

# observations

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## **In The Movies, Journalists Are No Longer Heroes -- Just Like Everywhere Else A Large Majority of the American Public Feels The Press no Longer Deals Fairly with Issues**

By Casey Pittman

Freedom of the press is a basic tenet of American society and culture, and journalism is an institution meant to reinforce the general public's trust in the government. Journalists have had a long tradition of upholding that trust, and pride themselves on their sacred bond with the public. Journalists see themselves as champions of truth and openness, watchdogs defending the public's right to know. Lately, though, the public doesn't agree. In the last two decades, public opinion of the press has been on a downhill slide. Journalists who feel they are fighting the good fight are vilified by the very people for whom they have chosen to fight.

**See "All the  
President's  
Men"  
video clip**

More and more people have begun to see reporters as unethical and uncaring louts who fight for their own career advancement and not the public good. The public perceives bias in the media. There is a spreading belief that the media has become a servant of corporate America, not the public.

A Times Mirror/Gallup poll conducted in 1992 found that only 28 percent of the public feels the press deals fairly with all sides involved in an issue, while 68 percent believe the press tends to favor a specific side. Sixty-two percent of the public believes news organizations are influenced by powerful organizations and 44 percent feel the media are inaccurate in their reporting, said David Rynecki of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

In the wake of such public spectacles as the death of Princess Diana and presidential scandals, followed by the ensuing media coverage, the public has formed a less than favorable opinion of the media and its motives. As a result of these news events and their coverage, the "diverse news the media are thrown together into a single cesspool they all call 'tabloid journalism,'" said Joel Saltzman, author of "Everyone Hates the Media."

Sixty percent of people believe the media pay too much attention to "bad news" and scandalous events, Rynecki said, and only 35 percent believe

the media are actually reporting the stories they should be covering. The public is not only questioning the integrity of the media organizations, but also the integrity of the individuals who have chosen journalism as their careers. In a 1996 Gallup Poll, only 23 percent of respondents rated broadcast journalists' ethical standards and honesty as "high or very high." Only 17 percent rate print journalists as highly ethical and honest, said James Boylan of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

It is this negative view of the journalist that is most disturbing. James Warren, Washington bureau chief for the *Chicago Tribune*, said the public sees journalists "as hypocritical, privacy-invading, emotionally and practically remote from [the public], paternalistic and prone to frequent error." Why do so many people view the journalist as a bad person? Most people rarely, if ever, have face to face interactions with journalists. They have no basis for judging journalists' personal values. So where do these negative perceptions of journalists come from?

There is no single answer to this question. Negative perceptions are the product of a barrage of complaints from many sources. Politicians, supposedly operating under the same constitution that protects the media, constantly berate the media for being "uncaring, biased, arrogant, out-to-get-you-at-all-costs gutter-rakers who care about no one and will do anything to cover a story, no matter how damaging it may be to the principals involved," Saltzman said.

But perhaps, to truly understand the erosion of the journalist's reputation, one needs look no further than mainstream entertainment.

Late night television personalities lampoon the media as often as they do former president Clinton. Television series, both dramatic and comedic, routinely portray journalists as "foul-mouthed, dim-witted social misfits concerned only with twisting the truth into scandal," said Matthew C. Ehrlich, author of "Journalism in the Movies." The stereotype of the journalist as an immoral opportunist has become so widespread it may be safe to say it is now ingrained in popular culture.

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One of the most potent institutions contributing to that vast wasteland known as popular culture is the silver screen. Since the beginning of the 20th century, films have captured the public's imagination and provided breaks from everyday life and reality. Films have provided fantasy and escape for millions. But film also serves purposes beyond mere entertainment. Films are products of their times, and can be seen as time capsules. A film from a given period can not only reflect the mood of society at the time, but can influence it as well. Though audiences realize movies aren't real, they have a certain trust in Hollywood -- a movie may not be completely real, but it reflects real attitudes and beliefs. An audience watching a film can leave with a new belief or leave with their existing beliefs falsely reinforced or confirmed.

Journalists have been important characters in film as long as movies have been around. From *The Front Page* (1931) to *Citizen Kane* (1941) to *All the President's Men* (1976) to *The Insider* (1999), the movie industry has been fascinated with the journalist as a character. The portrayals of journalists weren't always negative. Many early films featuring journalist characters romanticized the profession, but certainly respected the journalist's importance in a democratic society, Saltzman said.

Films like *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Deadline U.S.A.* (1952) and *The China Syndrome* (1979) illustrated the journalist as an idealist, as the crusader who was "gruff and hard-bitten yet unwilling to yield to cynicism, intolerant of bullies and crooks and always ready to fight for the right," said Christopher Hanson of the *Columbia Journalism Review* and author of "Where Have All the Heroes Gone?" Journalism reached a high point in the public eye, as well as in film with the 1976 film *All the President's Men*, starring Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the two reporters responsible for uncovering the Nixon Watergate scandal. Critics praised the film. The country saw journalists as heroes -- fighters for the public's right to know. More students wanted to become journalists, and enrollment in journalism schools increased sharply after the Watergate scandal. Enrollment at the University of Texas School of Journalism tripled. The two famous reporters were portrayed as "embodying the best of American values," Hanson said.

But in recent years, Hollywood has discarded the image of the crusading journalist. They are now portrayed as callous or reckless cynics, Ehrlich said. Movies have implied that journalistic objectivity now serves commercial purposes and that their work does more harm than good, he said.

And the public buys it.

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Film is a strong medium, and Hollywood's ability to make movies realistic has made it even stronger. Most movies ask audiences to suspend disbelief willingly, and audiences oblige -- but not completely. Audiences may realize that although dramatic action sequences and plot twists are not real, it is hard to discount the attitudes and beliefs of characters, including attitudes and beliefs about journalists and the media. Audiences are learning from movies that journalists are "morally indefensible ... preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse, all in the name of the public's right to know," Ehrlich said.

The number of films taking this approach increased dramatically in the 1990s. Some of the most popular and widely viewed movies of that decade contained strong negative views of the media in general and even stronger negative portrayals of journalists as individuals. Three such films are *To Die For*, *Scream* and *Mad City*. An examination of the portrayals of

journalists in these three films illustrates how Hollywood influences the public's views about journalists.

In order to discuss the negative portrayals of journalists in these three films effectively, it is necessary to develop criteria for evaluating what is and what is not a negative portrayal. These criteria can be developed through examination of three of the most prevalent stereotypes and complaints about journalists.

The first criterion for a negative portrayal is untrustworthiness and dishonesty. Many people believe that journalists are not to be trusted, that their lives are pretense meant to take advantage of an unsuspecting public. The journalist is a snake that will turn on its victim as soon it has gotten everything it can get from him. It has been said that journalists rank as low as or lower than serial killers and lawyers in sincerity and trust, Hanson said. According to Hollywood, journalists are back-stabbers interested in "twisting the truth," Ehrlich said, and aren't more trustworthy than used car salesmen and con artists.

The second criterion is a shameless attitude of self-promotion. In the American culture of capitalism, it is generally expected that individuals are trying to get ahead of each other. But in journalism, a field where Ehrlich said individuals have "extraordinary power to do harm," ambition has become a negative personality trait. Like it or not, journalism is a business, and there is pressure on employees to raise circulation and ratings. Profit is important in any business, but in a business where peoples' lives can be made public, ambition becomes more sinister.

The final criterion is tied to the character's choice in which stories he or she will cover, and what aspects of those stories he or she will emphasize. A common complaint is that the media tend to cast the spotlight on sensational stories, opposed to important stories with more social value. The public sees journalists as constantly searching for a story meant to boost ratings (and their own careers), while ignoring more relevant stories.

There is a consensus that the news has adopted a new purpose: to entertain rather than inform. The plethora of tabloid magazines and news shows has begun to convince serious news organizations that drama sells. During the presidential scandal, "the sheer volume of space and time devoted to the sexual aspects of the Lewinsky affair has displaced other important stories, and trivialized the discussion of the fate of the president," said Richard Lambert of the *Columbia Journalism Review*. This sentiment is expounded on in film. Journalists are often portrayed chasing down stories laden with sex and violence, or stories that could topple prominent individuals. They often spend massive amounts of time hounding innocent people, employing underhanded methods and even breaking the law to break a story with no redeeming value.

Utilizing these criteria, it is possible to evaluate the portrayals of three

journalist characters in three popular films of the 1990s. The movies *To Die For* (1995), *Scream* (1996) and *Mad City* (1997) all include characters who are journalists and who are portrayed in a negative light. These three films are good examples of influential negative portrayals of journalists because their popularity, along with the star power accompanying them, adds credibility to the misconception that journalists are bad people who irresponsibly wield the power to destroy lives.

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The first film to be examined for negative portrayals of journalists and the media is the 1995 dark comedy *To Die For*, starring Nicole Kidman. This film, directed by Gus Van Sant, was the subject of much discussion about the nature of the media and the journalist. Kidman's character, Suzanne Stone Maretto, has been described as "one of the most amoral, calculating film villainesses in recent memory, stopping at nothing, including murder, to catapult herself from cable weather girl to the next Diane Sawyer," Hanson said.

Suzanne definitely meets the first criterion for a negative portrayal of a journalist. She is absolutely and completely untrustworthy. She lies and schemes to manipulate other people into doing what she wants. She does it so well that authorities can't legally link her to the murder of her husband.

In the movie, the ambitious Suzanne takes it upon herself, while working for a local cable channel as a weather forecaster, to make a documentary about teens and their opinions. She begins interviewing three outcast teens and gains their trust and friendship. Suzanne even enters into a sexual relationship with Jimmy (Joaquin Phoenix), the dim-witted leader of the three friends. She tells him she loves him, that she only wants to be with him. She's already cheating on her husband, a basic breach of trust, and eventually uses sex to manipulate Jimmy into killing her husband. She lies to him, appealing to his male protectiveness by implying that her husband, Larry (Matt Dillon), physically abuses her. She plants the idea of murder in Jimmy's head so subtly that he believes it is his own idea. After Jimmy and his friend Russel (Casey Affleck) kill her husband, she wants to have nothing to do with them. She at first pretends to have no knowledge of their activities. After being questioned by suspicious police, she lies to the world on television about Jimmy and Russell's motives in killing her husband. Suzanne tells the world that the two teens got her husband hooked on cocaine, and that when he decided to go clean, they killed him. With this lie she has betrayed not only the impressionable teens she set up, but also her late husband and his memory.

There is no doubt that Suzanne fits the second criterion -- she is obsessed with her own self-promotion. She tells her in-laws that she wants to be the "next Barbara Walters." She wants a career in journalism not because

she has an urge to find the truth and inform the public, but because she wants to be a star. "You're not anybody in America if you aren't on TV," she tells the audience. She puts her career before her personal life. She marries an Italian-American man, the doomed Larry Maretto, not out of love, but because she wants to "explore ethnicity." She compares her marriage to that of Connie Chung and Maury Povich.

Every move Suzanne makes in *To Die For* is calculated to further advance her career, even the murder of her husband. After his death, she intends to use her story to make money and obtain high profile jobs. She shows no real remorse at her husband's death, and sees the documentary she was making on the teens as a meal ticket. "The bright side of it is that I would have in my documentary an extremely marketable commodity," she tells the audience.

*To Die For* is overwrought with sensationalism. Suzanne goes to great lengths to keep the frenzy alive after her husband's death, and does her best to add to the drama surrounding her case. The night of her husband's murder, the media show up at her home in hordes. The police tell her she doesn't have to talk to them, yet she fixes her hair, puts on a false sad face, and steps outside to greet the reporters and photographers crowding her front lawn. She even allows the media to attend Larry's funeral, where she does her best to ham it up and create drama by playing a tape of the song "All By Myself." Suzanne's attempts are successful, despite Larry's family's suspicions and accusations. Suzanne manages to create a media frenzy around herself. Yet her career never advances. In the last few minutes of the film, a man hired by Larry's family kills Suzanne and hides her body beneath the ice of a frozen pond. She blindly walks into his trap, believing he wants to offer her a job in the national spotlight.

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Another film portraying a journalist negatively is the 1996 horror film *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven. Playing a significant role in *Scream*, Gale Weathers (Courtney Cox) is an investigative reporter for KQIS, a local network affiliate. At the beginning of the film, Weathers has gained some bit of notoriety for her coverage of the trial of Cotton Weary, a man who was convicted of raping and killing a local woman named Maureen Prescott one year earlier. Weathers believes the wrong man was convicted, and says so publicly. She is in the process of writing a book that explains her theories and she hopes will help to exonerate the convicted man. Weathers returns to the small town where Maureen Prescott lived to cover a series of murders. Each of the victims is somehow connected to Sidney Prescott (Neve Campbell), Maureen's daughter. Other characters quickly react to Weathers negatively. Sidney refers to Weathers as "that little tabloid twit," and at one point punches her in the face for no reason. It soon becomes apparent that Sidney's rage is justified as Weathers begins utilizing every underhanded trick in the book to get her story, and doesn't understand why she is viewed so

negatively by the other characters in the movie. "People treat me like I'm the antichrist of television journalism," she says.

Weathers is sneaky and untrustworthy. She pursues the story of the killings relentlessly and will deceive anyone in order to succeed. Most notable are her successful attempts to manipulate and use Dewey, a local deputy who isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. Dewey is nice, trusting and gullible -- a perfect pawn for Weathers' purposes. She flirts with him and flatters him in order to get information about the police investigations into the murders. Weathers' manipulation of Dewey suggests it is standard practice for journalists to take advantage of naïve people.

Weathers is also concerned with promoting her career. Her main interest in the story is the fact that the "true killer" of Sidney's mother could be the same man killing Sidney's friends. If this is true, she could gain fame for proving Weary's innocence. She makes it a personal mission to clear his name and have him released from death row. "If I'm right about this, I could save a man's life," she tells her cameraman. "Do you know what that would do for my book sales?" The relentlessness with which she pursues the story is not a pursuit for the truth. At least that is not her first priority -- she makes it obvious that her goal is to advance her career.

Sensationalism is Gale Weathers' forte. She is already trying to fan the flames on a "finished" case by writing a book about Weary's trial. Soon after the murders begin, she publicly offers the theory that there is a connection between the murder of Maureen Prescott and the current murders of teenagers. She has absolutely no evidence or basis for saying this. She hopes for the murders to continue, or at least to continue to be newsworthy. At one point she is trying to pump Dewey for information about the police investigation, and suggests they are dealing with a serial killer. She's hoping for a major story. Dewey replies that the killer hasn't murdered enough people to be officially classified as a serial killer. Weathers replies wryly: "Well, we can hope can't we?" She wants to prolong the life of the story, as well as inflate its importance.

Weathers' theory is proven correct at the end of the film, but her muckraking tactics are what the audience remembers.

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The final film that portrays both the media and an individual journalist negatively is the 1997 film *Mad City*. Dustin Hoffman, who once portrayed a crusading reporter in *All the President's Men*, is Max Brackett, a veteran reporter working for a network affiliate in a small California town. While reporting a "fluff piece" at a local museum, Brackett gets trapped inside when a former museum employee, Sam Baily (John Travolta), takes the curator and a group of children hostage. Seeing his chance to break a sensational story, Brackett begins reporting on the unfolding situation from inside. He eventually becomes a central figure in the direction of events, crossing the line between objectivity and subjectivity.

Brackett starts off as an untrustworthy and sneaky character. He lies to the police about the seriousness of the situation, telling them Sam is much more dangerous than he actually is. Brackett convinces Sam he has the disgruntled employee's best interests at heart, but he is lying. He really wants to control and prolong the situation. Under the assumption that Brackett wants to help him, Sam takes his advice on everything from releasing hostages to ransom demands. Brackett consistently lies to Sam, and convinces him to tell his family to talk to nobody in the media except for Brackett himself. He claims this will be better for the family and Sam, but in reality he just wants exclusive interviews.

Brackett's deceptions of Sam aren't his only improprieties. At one point, while creating a montage piece featuring interviews with people who know Sam, Brackett manipulates the tape of an interview with Sam's high school principal. The principal says Sam is a bad person and is totally responsible for the situation. Brackett, through tricky editing, manipulates the tape to a point where it sounds as if the principal is blaming the poor education system, not Sam, for his actions. The meaning of everything the principal says is reversed. This raises questions of trust in the press. The audience asks itself: If this is possible, how can we trust anything the media say?

Brackett is concerned with promoting his own career. Brackett used to be a respected correspondent for the network. After an on-air confrontation with the anchorman, he was demoted and shipped off to a small affiliate. Brackett wants to regain his network status, to once again be seen on the national news. He feels that by being a central figure in the hostage story, and by having sole access to the hostage taker, he will be able to "get back to New York." This story is his big opportunity. "I was up. I was down. Now I'm up again, thanks to you," Brackett tells Sam. He is well aware of his opportunity, and he's not the only one. Mrs. Banks, the museum curator, questions his motives for returning to the museum after Sam has let him go. "Is that because this insanity benefits your career?" she asks him. "I would hope so," Brackett replies.

Brackett's machinations are successful. His broadcasts begin airing nationwide. He and Sam get a full hour interview on Larry King Live. The network offers Brackett his own investigative reporting show with full editorial control and a hefty salary. Brackett's efforts at shameless self-promotion have paid off.

The key to Brackett's success is his quest for sensationalism. The story is the events unfolding, not the people who are involved and whose lives are at stake. He advises Sam every step of the way, not with the goal of ending the situation, but to prolong the story and generate talk of the story in the public. At the beginning of the situation, Sam accidentally shoots his friend Cliff, a security guard. Cliff stumbles out of the museum wounded, the cameras broadcasting the whole incident live. The station cuts the feed and Brackett gets angry. He demands to know who cut the



feed, and insists that the man's pain be broadcast. He knows that violence and blood sell, and wants to show every little detail of the tragedy. He repeatedly puts words in Sam's mouth, and tries to get Sam to admit on camera that he entered the museum with the intent to hurt someone. When Sam questions his motives, Brackett takes advantage of his naïveté by explaining to him how famous he is going to be. "You're the best show in town!" he tells Sam.

Despite all of Brackett's character flaws, he is "redeemed" in the end. He begins to care genuinely about Sam's well-being and even defends him when the network anchor portrays Sam as a deranged and dangerous man. He has actually taken the time simply to talk to Sam and listen to him. He has gotten to know Sam as a man and not simply a news event and thus sees the whole situation in a new, more sympathetic light. Brackett does everything he can to bring the situation to a calm and peaceful end, and he stops caring about ratings and career advancement. After convincing Sam to release all the hostages, he tries to bring Sam out peacefully.

Sam realizes the mistakes he has made and the extent to which he has gone. He commits suicide. Brackett is devastated and repeats the words "We killed him. We killed him." The "we" he is speaking of is the media.

Brackett has learned a valuable lesson. He has regained his "humanity." Therein lies the problem. This film implies that journalism is a field where humanity is a liability. *Mad City* suggests that journalists are basically immoral people and that a journalist with a conscience will not be successful.

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Each of the three movies touches on this same principle: Morality impedes successful reporting. *In To Die For*, *Scream* and *Mad City*, journalists make conscious choices not to care, to emphasize the sensational and to lie in order to promote their own careers.

It is not unreasonable for audience members to watch these three movies and movies like them and infer that perhaps all journalists share this mentality. That is not to say audiences are stupid or gullible, but that such consistent repetition lends credence to their views and beliefs. And there is repetition. Over and over, it is implied that journalists are basically immoral and unethical people who deserve their comeuppance.

Hollywood now routinely portrays journalists as uncaring and selfish people exploiting the general public in order to promote themselves. In *To Die For*, *Scream* and *Mad City*, journalists must either reform themselves or die. Being a journalist is a condition that is to be cured. There are no nice journalists in these films. There are no respectable, ethical and honest journalists in these films.

In the 90s, Hollywood created a new stock character -- the insensitive lout

with no sympathy and no integrity. And, to the dismay of journalists everywhere, the public bought it.

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