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Memo to Hollywood: Female Journalists Don't Sleep With Their Subjects

By [Elisabeth Donnelly](#) on Jan 5, 2015 3:15pm

In Chris Rock's genial, three-fourths of a pretty good film *Top Five*, Rock is playing a washed-up comedic actor who's being trailed by a *New York Times* journalist (Rosario Dawson) during the grind of a press day. Dawson makes a smart, canny foil for Rock, and as the day goes on, and the interview gets more personal and rooted in "rigorous honesty," the reporter/subject lines get blurred. And blurred. I mean, in this case, it was expected — it's a romantic comedy, Rock is meant for Dawson in this film, it's not a surprise on a plot level.

But on another level, it bummed me out, as it was just another movie where the female journalist's interest in a topic wasn't for the sake of her work or her career — it was for the sake of her lovelife, so she could unethically fool around with or bang the subject. In *Top Five*, it's unnecessarily complicated by unrealistic plot twists — Rock's character has a nemesis, see, a "critic" at the *very same paper*, hmmm — that can be summed up with this tweet from the *New York Times*' film critic A.O. Scott:

By the end of the movie, as Rock and Dawson were sailing into happiness, I had more questions about what happened to the profile of Rock's character, and what this ethical break would mean for the weirdo journalism career of Dawson's character and her many, many pseudonyms. (In the run-up to the film, Rock did make the point to say that Dawson, a goddess on earth to be sure, was one of the few actresses who could convey the "intelligence" of this character; a neg to most actresses.) Sure, it's just a movie, but the problem is that when it comes to the portrayal of female journalists in both film and television, it's depressingly typical.

More often than not, when there's a film featuring a female journalist, her sexuality, and what she does with it is part of the plot. All too often she's just a cipher saddled with a "smart" job, sometimes glasses, and she's required to sleep with the lead character.

In *Crazy Heart*, Maggie Gyllenhaal is a music journalist sent like an angel above to sleep with and inspire drunk Jeff Bridges to get his life back on track. In the first season of *Nashville*, when a female music journalist appears to write a story on a country band, it cuts to the next scene and she's sleeping with the guitarist, Deacon Claybourne (Chip Epstein). *House of Cards* is about a bunch of venal, unethical jerks, but it's particularly cruel when it takes its female reporters (Constance Zimmer and Kate Mara) to task, the women bantering back and forth about sex for sources. It inspired the Slate headline "[House of Cards Thinks All Female Political Reporters Are Mean Sluts.](#)"

Satire or comedy or drama, Hollywood portrays the female journalist as a ticking time bomb of questionable ethical choices. In David O. Russell's *Three Kings*, a comical portrayal of a Christiane Amour-type is balanced out by another journalist whose one scene consists of her fucking George Clooney on a chair. Fluff like *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, which features a central character who wants to write "more important" work, has that writer, played by Kate Hudson, taking on seducing, destroying, and falling for Matthew McConaughey, all for a piece. Even classy flicks like *Adaptation*, *His Girl Friday*, and *Broadcast News* all hinge on the female journalist's lovelife. [Scroll through this list](#) and find the female journalist characters who are real, complicated women and not just the protagonist's foil.

It's bad enough so the films that feature female journalists *not* sleeping with the leading men — think Rachel McAdams in 2009's *State of Play* — feel like outliers. There's also terrifically creepy scenes, like in this year's Jake Gyllenhaal film *Nightcrawler*, where the high-charging, ambitious female journalist

(Rene Russo), is manipulated into sleeping with Gyllenhaal's ghoulish striver. At least in the case of *Nightcrawler*, the scene is meant to be awful and violating, an exhibit of the venal appetite of Gyllenhaal's nightmare millennial. The film doesn't linger on their "deal," either. But it makes a character who's mostly complicated and interesting into another accident on the side of the road.

Perhaps female journalists should be grateful that occasionally, Hollywood alights on their profession and makes it into entertainment. But it's not easy to be a female journalist — I can tell you stories about pitching in my twenties, where editors would actually imply that I only wanted to write about a topic because I had a "crush," in cruder terms — and it feels like Hollywood's missing out in telling interesting stories about women who are drawn to this infuriating, fascinating, and ultimately very human art. Playing a character who's a female journalist, ready to sleep with the main character and ethically compromise their story, just isn't a very interesting subject, in all honesty. Where's the Nellie Bly biopic that female journalists deserve?