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## Q & A: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture



In light of **Spotlight's** six Oscar nominations – and the winners being announced at the Academy Awards ceremony on Sunday, Feb.



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28 – we talked to Joe Saltzman, co-author (with Matthew C. Ehrlich) of the new book **Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture** (University of Illinois Press).



Saltzman is a professor of journalism and communication at USC Annenberg, and he maintains the comprehensive Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) research database [www.ijpc.org](http://www.ijpc.org) (more than 87,000 entries and counting). Saltzman previously had a long, award-filled career in newspaper reporting and editing, broadcast journalism and documentary filmmaking. [Roger Leatherwood](#) interviews him for EatDrinkFilms.

*[Editor's Note: Some sections have been rearranged or edited for clarity.]*

**EDF:** Journalists, and the job they do, continue to fascinate us. **Spotlight** is up for Best Picture this year, and last year **Nightcrawler** garnered much attention. Do you think this trend will continue?

**Joe Saltzman:**

Journalists from legacy media or the new multimedia will always be characters in films because they're instantly recognizable and often represent the audience in asking questions the audience wants answered.




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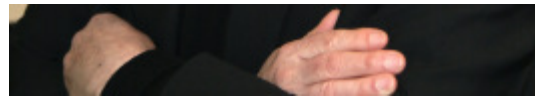
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They're a great vehicle for exposition in a film or TV show.



Joe Saltzman

**EDF:** Do you think the depictions of journalists in film are primarily positive or negative, generally fond or usually damning?

**JS:** When the journalist is featured in the film, he or she is usually a heroic character doing whatever it takes to serve the public interest. **Spotlight** is the perfect example of journalists doing whatever it takes to expose corruption, save innocents, solve a crime.

**Nightcrawler**, by contrast, is the rare example of a major actor playing a journalist in a title role who's a villain. Most films featuring journalists show reporters and editors played by top actors who make the characters accessible and likable. When a journalist is a minor character, however, he or she is usually seen with other journalists running around yelling out questions in a rude and threatening manner. They're usually villains and not liked at all by the audience.

With these two films – **Spotlight** and **Nightcrawler** – you have both ends of the spectrum.

**EDF:** What's your favorite journalism film, or films?



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Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur wrote **The Front Page** (1931) which later became **Switching Channels** (1988).

**JS:** There are the obvious ones: **Citizen Kane**, **All the President's Men**, **Call Northside 777**, **Spotlight**, **Ace in the Hole**, **The Front Page** in all of its variations, especially one of my favorites, **His Girl Friday**, and **Deadline U.S.A.**, which is usually every print journalist's favorite film. The list goes on and on.

**Deadline - USA - Free Press**



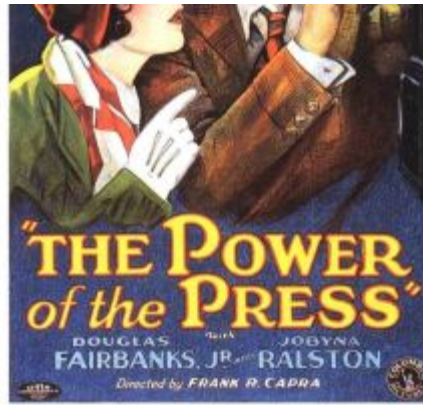
**EDF:** I can't expect you to pick one.

**JS:** If I had to, it would be Frank Capra's 1928 film **The Power of the Press**,





which summed up all the images of the journalist in one terrific film during the silent era. It includes a wonderful segment showing how a story went from a cub reporter's typewriter, through the editorial process, through the composing-room process, from the printing press to the delivery trucks to the consumer. That sequence shows exactly how newspapers were created through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Douglas Fairbanks Jr. plays the part of the cub reporter, and Capra perfectly captures the excitement of the newsroom and the people working there. *[Ed. Note: Saltzman also wrote **Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film.**]*



**EDF:** Any other notable titles from other media?

**JS:** The film I never get tired of seeing isn't a film at all. It's really two television series that I think are the best examples of the image of the journalism in media and the most fun – **The Mary Tyler Moore Show** and **Murphy Brown**. They hold up very well, tackle many important journalism issues, and have characters that are enjoyable to watch.

In my opinion, television is far more influential a medium when it comes to bringing the image of the journalist to the public. A film comes and goes, but a TV series comes into the home week after a week and has a much more dramatic influence on the public's perceptive of journalists than the occasional film.

## Murphy Brown



**EDF:** There's been a lot of talk about the "death of journalism" with the advent of social media and the Internet.

**JS:** Journalism is alive and well and thriving in every way – except financially. More people are reading newspapers today than in history, but they're reading them online. Printed newspapers and magazines are dying, but Internet and multimedia journalism is more important and more coveted than ever.

**EDF:** Everyone has a phone in their pocket, getting information in small bits.

**JS:** Getting information via smartphones, the Internet and social media is the new frontier. It's made being a journalist more exciting today than ever – with its deadline-every-minute, with instant relaying of information, with storytelling involving audio, video as well as text.

**EDF:** As journalism becomes less a business, and perhaps more democratic, do you see a shift coming in the presentation of

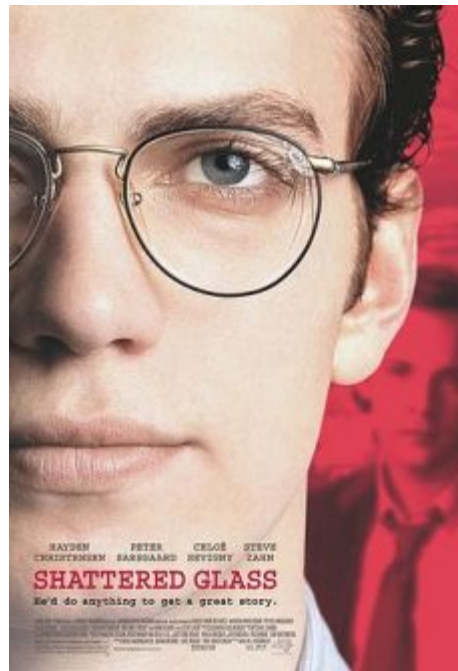
journalists?

**JS:** Not really. Since the beginning of history, the image of those people doing the job of a journalist – reporting and informing the public – really hasn't changed. We love the information journalists give us. We don't much care for the process of getting that information. It's much like enjoying a steak dinner. We don't really want to see how that steak got to the plate via the slaughterhouse.

When it comes to being informed, we just want the information as fast and as accurate and as fair as possible. We don't necessarily enjoy watching how this is done. The depiction of the journalist in film, whether it be a 1930s newshawk or a 1990s anchorman or a 2015 blogger, is much the same as it always has been. If the journalist serves the public interest, it really doesn't matter what he or she does to do it. Is the truth found out? Is the bad guy exposed?

**EDF:** What about the depictions of corrupt journalists, such as in **Ace in the Hole**, **The Harder They Fall** and, more recently, like **Shattered Glass** and the aforementioned **Nightcrawler**. It seems those films are more focused on the process than the outcome.

**JS:** But if that journalist uses the precious commodity of the news media for his or her own personal, economic or political gain, then that journalist becomes the villain. Depictions of any journalist in film or TV haven't changed much since the 19<sup>th</sup> century novels about the press. Having surveyed more than 600 silent films featuring journalists, the depictions of journalists even in those early days of film are pretty much the same as they are today. The clothes



have changed, the newsrooms have changed, the mode of transmission and the technology have changed, but the images of the journalist, both pro and con, remain the same.

**EDF:** You're a professor of journalism. Do you see younger versions of yourself in your journalism students?

**JS:** I tell my students, when I started out in television it was brand new and we literally invented broadcast journalism day by day. It was perhaps the most exciting time to be a journalist.

That's what's happening today with multimedia journalism – young journalists can literally invent the journalism of the future using video, audio and text in new and unimaginable ways to inform the public every minute of every day.

**EDF:** Are the journalism students finding the same role models you might have had?



*Pat O'Brien as Hildy Johnson in **The Front Page**  
(1931)*



*Dustin Ho.*

**JS:** When I was growing up, I wanted to be Clark Kent, or Hildy Johnson (from **The Front Page**). Most of my colleagues had the same idea. Females wanted to be Lois Lane or Brenda Starr. In 1976, when **All the President's Men** came out, students flocked



to journalism schools because they wanted to be so-called "WoodStein." In the 1980s, many women idolized Murphy Brown. Men loved Lou Grant. **Spotlight** could have a similar influence.

I think today's students interested in broadcasting take their role models primarily from television or the Internet rather than film. A favorite anchor, a favorite talk-show host usually makes them want to become a broadcast journalist.

**EDF:** Why should we care about the images of the journalist in popular culture?

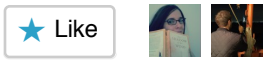
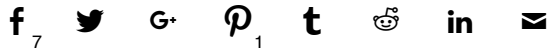
**JS:** Why are these images important? The simple answer is this: Because the images of the journalist you see in films and on television influence the public's opinion about the news media and the effectiveness of that media. And the ramifications of how the public perceives and judges the media can have a profound effect on the success or failure of our American democracy.

Next week Roger Leatherwood reviews **Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture**.

*Roger Leatherwood worked in all levels of show business over the last 20 years, from managing the world-famous Grand Lake Theatre in Oakland to projecting midnight movies to directing a feature about a killer, [Usher](#) (2004), that won numerous awards on the independent festival circuit. He currently works at UCLA managing the instructional media collections, which to him is its own kind of show business. His film writing has appeared in numerous publications, including Bright Lights Film Journal, European Trash Cinema, and his blog [mondo-cine](#).*



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