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11:38AM

This Just In: Journalists in Popular Science Fiction & Fantasy Are Evil

RYAN BRITT

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In the various science fictional worlds of comic book superheroes; possessing the profession of a journalist almost guarantees you're a good person. Between Lois Lane, Clark Kent and Peter Parker it's almost as if working in the media makes one destined for sainthood. But what about journalists depicted in science fictional contexts that are not in the genre of comic books? What about the journalists of the 23rd, 24th, or 80 Billionth Century? When looking at some examples of these SF&F news media characters, they almost always are portrayed as villains. Let's investigate.



The first step to making somebody into a bad guy, is to show that our heroes don't like them. At all. In *Star Trek: Generations*, there are clearly reporters on the bridge of the *Enterprise-B* covering its launch. Now, let's be honest, despite the enthusiasm the reporters seem to show, this was probably a fluff piece for them. I mean, did they really want to watch retired Captain Kirk hang out on the *Enterprise* and do nothing? Not likely. But then when things start to heat up, the first thing Kirk does is to tell the reporter/camera person to "turn that damn thing off." Why? Do you like suppressing the freedom of the press, Captain Kirk? Come on! These guys were covering some page six nonsense which involved you saying and doing very little, but now they've got a news story! Give these guys a break! But Kirk doesn't care and we hardly notice, because in the future, everyone hates journalists. Well not Jake Sisko. He was a nice journalist. But we saw what the Dominion did to him.

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The Wheel of Time Re-read: Knife of Dreams, Part 14 by **leighdb**

Fiction Affliction: Diagnosing August Releases in Urban Fantasy and Paranormal Romance by **SuzanneJohnson**

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On *Babylon 5*, the notion that the press is not only sensationalist, but also politically corrupt is highlighted in numerous episodes. In the episodes "And Now for a Word" and "The Illusion of Truth" the entire story is told in a documentary style, depicting Babylon 5 as seen through the eyes of an Earth-based news magazine. We seem to be dealing with some variety of "Space TV" here, as the styles and tones of ISN reporters are basically no different from investigative reporters of the 1980s or 1990s. Both of these episodes end up making Captain Sheridan, Delenn and all the rest look like pretty crazy people doing crazy things. But, of course, we the viewers know the truth because we've been with these characters the entire time! Sheridan's not crazy power hungry! He's nice! Dr. Franklin isn't hiding a bunch of telepaths in cold storage! I mean, um...he is hiding telepaths, but it's all for a good cause. You can see why the press might get the wrong idea. But it doesn't matter because, these reporters are depicted as evil and scheming and really nothing more than some kind of Orwellian mouthpiece for the government.



The contemporary *Battlestar Galactica* would use this almost exact same format in the episode "Final Cut." In it, a reporter, D'Anna Biers, shows up on Galactica with damning evidence that basically makes the marines under Adama's command look like a bunch of mindless murderers. Adama and President Roslin make a deal with the reporter to let her do a full documentary on the ship and its crew in exchange for giving them the tape with the compromising footage. Already D'Anna Biers: Investigative Space Journalists is coming across as a rotten mean terrible person. Why does she have to come in here and ruin everything? I mean all Adama and Roslin are trying to do is save everybody! Screw the press! Though the documentary eventually produced depicts Galactica in a more positive light than the one on *Babylon 5*, the journalist is still the bad guy. In fact, she's a Cylon, and her whole reason for pretending to be a mean journalist was so she could help her Cylon buddies figure out better ways of killing all the humans. See? You can't trust a reporter.

The Devil's Diadem by Sara Douglass by **Stefan**

abhi_sedai on The Wheel of Time Re-read: Knife of Dreams, Part 15

HARai on A Read of Ice and Fire: A Game of Thrones, Part 17

Mistborn Fans: Don't Forget to Pick Up Today's Edition of The Elendil Daily by **ManagementServices**

Going Through the Spin Cycle: Axis by Robert Charles Wilson by **Stefan**

HARai on The Wheel of Time Re-read: Knife of Dreams, Part 15

RBSIV on Rothfuss Reread: The Name of the Wind, Part 14: Like a Thunderclap

Wall-E the real robot! —EA

Prometheus (the alien prequel) has its first image —RB



Though not a space reporter, you've also got Rita Skeeter from the *Harry Potter* books. Considering that there is clearly a big news industry in the wizarding world (*The Daily Prophet* is mentioned about a billion times) it's very telling that this is the ONLY journalist that we ever meet. Of course, we all know Harry Potter is a nice guy, but a lot of the stuff Rita writes about him initially is totally true. He does have mood swings. He does fight with his friends all the time. He is sort of a jerk on occasion. Naturally, Rita Skeeter starts making up all kinds of stuff about everybody at some point, which only goes to prove magical journalists are just as bad and evil as space journalists. Only Hermione has the good sense to read Rita's book about Dumbledore in *The Deathly Hallows* because surely there must be *something* true in there.

So what causes popular science fiction and fantasy to depict journalists as petty, small people concerned only with their own agenda or the agenda of the organization controlling them? Why in the genre of imagination are journalists reduced to basic stereotypes? It seems to me there are two basic reasons.

The first is that science fiction in particular has never really been great on handling how news is transmitted in a futuristic setting. Though the worlds of *Star Trek* or *Babylon 5* clearly have things that resemble the internet, we still get these approximations of "Space TV." In another episode of *Babylon 5* characters are seen getting custom Space Newspapers from a dispenser slot on the space station. But of course, they have to recycle their old newspaper first! The clunkiness of this scene is actually the perfect analog for why journalists are depicted so poorly across the genre. If the delivery system by which people get their news in the future is ridiculous (Space TV, Space Newspapers) then the people who create the news will similarly be depicted in an absurd light.

The second reason why journalists seem like such terrible people in these popular, more adventure formats of science fiction is because the majority of protagonists in these kinds of stories have nothing to do with that part of the world. These kinds of people tend to be soldiers, or scientists, lonely politicians, or in the

case of Harry Potter, teenagers. These are not the kind of people who write for a living. Instead our heroes are people who are changing the world and saving all our lives. They couldn't be bothered who knows about it, because they're selfless and great and heroic. So in stark contrast, people who are concerned about the details threaten that supposed selflessness, which really irks our heroes. Granted, Heinlein gives us Ben Caxton in *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Asimov has a reporter following around Susan Calvin in *I, Robot*, but mostly these characters are ends in themselves. It is interesting



however, in more complex, layered world of a novel, the idea that there is a press and it's not ALL bad seems to be more apparent.

I'd like to believe any universe, science fictional or otherwise, would be made a lot better off if more of its heroes sat down and gave solid interviews. And let's not even think about *Star Wars*. Ever wonder why it was so easy for the Empire to rise to power? How come people had so much misinformation about the Jedi only 20 years after the big coup? Well, we never see one single news camera. Oh wait. Once. In the senate during a scene in the *Phantom Menace*. Hey Galactic Republic, if you want to preserve your democracy, you might want to think about putting news cameras on places like Naboo or Geonosis.



You know, where people are dying and stuff. I mean if Padme had been a little more Lois Lane, she could have blown the lid off that whole Sith Lord thing in three seconds. I mean it wasn't that hard to figure out. The audience knew the entire time.

Ryan Britt's writing has appeared here, with *Opium Magazine*, *Clarkesworld Magazine* and elsewhere. He has not forgotten about April from the TMNT.

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23 comments



1. FSS

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 11:56AM EST

I think it more reflects the viewpoint shared by people everywhere that you can't totally trust any source of news. I can't think of any news organization that isn't accused of bias on a regular basis. This makes news media an easy villain to create. You set up a stereotypical reporter (lazy, with an ax to grind), and let them interact with your protagonist. They will tell things that are half true or spun to make heroes look like villains, increasing the conflict for the hero.

As to your specific examples, in *Star Trek 7*, I thought Kirk just wanted the reporters to leave him alone so he could figure out a solution, which is hard to do with some shadowing you (from 2 feet in front of your face!). In HP, what I always thought was funniest was how people were quick to condemn Rita Skeeter when she reported on *them*, but all too ready to believe what she wrote about anyone else, even those close to them.



2. FSS

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 11:58AM EST

Oh, and I'm ignoring what you wrote about the Star Wars prequels. As a 30-something Gen-Xer, I prefer to believe that Lucas never made them, and his worst mistakes were the Ewoks and that Super Star Destroyer crashing into the 2nd Death Star.



3. ZetaStriker

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 12:33PM EST

I disagree entirely; not with your evidence of the media being portrayed negatively, but with your conclusion as to the reason for it. Even in our present-day world, the media has a ridiculous amount of control over the populace. American culture, from the idea of romance to the fundamentals of our national holidays, have been carefully crafted and implanted into the nation's collective consciousness with a startling degree of success. Every media outlet has an agenda, and they fulfill it by attemptation to brainwash their audience to their way of thinking.

In that light, I think portraying the future where the fear-mongering media of today has become the villainous muckrakers of tomorrow is entirely acceptable. Science fiction is speculative, after all, and just because it's not a spaceship or laser gun doesn't mean their portrayal of the media isn't any less true than their depiction of futuristic technology.

I will say that I firmly believe *reporters* aren't the target of this treatment, though. As I mention throughout my comments, the media at large is being represented by these isolated individuals, and it is a commentary directed at our own present-day society more than anything else. And in my opinion, ignoring it isn't in anyone's best interests.



4. Lis Carey

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 12:40PM EST

I suspect some of the negative depiction of reporters and news media also stems from the fact that organized science ficiton fandom has often had negative experiences with the news media. Some of that has been because the news media saw us as easy fluff, "look at the freaks" materials--but some of it also is the result of sf fans not understanding how to communicate about our activities, enthusiasms, and concerns with people who don't already share them.

So to the extent that the writers come from the sf community (and while many don't, many still do), there may be a background, unexamined hostility coming from past bad experiences.



5. Pam Adams

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 12:47PM EST

Dont forget the MARS TODAY newspapers in *Total Recall*.



6. DavidA Still

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 12:59PM EST

The explanations for the differing views of journalists in the examples you provide is really very simple: The comic book worlds you cite were created in the 1940s, 50s and 60s, when journalists were generally regarded favorably; the TV and movie examples you give are all from the 1990s or the 21st century, when people mostly have a very negative view of journalists. Journalists are evil in virtually all movies and TV today, not just science fiction/fantasy movies. In other words, it has nothing to do with science fiction as a genre, and everything to do with the period in which they were written.



7. SaltManZ

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 01:29PM EST

Trying to remember journalists I've encountered in sci-fi...

Eddie Michallat is a journalist, and one of the main "good guy" characters in Karen Traviss' *Wess'har* series. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Traviss was a journalist herself.

Then you have the current *Star Wars: Fate of the Jedi* series, where the main journalist character hounding the Coruscant Jedi is a bit of a sleezeball. Though I believe another journalist, this one female, was recently introduced in a more positive light, bringing attention to the problem of slavery within the Galactic Alliance.



8. wyoarmadillo

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 01:55PM EST

Take a look at David Webers treatment of the press in the Honor Harrington novels. In his latest book *Mission of Honro* he shows several journalists in a bad light. He also shows through the series ways governments try to control the media, and how willing journalists are to let them. I will agree that his journalists seem no different from popular potrayals of journalists in this day and age.



9. Dreamwolf

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 01:59PM EST

I see a shift over time in your material. The older the book / story the more respect journalists and media gets. That's why the superheroes who mostly started in the 50ths se journalists as a factor for good because in that time real media were much more intrested in the whole story and to present it unbiased.

While more modern views of media mirrors the modern model of media as mere mouthpieces for powerful media moguls and completely uninterested in the truth.

In addition I would presume that neither Heinlein nor Asimov had much experiece of being interviewed and having to watch the result of said event except maybe by a fanboy from a specialist magazine. Today's authors and scriptwriters usually have that experience, they know that a two hour interview will be cut down to a ten second soundbite focused on a completley irrelevant detail and given that knowledge, who could criticize them for painting media black?



10. boquaz

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 03:00PM EST

What about the way information flows in *Ender's Game*?

I always thought the blog-ish international message boards Peter and Valentine use sounded pretty realistic to the future. It turns out, that's the way we're going as well.

Why should the government (Padme, in your prequel example) arraigne for cameras? Limiting access to information to a chosen elite (who claim to be acting in everyone's interest) is *still* limiting access to information to a chosen elite. The existence of elite media organizations in a technologically advanced society (as opposed to... say the *Snowcrash* model of "gargoyles") suggests systemic corruption. Systemic corruption is what allows the continued

existence of large media companies even in our own society.

I think Dreamwolf@9 has it right. Authors have more experience with corporate media now. It's not that today's authors are painting corporate media in a bad light, they're painting corporate media in a more accurate light.



11. JeffR23

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 03:40PM EST

Well, we've got Edison Carter at least. For certain values of "popular", I guess.



12. Ludon

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 03:52PM EST

You beat me to **Max Headroom**.

The journalists in the **RoboCop** movies were depicted more as puppets and stooges than as villains and I think they had the same treatment in the TV series.

While this is not science fiction, I think it is worth taking a look at the Apollo 13 episode of Tom Hank's **From the Earth to the Moon**. In this episode you get a look at the beginnings of the transition of the (TV) news from information sources to ratings (and revenue) generating tools.



13. Imodesitt

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 04:12PM EST

I may be old school, but in **Archform:Beauty**, one of my protagonists is Jude Parsfal, and he's a journalist, and a good guy.

L. E. Modesitt, Jr.



14. wsean

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 04:14PM EST

Dude, I think you missed the mark on Babylon 5.

The journalists on B5's ISN were generally depicted as... well, journalists. You'd see TVs in the background, where reporters were talking about world events. Sometimes characters would be shown watching the news, and it'd be used to catch the viewer up on things that had been going on. The main anchorwoman had a nice emotional moment when the President was killed at the end of the first season.

ISN reported on all the shenanigans going on with martial law and the new president, right up until their broadcast center was taken by armed troops--which was also talked about on air as it happened.

It was only after that, with all the actual journalists taken away and presumably jailed or killed, that ISN became a gov't mouthpiece, and an obvious one. This was why "Illusion of Truth" had a scheming, evil journalist. Conversely, the journalist in the pre-takeover "And Now For a Word" was actually quite even-handed--the point of the episode was that from the outside, the way the station was run did look a bit crazy. And by the end of the episode, you could see their point.

One of the more touching aftermaths of the liberation of Earth was when the original anchorwoman reappeared on ISN, after more than a year of being

imprisoned, and talked about what had really been going on. She had appeared in a lot of early episodes, then vanished suddenly in inauspicious circumstances--it really was a lovely moment when we got her back again.

In short, I'd say B5 did a pretty damn good job with journalists.



15. Fenric25

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 07:32PM EST

I'm surprised there was no mention of Sarah Jane Smith from Doctor Who and the Sarah Jane Adventures--a journalist who's helped the Doctor save the world many times and gone on to do so by herself, albeit with the help of the local teenagers. Granted, it's rare that we actually see her actually doing her job as journalist, though it comes up every now and then that she worked for the fictitious Metropolitan magazine. Still, it's a fair sight better than the portrayals of journalism in SF/F mentioned above.

Also have to agree with the above poster--I felt Babylon 5 did a pretty good job as well, and likewise liked the return of the original reporter after the liberation of Earth. The way ISN and other methods of media/communication is shown does, alas, feel rather outdated now in some respects but it worked back then and is still entertaining when watching the show.



16. Christopher Byler

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 08:06PM EST

I agree with wsean: the fact that ISN turns into Pravda IN SPACE after Clark takes over isn't about how journalists are evil, it's about how the Clark regime is evil. Turning the media into a propaganda organization was recognized as an evil thing for a government to do.

Which in a way echoes David A. Still and Dreamwolf's point: these days turning the media into a propaganda organization is considered a perfectly unremarkable thing for a rich business owner to do, instead. (Or in addition, I guess; a government that tried to do it would still be regarded pretty negatively.)



17. Jfleon

WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2011 10:17PM EST

I agree, but there are a few exceptions, at least in the fantasy world.....Andrew Wren in "A Knight of the Word" comes to mind, a journalist who does the right thing in the end. Actually, I can think of more than a few positive fantasy examples....not so with Science Fiction.



18. ofostlic

THURSDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2011 02:18AM EST

I'm not sure it's so one-sided in books as it is in film. For example. Charlie Stross likes journalists: the protagonist in the *Family Trade* series, and one of the main characters in *Iron Sunrise*. There's a positive depiction of a journalist in Doctorow's *Little Brother*. The Ankh-Morpork *Times* is generally a force for good, even if it annoys Vimes.



19. crotchetyoldfan

VIEW ALL BY | THURSDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2011 06:38AM EST

@9: in fact, Heinlein and Asimov were regularly interviewed and presented on television (Asimov more so than Heinlein) and from my encounters with Asimov, I have no doubt that he was well aware of how journalists can treat issues, manipulate and take things out of context.

Another example of a 'good journalist' would be Jack Barron in Spinrad's novel *Bug Jack Barron*; then there are the several muckrakers portrayed in various novels and stories by A. Bertram Chandler; one was instrumental in breaking up an interstellar sex-slave trade; another working in concert with private agencies to expose slavery. It's early so I'm sure if it were later I could remember other examples.

I think a broad-based view would reveal a fairly even-handed handling of this particular profession. (A lot of pulp-era writers were journalists as well. I think Kornbluth featured journalists on several occasions and treated them well....)



20. NancyLebovitz

VIEW ALL BY | THURSDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2011 10:18AM EST

It's a while since I've read it, but iirc Brunner's *The Jagged Orbit* portrays journalists fairly favorably.



21. ryanbritt

VIEW ALL BY | THURSDAY FEBRUARY 24, 2011 12:35PM EST

Whoa! What a great conversation. It looks like my original thesis might have been a bit too narrow. Good call on wsean on looking at the whole Babylon 5 thing from a more comprehensive angle.

Also, I can't BELIEVE I forgot Sarah Jane Smith. Fenric25, very, very good call.

I have so many new thigns to read thanks to all of you! Nice.



22. TeresaJusino

VIEW ALL BY | WEDNESDAY MARCH 02, 2011 01:04AM EST | AMENDED ON WEDNESDAY MARCH 02, 2011 01:08AM EST

More "good" examples of journalists/journalism:

Jake Sisko on DS9 becomes an investigative journalist for the Federation News Service during the Dominion War. Just because things weren't puppies and sunshine for him doesn't make what he was trying to do less important, or less of a positive portrayal of what good journalism can be used to do.

In *The Hunger Games* trilogy, while the press starts out as the tool of the oppressor, it is co-opted by the rebellion as a tool to inspire revolution by creating a symbol in the Mockingjay and uncovering government lies.

Two examples of the press in SF being used to fight the good fight and stick it to The Man! :)

And on *Caprica*, the press - while still sensationalist - was acting as the conscience of the Twelve Colonies, questioning the motives of scientists like Daniel Graystone and organizations like the STO at a time when those two extremes were pulling society apart.



23. TheGeekRebellion

WEDNESDAY MARCH 02, 2011 03:49AM EST

I can't believe nobody has mentioned either *Starship Troopers* or *Mass Effect*. The journalists in *Troopers* were clearly puppets of the state and functioned as a propaganda machine. I think it represents a warning about what would happen if you let your need for security overwhelm you right to free speech. Then again, that could be a skewed observation tainted by the

world in which we live today.

And the news media in Mass Effect actually changed with the story. If Shepard became a hero the media went all nationalistic (or humanistic or racist even in this case). Not only that, we got to directly interact with one reporter on the citadel and either set her straight, let her continue along her path to the darkside or ignore it altogether and see how it played out.

I think that's a big of interesting incite as to how the media will actually give us the consumers what we want (or what it is performed that the majority of us want) because they're all really in it for the ratings.

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