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Entertainment

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Journalism through the camera's eye: Book looks at how Hollywood shapes our views of the press

By **HUEY FREEMAN - H&R Staff Writer**

URBANA - Whether movies portray journalists as idealistic crusaders or hard-boiled cynics, they influence the way the public thinks about them.

"They suggest that journalism is important," said Matthew Ehrlich, a journalism professor who has recently completed a book on Hollywood's treatment of the fourth estate.

Ehrlich said the research for his recently released book, "Journalism in the Movies," published by University of Illinois Press, showed him Hollywood has played a key role in shaping the American point of view toward journalists.

"When you keep telling stories about the press, you suggest it's a major player, something that should be reckoned with," Ehrlich said in an interview in his office in the University of Illinois' Gregory Hall.

Joe Saltzman, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California, said he appreciates Ehrlich's book, especially because the genre of movies on journalism has been ignored for too long.

"I think Matt did an incredible job of showing the image of the journalist in the movies and how that influences the public," said Saltzman, a former TV reporter and producer. "It is very important to have that documented in a readable book. It will remind people of the films they have seen and make them more cautious about how they view journalists."

Saltzman, director of The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project that analyzes portrayals of journalists in many kinds of media, said Ehrlich is one of the preeminent scholars of journalism in the movies.

Ehrlich, a former reporter and editor in television and radio, spent about 15 years researching and writing his book.

His explorations through film archives and libraries were rewarded with finds such as producer Howard Hughes' handwritten notes on how to steer "The Front Page" past the censors. The 1931 film on the Chicago reporter's trade during the Roaring '20s contained profanity and references to prostitution.

Ehrlich, a movie buff who teaches a class on journalism films, found those notes in the library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, located in Beverly Hills.

"That was great fun," he said.

The library is a repository for everything related to film, including posters, photographs and even old Oscars.



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"There's so much history bound up with movies," Ehrlich said.

The history of movies that focus on journalists is thoroughly covered in Ehrlich's book.

From the wisecracking reporters of the "The Front Page," to the investigative whiz kids of "All the President's Men," to the foreign correspondents of "The Killing Fields," Ehrlich covers the waterfront of Hollywood's prodigious take on the press.

Ehrlich said there were 500 movies produced that involved journalism in the 1930s, when talking pictures were in their infancy. Throughout Hollywood's history, virtuous journalists have been consistently rewarded while bad ones are punished.

"I think the movies show us a lot of ways that journalism should and could be," Ehrlich said. "They deal with fundamental questions of fairness, of doing the right thing."

Reporters have been portrayed without any redeeming qualities, such as Chuck Tatum, played by Kirk Douglas, who conspires to keep a man trapped in a cave so he can get a big story and continue an affair with the man's wife in "The Big Carnival."

But they also show courageous characters such as Ed Huteson, played by Humphrey Bogart in "Deadline USA," who risks his life to expose a vicious gangster.

Ehrlich said he was surprised to find that most movie journalists were portrayed in a positive light.

"I think the movies do influence how people view professions," he said.

By focusing on journalism so frequently, Hollywood invests the press with a kind of symbolic power, Ehrlich said.

"They help the press matter," he said.

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