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Movies elevate, rather than denigrate, journalism and reporters, author says

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CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — Are movies to blame for the public's low opinion of reporters and journalism? Has the Hollywood portrayal of the news business grown harsher in recent decades?

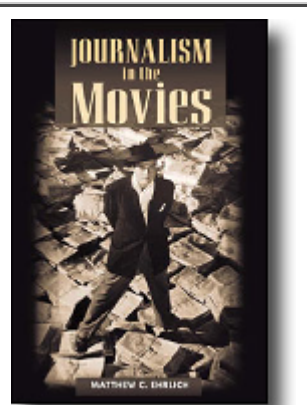
Some in the news media think so, says former reporter Matthew Ehrlich, now a [journalism](#) professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the author of an engaging new book on the subject.

Some critics among journalists think movies too frequently portray them in an unflattering light — as hard-drinking, foul-mouthed, scandal-seeking or lacking conscience, among other things. And they believe that portrayal has colored the public's view of real-life journalism.

But Ehrlich went to the source — the movies — and argues for a very different view in "Journalism in the Movies" ([University of Illinois Press](#)), being published in August.

"I started off, as a lot of journalists do, thinking that movies primarily are very highly critical of the press, and derogatory, and tell stories that kind of undermine the press's place in American life. But I've come around to the notion that, on the whole, they do the opposite."

Movies in general, and journalism movies in particular, are



Matthew Ehrlich went to the source — the movies — and argues for the unexpected view in "Journalism in the Movies" (University of Illinois Press), being published in August.

almost always reinforcing ideals or mythic notions about democracy and the role of the press, Ehrlich found. When movies tell negative stories about the press, or portray reporters as misfits or villains, their stories are almost always “morality tales, or cautionary tales, about what can go wrong when we lose sight of those ideals or myths.”

Journalism movies, Ehrlich said, almost always underscore the notion that “journalism is important, journalism has a central place in American life and in democracy, that journalism can and should be performed well. And if journalism somehow has lost its way – because of money pressures, sensationalism, television, sleaze – then one way or another it can find its way again, and journalists can do the right thing and make a difference.”

To write the book, Ehrlich turned a critical eye on what he calls the journalism movie genre: movies that focus on reporters and the news business. His list included such notable films as “The Front Page,” “His Girl Friday,” “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” “Citizen Kane,” “All the President’s Men,” “Network,” “Broadcast News” and “The Insider.”

A common theme among these movies is their dual message about the world of journalism, Ehrlich wrote. “They have exalted professional virtue by telling tales of ethical practitioners versus amoral hacks; at the same time, they have broadly hinted at how much fun amoral hacks can be.”

One reason for that dual message is that so many of the scripts were written by former journalists with their own mixed feelings about the press – and often a sense of what sells in a screenplay, Ehrlich wrote.

The first and prime example was “The Front Page,” the 1931 film based on a hit Broadway play, written by former reporters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, about reporters waiting for an execution in 1920s Chicago. The reporters in the movie were portrayed as pushy, loud, irritating and unethical – “not a journalism school portrait of the press,” Ehrlich noted with a smile. But still they manage to topple corrupt city officials and save an allegedly innocent man from execution.

“The Front Page” basically established the journalism movie genre, according to Ehrlich, who devoted a full chapter to it in his book. The movie’s conventions and themes, many borrowed from earlier newspaper novels and plays, have been surprisingly persistent in the movies that have followed, he said.

Journalism movies, for example, often put the lure of the big

story up against the desires and demands of romance, exploring issues of work versus home that are not easily resolved. The movies, in that regard, suggest “that journalism is not for normal people – which is its blessing and its curse,” Ehrlich wrote.

Other common themes are cynicism versus idealism, objectivity versus subjectivity (or the nature of truth), and public interest versus private interest. Woven through these themes are Hollywood versions of the outlaw hero and the official hero, both of which hold sway in the American imagination, Ehrlich said.

The outlaw journalist “stands for individualism and freedom,” stands up to power, and is “invulnerable to being snookered or co-opted,” Ehrlich wrote. “On the other hand, the official journalist stands for community and progress. He is a pillar who helps ensure democracy’s proper functioning while embodying white-collar ideals of public service and social mobility.”

The movies play a role as “purveyors of myth,” Ehrlich wrote, and they may serve a useful purpose even as they smooth over real-life conflicts in the process of telling their stories. “We abandon myths of a free press and a free citizenry at our peril. Movies offer visions in which the two cannot be separated.”

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