaper publisher (Angela Lansbury) and political boss (Adolphe Menjou).

Saltzman finds the 1941 tycoon in "Meet John Doe" even more wicked. Facing dismissal from her job, it's Stanwyck's Mitchell who does the unthinkable by inventing in her newspaper column a letter from a John Doe who vows to commit suicide on Christmas Eve to protest the misery, corruption and hypocrisy suffocating him. It's despotic new publisher D.B. Norton (Edward Arnold), however, who is Capra's epic scoundrel here, because Mitchell would not be writing her dishonest column of protest had he not bought the paper and given her and her colleagues pink slips in pursuit of his dream: a fascist U.S.

It's not fascism that dominates today's headlines. If Capra were alive and active today, would he want to make a movie showing reporters covering combat in Afghanistan or the Middle East instead of filming their combat with editors and moguls? Only one Capra film, "Here Comes the Groom" in 1951, includes a foreign correspondent (played by, uh, Bing Crosby). "He stayed away from foreign correspondents," Saltzman said.

Instead, Capra quit Hollywood during World War II and made seven documentaries for the War Department. So Saltzman thinks Capra would now be offering his services to the government, this time to again make documentaries "about why we fight."

Not only terrorism, but the narrowing of media diversity.

\*

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