

When a hot story is breaking, reporters are sure to be on the case, whether it's a political scandal or a monster on the loose. In fact, horror films are full of the Fourth Estate, which we see whenever...

THE MONSTERS MEET THE PRESS

By JOE WINTERS

Like 'em or not, the men and women of the Media are all that stand between us and total ignorance of what's going on in this wacky world of ours. While there are critics (usually part of the media *themselves*) who might see fit to discredit the profession on the basis of an occasional bad call (the 2000 Presidential election for instance), the Press, more often than not, are good to have in our corner.

Since at least the time of Julius Caesar, there has been some form of daily public news bulletin posted. By the early Seventeenth century, daily newspapers were being printed. In the Twentieth century, the information age was full-steam ahead, from radio and newsreels to television and the Internet.

Back in the Thirties, the newspaper reporter was depicted on film as your average Depression-era working stiff struggling to earn a buck by delivering something new to distract and captivate the public's imagination. Warner Brothers/First National were most adept at these workaday depictions in films like *Five Star Final* (1931), and their brief foray into horror mysteries helped sell the image of the wisecracking reporter.



In *Doctor X* (1932), directed by Michael Curtiz, reporter Lee Taylor (Lee Tracy) of The Daily World is on the trail of a killer whose victims show signs of being partially eaten!

Taylor's search begins at the local morgue, where Doctor Xavier (Lionel Atwill) performs an autopsy on the latest victim of the fiend whom the Press has labeled the Moon Killer, as all the killings occur during the light of the full moon. Taylor hides on a morgue slab under a sheet to eavesdrop on the investigation. From there, it's on to Xavier's scientific academy, where Taylor is caught snooping by Xavier's daughter Joanne (Fay Wray), with whom the reporter alternately interviews and flirts. Later at the Xavier home, Taylor sweet-talks the maid into announcing him to Joanne, and while he waits, attempts to swipe photographs of Xavier and of Joanne, mixing business with pleasure.

Finally, the trail leads to Xavier's Cliff Manor, where Taylor shimmies up a drain pipe to overhear the doctor's planned experiment that should pinpoint the murderer from among the prominent scientists gathered there. Taylor literally stumbles into the house, then hides in a closet where the killer introduces sleep gas. Having completely missed the experiment (where a suspect dies), Taylor is found and revived. After stumbling through secret passageways, Taylor arrives on the scene in time to foil the murderer, rescue the girl, and announce his forthcoming marriage.

In 1933's *Mystery Of The Wax Museum*, also directed by Curtiz, reporter Florence Dempsey (Glenda Farrell) of The New York Express is under pressure from her editor (reporters are *always* under pressure from their editors) to come up with a story or be out of a job. What begins as a probe into an apparent suicide leads to the wax museum of Ivan Igor (Lionel Atwill) who has been killing, snatching, covering his victims in wax, and dressing them up as historical exhibits.



After a series of verbal exchanges with suspects, cops, and her editor, with whom she resorts to phony tears to stay on the story, Miss Dempsey cracks the case in time to save her roommate (Fay Wray) from becoming Ivan's "Marie Antoinette" exhibit. After Florence tells her sarcastic editor "I've been in love so many times, my heart's callused," she decides to "get even" with the big lug by agreeing to marry him!

With a plot used again in 1953's *House Of Wax*, *Mystery Of The Wax Museum* is often cited as being the first horror film with a contemporary urban setting. Director Curtiz and star Farrell make further use of this backdrop with the rat-a-tat pace and dialogue that Warner Brothers was renowned for. Glenda Farrell would go on to roles in musicals, comedies, westerns and more, including the "Torchy Blane" series of films where again she would shine as the fast-talking, quick-thinking reporter solving crimes before the befuddled police.

While not a sequel to *Doctor X*, Warner's *Return Of Doctor X* (1939) featured as its hero another of those darned reporters, this time from The New York Morning Dispatch. A telling line from the paper's editor was "Won't The Evening Bulletin be surprised! I'm going to make them print an apology for the apology the made us print!" At the end of the picture, reporter Walter "Wichita" Garrett (Wayne Morris) plans to return home to write a novel, but his boss's pretty secretary is enough to change his mind.

The Forties continued to present reporters as romantic comedy relief, as well as our eyes and ears to the events at hand. In *The Devil Bat* (1940), reporter Johnny Layton (Dave O'Brien) of the Chicago Daily Register must get to the bottom of the mysterious killings attributed to the title creature.

Amid such headlines as "Flying Death Strikes Again in Heathville," Layton's editor demands a picture of the giant bat, so Layton and his photographer, "One-shot" McGuire (Donald Kerr) concoct a fake photo, which is soon revealed. After being fired, Layton stays on the story as a matter of principle, and eventually exposes mad doctor Carruthers (Bela Lugosi), who had grown the bats and trained them to suck blood on cue. With later headlines like "Reporter Kills Devil Bat," Layton can write his own ticket, so once again heroism and good reporting pay off.

When he wasn't portraying romantic comedy leads or wisecracking sidekicks in B-pictures, Wallace Ford was playing wisecracking

reporters.

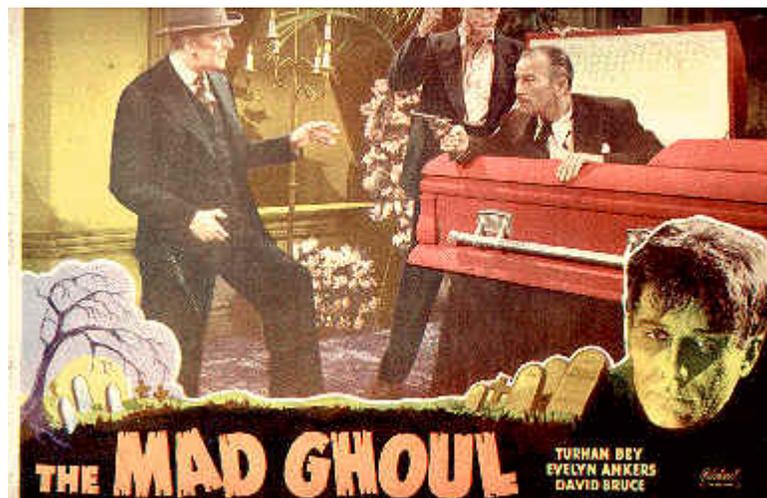




He, too, foiled Bela Lugosi in movies from Monogram's *The Mysterious Mr. Wong* (1935) to *The Ape Man* (1943), and managed to get the scoop on more hot stories in films like *Murder By Invitation* (1941), where he happily jumps out of bed at the news of a murder and later works with a chief suspect to solve the crime.

While Ford excelled at playing reporters, Bela Lugosi seemed constantly on the *receiving* end of journalistic jolts. In *The Corpse Vanishes* (1942), Bela's scheme of kidnapping young brides, then extracting their gland fluids to keep his own wife (Elizabeth Russell) young, was smashed by a female reporter (Luana Walters). Once again, the reporter found romance, this time with the film's young doctor (Tristram Coffin), in time for her editor to remark "Finally make a newspaperwoman out of you, and then you have to go and quit!"

While it seems reporters always got lucky in one way or another, this wasn't always the case. In Universal's *The Mad Ghoul* (1943), fast-talking reporter "Scoop" McClure (Robert Armstrong of *King Kong* fame) *literally* lost his heart to George Zucco, when the reporter's plan to pose as a corpse backfired and he became the latest victim in a series of grave and heart robberies.



Universal's harsh treatment of reporters (perhaps a swipe at other studios?) continued in *House Of Horrors* (1946), where art critics (reporters of sorts) are bumped off by the back-breaking Creeper (Rondo Hatton) at the suggestion of mad sculptor Marcel De Lange (Martin Kosleck). Though her instincts about Marcel are initially off, critic Joan Medford (Virginia Grey) tumbles onto the scheme after stealing Marcel's model sketch of his hulking houseguest. Marcel later learns this, and plans to silence Miss Medford, promising her that she will not miss her 'deadline.' Joan uses her wits to pit the Creeper against Marcel, and buy herself the time she needs to be rescued.

Also in 1946, Universal's *The Cat Creeps* gave us obnoxious, but caring reporter Terry Nichols (Fred Brady) of The Morning Chronicle, who solves the mystery of the title creature, exposes a murderer, and with the help of his photographer (Noah Beery Jr.) uncovers hidden cash. Early in the picture, Terry sets the tone by casually telling off his editor for plotting to smear a senatorial candidate. As Terry exits, his boss happily remarks

"That's my boy," fully confident of the reporter's ability to get the dirt, in spite of his scruples.

While city reporters were grinding out stories in B-picture plots, A-picture director Alfred Hitchcock offered a view of journalism on an *international* scale with *Foreign Correspondent* (1940). During the years of World War II and into the television age, the world would continue to be brought into our homes. With the rise and fall of Hitler, the advent of The Bomb, and the rise of communism, the age of alien threats and earth-shattering disasters was upon us. With it, a new breed of reporter was needed, so enter the globetrotting journalist, our key to the world at large.



The Thing (From Another World) (1950) helped usher in this new type of reporter to the world of fantastic films. As military men and scientists are at odds over what to do about an unearthly visitor, reporter Ned Scott (Douglas Spencer), is caught in the middle and frustrated at not being allowed to send in any kind of story without official clearance. Prior to the monster's eventual destruction, Scotty concludes "What can we learn from that thing except a quicker way to die?" When the thing is finally quick-fried in a flurry of electricity and Scotty can finally take a picture, the reporter faints instead! Even guys who've seen it all are only human, but Scotty revives to utter the immortal line to the world, " Keep watching the skies!"

Of course, not all menaces would come from the stars. One of Earth's most infamous monsters would rise from the depths of the ocean to menace Earth (and Japan in particular). *Godzilla* (1956) is told in flashback by American Steve Martin (Raymond Burr), foreign correspondent for United World News. Burr noticeably shares no scenes with the principal Japanese actors. His scenes were all added to the edited version of the original film *Gojira* (1954). For American audiences, Burr does multiple duty as a character in the film, as our translator, and as narrator to give the movie a documentary feel. Following the doom-and-gloom reports that pervade the film, Burr can finally set our minds at rest by declaring upon Godzilla's demise "The whole world could wake up and live again!" Well, at least until the *sequels*.



While foreign correspondents were making world headlines, occasionally the local newspaperman could still manage to help stave off major disasters as Martin Cochrane (Les Tremayne) did in Universal's *The Monolith Monsters* (1957). Feeling useless at first ("San Angelo needs a newspaperman like that desert needs another bucket of sand"), Cochrane finally gets the chance to put his knowledge to use when the town and possibly the world is threatened by giant rocks that grow, fall on whatever's in their path, shatter, grow again, and...well, you get the idea. Not only does Cochrane mobilize a fleet of paperboys to warn the townsfolk, but he provides the heroes with information vital in combating the menace. "If it's dull or statistical," he wearily remarks, "I've written about it."

Reporters go where the story takes them, even to *The Lost World* (1960), where reporter Ed Malone (David Hedison) of Global News Service accompanies an expedition to a mysterious South American plateau where dinosaurs roam. Helping the party survive one peril after another, not only does Malone get a sensational story, but he earns the respect of cantankerous Professor Challenger (Claude Rains), and the love of beautiful Jill St. John. Once again, dedicated reporting has its rewards.

In director Val Guest's *The Day The Earth Caught Fire* (1961), a pair of experimental bomb blasts tilt the Earth off its axis, causing massive changes in weather, and a further shift in orbit that sends our planet moving toward the Sun. Reporters for London's Daily Express uncover the story, issue the facts and yet keep the tone of the paper optimistic to prevent mass panic.

Even reporters don't have *all* the answers, however, for even after the Prime Minister announces plan to detonate four thermonuclear

bombs that will attempt to offset and reverse the damage, the film ends with two headlines, one of which will see print. "World Saved: A Nation Prays" or "World Doomed: Now Nation Prays." *The Day The Earth Caught Fire* works beautifully on several levels, including that of a well-written and well-acted newspaper drama and an end-of-the-world thriller.



While most journalists care about reporting the news and occasionally making a name for themselves in the process, there are a few scribes whose ambition gets the better of them. The chilling consequences of this are on view in director Sam Fuller's *Shock Corridor* (1963) as reporter Johnny Barrett (Peter Breck) of The Daily Globe goes undercover in a mental institution to solve a murder. Successfully coached by experts to trick the hospital psychologists, Johnny places his own sanity on the line. Will he win the Pulitzer Prize or become hopelessly insane...or both?

Reporters and newspapers have the power to make or break almost anyone, but what happens when a subject decides to turn the tables. We saw a hint of that in *House Of Horrors*, but leave it to Vincent Price as ham Shakespearean actor Edward Lionheart to up the body count in 1973's *Theatre Of Blood*. Using an elaborately staged array of deathtraps inspired by the Bard himself, Lionheart effectively silences more than half a dozen drama critics who he felt had wronged him.

A free press, like a free life, is always in danger. Just ask Carl Kolchak (Darren McGavin), who put his life on the line in the 1971 TV movie smash, *The Night Stalker*. Not only did Kolchak track down and face the modern-day Vegas vampire (Barry Atwater), he also had to contend with public officials determined to hush up the story. After being run out of town Kolchak moved to Seattle for 1972's *The Night Strangler*, where a murderer (Richard Anderson) kept himself eternally young with glandular fluid obtained from his victims. Once again, Kolchak saved the day, and once again was run out of town for his trouble, this time along with his boss (Simon Oakland).



They were both back (working for Chicago's I-N-S news service) in the 1974 TV series *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*. Each week Kolchak, armed with tape recorder and camera, would investigate a different phenomena and encounter everything from vampires, werewolves, and zombies, to witches, robots, aliens, and, the most frightening monsters of all...irate city officials! Despite its winning combination of tongue-in-cheek action, sharp dialog, and bravura performances by McGavin and Oakland, the series lasted only one season, but today is enjoyed by new viewers and often credited as being the forerunner of the currently popular *X-Files* series.

While Kolchak may well have been the culmination of all the fearless, wisecracking reporters that preceded him, he wasn't the last word.



In 1981's *The Howling*, television reporter Karen White (Dee Wallace-Stone) helped take on an entire colony of werewolves, only to become one herself...on her own live broadcast that broke the story!

And finally, just "20 minutes into the future" (1985 actually) reporter Edison Carter (Matt Frewer) with his handy video camera would pursue corporate criminals, including his own Network 23 employers. A freak accident leads to the creation of Carter's computer-generated alter ego Max Headroom, in the British television show of the same name, and Americanized shortly after. Combining slick, state-of-the-art visuals with smart scripts, the show was a frequently brilliant satire on the cutthroat, anything-for-ratings world of television.

"The more sensational it is, the more the sonuvoguns love it!" exclaimed reporter Lee Taylor in *Doctor X*, and that statement may well be true. Still, the next time you hear some public figure or commentator criticize the Press, just ask yourself *why*. Chances are that person has something to hide, though with guys like Carl Kolchak and Edison Carter on the case, maybe not for long...but that's another story.