

The American Journalist: Fiction versus Fact

LOREN GHIGLIONE

HOWEVER HEROIC people may judge Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward of Watergate fame, however much Dan Rather and Ben Bradlee may be celebrities, however many honorary degrees Russ Wiggins and Walter Cronkite may receive, the status of the twentieth-century American journalist is also told in such headlines as 'Councilman charged with choking reporter' [1](#) and 'Journalists assaulted following N.Y. trial verdicts.' [2](#) People love to hate the journalist.

Many who come in daily contact with the journalist of fact-- from pol John Silber ('I have been running against the press since the beginning of the campaign') [3](#) to Pope John Paul II--vilify the press. The pontiff, according to a Boston Globe report, accuses the press of 'promoting "aberrant behavior" and imposing a world-wide condition of "moral slavery" on the unsuspecting.' [4](#)

Others charge the journalist with distorting the facts or simply getting them wrong. One study concluded that errors of fact appear in one of every six news articles. My favorite correction comes from one of our papers: 'The item last week, objecting to a dog in Dudley, should have read, "The owner should be fined and warned," not "fixed and wormed" as was printed.' [5](#)

Is there one incident that symbolizes the status of the contemporary journalist? Yes, what happened recently to Lisa Olson, a sports reporter for the *Boston Herald*, while interviewing football players in the New England Patriots' locker room. She experienced what the news media have politely called sexual harassment. What really happened--and I'm not going to bowdlerize Olson's explanation--is that several players positioned their bare genitals within inches of her face, dared her to touch them, and made lewd suggestions. 'Is this what you want?' [6](#) one said. Later, Patriots' owner Victor Kiam reportedly called Olson 'a classic bitch' and, according to *Newsweek*, said about his players, 'They can wiggle their waggles in front of her face as far as I'm concerned.' [7](#) At the next Patriots' game it was Lisa Olson, not the players, that the fans hooted.

When newspeople talk about themselves, they tend not to defend their role or reputations; instead, they adopt a self-deprecating, semicynical *Front Page* tone in describing their craft. The journalist of fact is, in the words of *New York Times* columnist Russell Baker, 'a scandal peddler, a mischief-maker, a busybody, a man content to wear out his hams sitting in marble corridors waiting for important people to lie to him.' [8](#) The small-town journalist of fact, I might add, waits for unimportant people to lie to him. A hunts newspaperman--now there's an oxymoron--if asked to define the real journalist, might repeat a joke about journalists: Why do so many people take an immediate dislike to journalists? Answer: To save time.

But what about the image in fiction of the journalist? Surely it must be better than the image of the journalist of fact. Before I answer, let me offer a true confession. The three other lecturers in this series--erudite scholars all--base their conclusions on a careful study of history. I base mine on a far-from-careful wallowing in comic strips, sci fi potboilers, TV sitcoms, movie whodunits, and two

thousand junk journalism novels.

(And, parenthetically, it seems appropriate, having been here to witness last week an excellent lecture on 'Newspapers and American Nationhood, 1776-1826' by Prof. David Paul Nord--dressed in a dignified brown suit and an equally dignified dark brown tie--to suggest that perhaps a lecturer who discusses the journalist in fiction needs to present a different image. First, he needs to shed his jacket and roll up his sleeves. Second, he needs to replace his dignified tie with a raffish, raucous one, featuring a painting of a Cracker Jack box. Of course the tie's knot needs to be pulled down, so that the shirt collar can be unbuttoned and open. Third, he needs to surround himself with the tools of the trade: a reporter's notebook, a pencil behind the left ear, a 'Question Authority' button pinned to his shirt, a beaten brown hat with a press card in its band, a lit cigarette (without filter, of course), a banged up Underwood--you'll have to imagine this painting of an Underwood as my typewriter--and a bottle of bourbon, for medicinal purposes only.)

Now we're ready to examine the images in fiction of two types of journalist--the reporter and the newswoman--to see what they suggest about the real journalist. In focusing on the reporter and the newswoman, we're skipping over such favorites of fictional characterization and caricature as the tough-on-the-outside, tender-on-the-inside editor, the adventurous war correspondent, the all-knowing Washington columnist, the Norman Rockwell-style small-town editor, and the money-grubbing publisher. While it's difficult to take seriously fictional journalists who spout lines like 'Win the Pulitzer for the Gipper,' [9](#) the fictional reporter and newswoman encourage us to consider important issues about U.S. journalism today and tomorrow.

First, the reporter. In the beginning, before the *Front Page* image of the big-city reporter, fiction gave us the jack-of-all-trades, small-town printer/reporter/editor, depicted in a 1791 poem by Philip Freneau. The printer/reporter/editor may rely on the thrice-weekly stage and its passengers for news. If '[a]ll is not Truth . . . that travellers tell,' [10](#) the readers tolerate the inaccuracies repeated by the printer/reporter/editor. As for local news, he acts as self-censor, emphasizing local people's good qualities and concealing ill 'from vulgar sight!' [11](#) He can be counted on to uphold the community's values.

The image of the reporter that dominates the American consciousness postdates the age of the partisan press, when, in fiction, the opinionated editor symbolized the newspaper. The year 1890 saw the publication of the first novel devoted to reporting--Karl Munroe's *Under Orders: the Story of a Young Reporter*--and a short story by Richard Harding Davis that was probably the most popular nineteenth-century fiction about the reporter. Davis's 'Gallegher: a Newspaper Story' records the exploits of a Philadelphia Press office boy in whom 'the detective element was abnormally developed.' [12](#) Gallegher helps capture Hade, a notorious murderer. By lying to the police and stealing a horse-drawn carriage, Gallegher gets the story back to his paper before deadline . . . and before the competition. He proclaims, 'I beat the town.' [13](#)

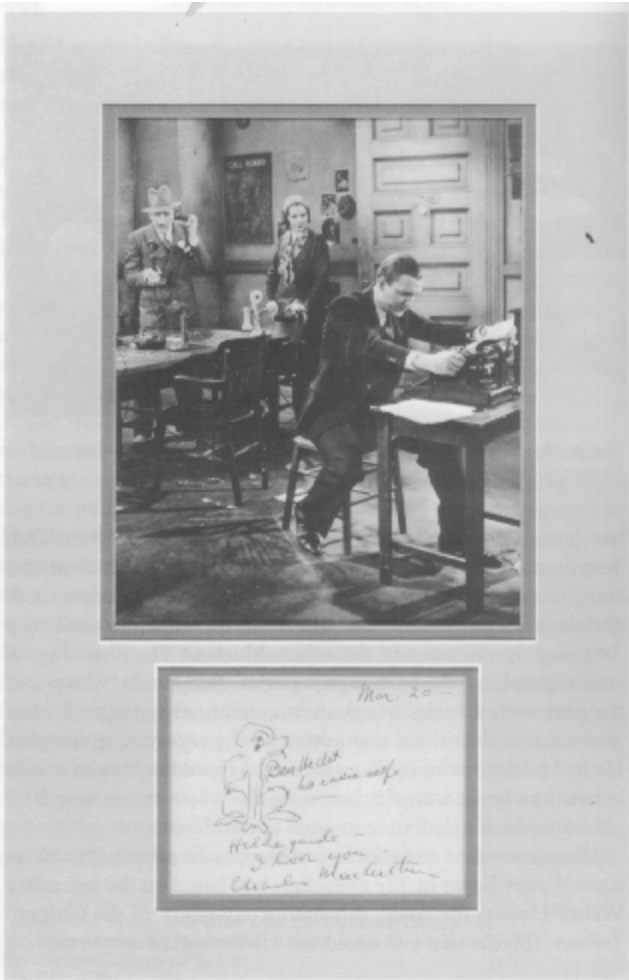
There is the same dedication to scooping the competition and getting the story in *The Front Page*, the 1928 play that was made and remade--at least four times--by Hollywood into a movie that



Photograph from 'Okay, America,' a 1932 film directed by Tay Garrett. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

has given Americans the archetypical big-city reporter. That 'hoodlumesque half-drunken caballero' [14](#) of a reporter wears his rumpled fedora inside, keeps a whiskey flask in his bottom desk drawer, wisecracks out of one side of his mouth while smoking a dangling cigarette out of the other. Much of *The Front Page* is autobiographical. As a Chicago reporter, Ben Hecht, who wrote the play with Charles MacArthur, committed outrages no less questionable than those committed by the reporters in the play. He had pockets sewn in his coat lining to hold the burglar's tools he used to break into the homes of the bereaved, in search of photographs of murder victims and of murderers.

Many journalists in fiction resemble specific people. The character Walter Burns in *The Front Page* was based on the legendary Walter Howey, the coldly calculating city editor of the *Chicago Tribune*. (Hecht said you could tell Howey's glass eye because it



Photograph from 'The Front Page,' a 1931 film directed by Lewis Milestone. Courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

definitely was the warmer one.) [15](#) And Clark Kent, Superman's alter ego, was modeled on a real-life reporter named Wilson Hirschfeld, who reportedly once remarked that he knew no one with as much integrity as himself. [16](#) But usually fictional journalists are only fun-house-mirror reflections of real journalists. The actions of fictional journalists often bizarrely exaggerate the worst in human behavior. The reporter in Jim Thompson's *The Nothing Man* commits--or, rather, thinks he commits--the Sneering Slayer murders. [17](#) In the film *Al Capone*, Keely, a sleazy reporter based on the Chicago *Tribune*'s Jake Lingle, works for the Chicago mobster, double-crosses him, and winds up a corpse. [18](#)

Sometimes the fictional journalist is the archetypical reporter that the newsman-turned-novelist would have liked to have been. The Watergate reporting by Bernstein and Woodward, for example, led to a series of novels about Washington investigative reporters, invariably winners of Pulitzer Prizes. Drew Pearson had previously provided Hap Hopper, a comic-strip crusader, but now Les Whitten, Jack Anderson's ferret, created Aubrey Warder of the Washington *Eagle*. The Washington *Post*'s Lawrence Meyer answered with reporter Paul Silver of the Washington *Herald*.

Good guy or bad, the cardboard character of a reporter in fiction usually does not provide, as H. L. Mencken concluded, an 'ade-quate portrait of the journalist.' [19](#) And yet, a fixture of early twentieth-century newspaper fiction is the journalist who feels his life will not be complete until, drawing upon

his career, he tries writing the Great American Novel. In 'Gentlemen of the Press,' Thomas Wolfe has a reporter say: 'Christ! Maybe some day I'll write a book myself--about all the poor hams I've known in this game who were going to write a book--and never did. What a life!' [20](#) In his novel *Erik Dorn*, Hecht jokes about 'two kinds of newspapermen . . . those who try to write . . . and those who try to drink themselves to death. Fortunately for the world, only one of them succeeds.' [21](#)

The ideal newsroom protagonist, judging by fiction and film from the first half of the twentieth century, brought reporter and detective together in one person. The reporter and the detective both were considered hard-working and highly moral, even when breaking the law. [22](#) Both insisted on remaining loners and working by their own idiosyncratic rules. [23](#) And both mixed with high-hatters and hoi polloi; they, like the heroes of Vern Partlow's song 'Newspapermen,' reveled in 'corruption, crime and gore.' [24](#)

George Harmon Coxe, a former newspaperman, banged out mystery novels about newshound/detectives at the rate of three a year. His Jack 'Flash' Casey became the hero of a radio show, two movies, and a television series with Darren McGavin. Ronald Reagan starred as a boastful reporter-photographer in *Nine Lives Are Not Enough*: 'On the strength of my story and my story alone, he's behind bars.' [25](#) Even Ernest Hemingway wrote a reporter-detective story (fortunately for Hemingway's literary reputation, the story remains unpublished). [26](#) *Front Page Stories*, *Newspaper Adventure Stories* and other pulp magazines featured reporters like Joseph 'Daffy' Dill. A typical Daffy Dill story opens: 'When I came into the city room of the New York *Chronicle* I felt lower than a flounder's flatside, and I had a hangover that would have done credit to the old Romans of Bacchus' day.' [27](#)

Neither sainthood nor celebrityhood, it is clear, awaits such a reporter. As Hecht and MacArthur wrote in *The Front Page*: 'Journalists! Peeking through keyholes! Running after fire engines like a lot of coach dogs! Waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them what they think of Mussolini. Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. A lot of lousy, daffy buttinskis.... And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives'll know what's going on.... [Y]ou'll all end up on the copy desk--gray-headed, humpbacked slobs, dodging garrishees when you're ninety.' [28](#)

Today's reporter in fiction is often an echo of the *Front Page* reporter of the 1930s. Roger Simon's *Wild Turkey* presents a fictional version of *Rolling Stone* journalist Hunter S. Thompson. Gunther Thomas, 'the renowned Ph.D. in guerilla journalism,' [29](#) smokes joints and lies through his bourbon breath. 'I'll be back in twenty minutes,' he says, [30](#) returning in thirteen months. Gregory Macdonald's Irwin Maurice Fletcher, the investigative reporter who stars in nine best-selling whodunits and two movies, skewers his news editor with acerbic one-liners reminiscent of Hildy Johnson's assaults on Walter Burns. A police chief's routine questions also prompt wisecracks from Fletch. Police chief: 'Do you live alone?' 'Except for a pet roach.' 'And what do you do for a living?' 'I'm a shoeshine boy.' [31](#)

And what about tomorrow's reporter? A reader of science fiction learns that the newspaper reporter of the future is either an anachronistic oddity competing with more influential, more celebrated intergalactic television newscasters or a nonreporter who makes up the news. In Ed Naha's *The Paradise Plot*, people rely for news on twenty-four-hour cable hookups and on the likes of television

commentator Tony Safian--metallic blue hair, 'chin of granite, head of meat.' [32](#) The most credible reports, however, come from Harry Porter of the *Herald-Times-News*, the only remaining U.S. newspaper. In Len Jenkin's *New Jerusalem*, readers no longer want reality. So newspapers fire reporters or force them to become 'inventors' who manufacture fiction--'names of nonexistent winners of nonexistent lotteries, details of the imaginary sex lives of imaginary popular entertainers.' [33](#) Faber--no first name given--is retained as the paper's last honest reporter, 'perhaps to be pointed out as a vestigial organ.' [34](#)

Indeed, science fiction promises a world where reporters are no longer humans but computers or robots, and the world reported is a world of fantasy as much as a world of fact. Journalists--like the Fiction Department of the government propaganda agency in George Orwell's *1984*--have the capacity to rewrite the past and transform or avoid reality. Laurent Michaelmas, the television journalist in Algis Budrys's *Michaelmas*, takes advantage of a magic megacomputer to access the world's data banks and control the news, not just reporting on corrupt officials but neutralizing them.

You have noticed, perhaps, that every reporter I've mentioned thus far has been a male--a white male, I might add. It is the male reporter--the often hard-living, fun-loving, irresponsible reporter who does anything to get the story first--that, unfortunately, has become the standard by which we judge newswomen, the second category of fictional journalist I have chosen to discuss.

The portrayals of the newswoman in fiction have gone through five stages over the past century. (The earliest depiction has not been replaced by later cliches; rather, they are joined by them so that now several, conflicting cliches run through current fiction.) The fictional newswoman from a century ago usually was an im- poverished single mother or widow, victimized by a tawdry, tough male world. Journalism, like streetwalking, was a trade that a woman accepted only when forced by numbing necessity. The widow who produces a newspaper column in Rebecca Harding Davis's 1897 novel, *Frances Waldeaux*, stops writing for fear her son will learn of her trade. In Edna Ferber's *Dawn O'Hara*, a doctor warns Dawn: 'Newspaper reporting, h'm? . . . That's a devil of a job for a woman.... can't you pick out something easier--like taking in scrubbing, for instance?' [35](#)

Perhaps no nineteenth-century novel portrayed the newswoman's plight more powerfully than *Ruth Hall: A Domestic Tale for the Present Time*, an 1855 roman ◆ clef by Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Parton), herself a successful journalist. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the famous suffragist, applauded *Ruth Hall* (*Ruthless Hall* as one reviewer called it [36](#)) as the first novel by a female to portray a woman's life honestly. [37](#) Hall lives in a world of malevolent males. Her father, to save money, pushes her to marry at sixteen. Her husband dies of typhoid fever, leaving her and their two children in poverty. When she decides--reluctantly, of course--to enter journalism, penny-pinching male editors reject her work or pay only fifty cents an article. Her writing, however, brings acclaim and makes her newspaper editor wealthy. She asks for a raise. 'There it is,' the editor says, smiling, 'women are never satisfied. The more they get, the more grasping they become.' [38](#) But John Walter, a smart New York editor, hires Hall to write exclusively for his paper. Hall earns a fortune. And a collection of her newspaper pieces--a book like Fern's own *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio* [39](#)--makes her famous. At novel's end, while 'strong-minded' Hall may choose to wed Walter, marriage is not inevita- ble. But her independence, from malevolent and marvelous males alike, and her self-respect are certain. [40](#)

The second-era newswoman in fiction was cheerleader to a newsman. Whatever journalistic success

she achieved, she really sought to marry the man she loved. Helen Fisbee replaced hospitalized John Harkless as editor of the Carlow County *Herald* in Booth Tarkington's 1900 novel, *The Gentleman from Indiana*. Fisbee, who 'can turn off copy like a rotary snow-plough in a Dakota blizzard,' [41](#) triples the *Herald's* circulation and takes the weekly daily. But in the end, she appears ready to marry Harkless and abandon her career for his.

Third, the newswoman of the 1920s and 1930s was not only as talented but just as tough as her male counterparts. Often, as in Hollywood movies, she outwisecracked, outdrank, and out-reported newsmen. While the young female reporter on a real newspaper might be restricted to the 'women's page' and 'society' news, the film newswoman did everything. Joan Crawford captured mobsters (including Clark Gable) in *Dance, Fools, Dance*; Glenda Farrell as Torchy Blane, heroine of nine movies, chased murderers around the world in *Fly-Away Baby*; and Bette Davis nabbed the killer in *Front Page Woman*, which was based on a story entitled, ironically, 'Women are Bum Newspapermen.'

In much contemporary fiction we see the fourth stage of the depiction of the newswoman. The newswoman achieves professional success--she even climbs the ladder to editor, publisher, or owner--but remains an unfulfilled, unfeeling, personal failure. Often she panders and philanders, assuming the role of the seductive temptress, or she lets her aggression and ambition run wild, earning the reputation of superbitch. In *Anna Hastings: The Story of a Washington Newspaperperson!*, Allen Drury's heroine pushes the paper she publishes to be the most principled and most aggressive anywhere. But, to keep that reputation, she publishes an exposé about her husband, who then commits suicide. For the paper, she adopts the motto 'The Truth--Regardless!' [42](#)

The fifth stage is evident in a very few recent novels, most written by women. The newswoman no longer measures her success by her relationship to a man. She is more independent both as a journalist and as a human being. She takes on the toughest assignments, whether in big-city combat zones or war zones abroad. Samantha Adams, the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* reporter-detective in Alice Storey's *First Kill All the Lawyers*, nails the murderer and, perhaps to illustrate her independence, resists a fling with her first lover: 'Now she was grown-up.' [43](#)

Still infecting much fiction, though, is the notion that women lack the toughness to be real journalists. They spend their careers trying to become real journalists--that is, trying to become men. A woman police reporter in a recent Caryl Rivers novel writes in her diary: 'I'm a woman, on a man's beat, and one slip, and all of womankind goes down with me. ("Broads can't do these stories.>")' [44](#)

The depiction of newswomen in fiction raises serious questions about the nature of the journalist and journalism. While the journalist may strive for fairness and 'objectivity' (I put that word in quotation marks), the journalist's education, sex, ethics, and ethos color the presentation of the facts he or she has chosen to collect and report. Journalism is a highly personal funhouse-mirror of reality. It is not mere coincidence that the caricatures of newswomen in fiction match up rather closely to the sexist stereotypes of women that Jean Gaddy Wilson, a professor at the University of Missouri, found in her study of real news reporting. The sexist stereotypes of women that she found are: victim; pet/cheerleader; mother/nurturer; bitch; tempter/seducer.

The fictional newswoman also is a symbol of the real-life, Catch-22 tension for a woman between

achieving journalistic success by denying her womanhood and being 'manly,' even macho, or remaining true to herself and, perhaps, reforming and revitalizing journalism in ways largely foreign to men. So much of journalism focuses on conflict, not the resolution of conflict. So much of being a journalist revolves around rejecting our best instincts as human beings. The authoritarian, hierarchical management style survives. The myth of the tough guy still lives: Even when journalists have the time to check back with sources to guarantee the accuracy of reporting, they often choose not to do so.

The fictional newswoman, in addition, reminds us that the real journalist is actress or actor--a chameleon who plays different roles depending on employer, story, and circumstances. The journalist is both neutral and partisan, insider and outsider, truth-teller and, yes, even occasionally liar. The journalist resembles a description of Ernest Hemingway--himself once a journalist--by his wife, Hadley: 'So many sides to him you could hardly make a sketch of him in a geometry book.' [45](#)

Not surprisingly, the Washington *Post* Watergate reporters, as portrayed by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman in *All the President's Men*--world-famous symbols of truth-telling--also deceive and misrepresent. William McKeen, after surveying popular film and fiction, concludes that 'the journalist, even when on a crusade, has remained something of a sleaze. [46](#) . . . There are few lines of work that are portrayed as poorly--in the "fictional" world--as journalism.' [47](#)

Contemporary popular culture suggests that the institution of journalism, not only the individual journalist, is at fault. Art focuses not on the journalist's face but on journalism's institutional face--in the case of newspapers, the front page. In 'A Boy for Meg' and other paintings, Andy Warhol gives us page one of a tacky tabloid, which has become a ubiquitous symbol of the mass-circulation press.

Novels like Linda Stewart's *Panic on Page One* question newspapers' motivation. In that work, the Los Angeles *Tribune*, formerly a serious sheet, faces extinction. To save the paper, the new publisher hires a drunken columnist to egg on a serial killer. The paper's circulation soars. The columnist describes journalists and others 'makin' their bucks on a fucked-up, crazy, psychotic creep. Hey listen--it's the new American Dream.' [48](#) The novel begins and ends with words published in 1835 by Alexis de Tocqueville: 'In order to enjoy the inestimable benefits that the liberty of the press ensures, it is necessary to submit to the inevitable evils it creates.' [49](#)

One of the most obvious evils, suggests contemporary fiction, is that the values of the countingroom will take over the newsroom. There is also the possibility that by the year 2000 less than a dozen international media conglomerates will dominate the world. That possibility has generated a string of 'conspiracy' novels.

Throughout Jeff Millar's *Private Sector* runs the question of who--really, what--will buy the *New York Times*. A *Times* investigative reporter worries about the demise of real journalism: 'The *Times* is the Lone Ranger.... Everything else is turning into show business. The . . . conglomerates. They all seemed to be called . . . "Twenty-Second-Century Communications Group," and you never see them, or know who they are, except for the lawyer clones who announce the sale at a press conference.' [50](#) The *Times* later is sold for nine hundred million dollars to a 'Swiss bank account,' [S 51](#) part of a secret conspiracy of two hundred giant corporations worldwide that is buying the media to take over the U.S. government.

In David Aaron's *Agents of Influence*, a one-year-old Cold War novel that the speed of real-world

politics has already made hopelessly out of date, the Soviets bankroll a French media mogul, Marcel Bresson, who attempts to take over an eight billion dollar company that controls America's most influential news media. A Congressional committee worries about 'how much foreign ownership of American business is consistent with our national sovereignty and well-being.' [52](#) The takeover attempt is thwarted, though. At novel's end, the U.S. company receives a new hostile takeover offer from a Japanese media company. Bresson's ominous warning lingers: 'Nations . . . are dangerously overarmed anachronisms. The earth will be ruled by global corporate organizations. And the key to global economic and political power is the media.' [53](#)

I am reluctant to claim that fiction provides a unique understanding of the journalist and journalism. Fiction writers insist, as Ned Calmer has argued, that their characters come from 'the truer world of the novelist.... All imaginary, and all true.' [54](#) But fiction produces only partial truths.

Yet fiction--even the conspiracy novel--leaves us with questions to ask and answer about the future of the real American journalist.

The conspiracy novel exaggerates only slightly the real world of 1990, in which French, German, and Japanese companies have recently made significant purchases of U.S. media. Thomson Corporation, the five billion dollar Canadian firm, publishes 122 U.S. dailies, more than any other newspaper chain. Kenneth Thomson says, 'I can't imagine any publishing company anywhere in the world that would be beyond our ability to acquire.' [55](#) U.S. companies have begun shielding themselves against international raiders. Knight-Ridder, Inc., has adopted a charter amendment that requires 80 percent approval for any sale or merger that the board decides would threaten the quality of the news product or place more than 20 percent of the firm under foreign ownership.

Fiction about the media owner willing to stoop to anything to survive or beat the competition points to a new reality. Newspaper readers increasingly are treated as customers to be served and satisfied, not as citizens to be educated and challenged. James K. Batten, president and chief executive officer of Knight-Ridder, Inc., one of the nation's most respected media companies, believes the newspaper industry must 'develop a new and fierce commitment to publishing newspapers that strain to please and satisfy our customers every day.' [56](#) CNN television experiments with 'interactive television' to permit its audience to examine a broadcast 'menu' of available stories and pick the ones it wants to see. Critics wonder whether that approach abdicates editorial responsibility to customers.

Fiction that forecasts public disinterest in real news and the replacement of reporters with 'manufacturers' of nonnews--creators of artificial reality--brings to mind a recent survey by the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press. The survey concludes that young adults 'know less and care less about news and public affairs than any other generation of Americans in the past 50 years.' [57](#) Perhaps this indifference helps explain why in 1988 only half the eligible voters cast a presidential ballot.

Fiction also reminds us that, despite what we newspaper Neanderthals wish to believe about the majesty of print, the age of literate readers--readers of newspapers, serious literature, and books--is passing. (In his just-published *The Death of Literature*, Alvin Kernan concludes that 'reading books is ceasing to be the primary way of knowing something in our society.') [58](#) The percentage of adult Americans who read a newspaper every day decreased from 73 percent in 1967 to 51 percent

twenty-one years later--a drop of more than one percentage point each year. Of course, fiction lets us know that, in the words of a character in Carole Nelson Douglas's novel, *The Exclusive*, 'TV [is] no place for a journalist.' [59](#) But when the latest Hollywood version of *The Front Page* depicts Hildy Johnson as a TV reporter and Superman comics have Clark Kent working out of a television newsroom, perhaps the time has come to admit that print has fallen prey to television, computers, videos, and Nintendo.

Fiction about newswomen not only emphasizes the impact of sexism and of the glass ceiling on the careers of real newswomen, but it also suggests the continuing role in journalism of racism, homophobia, ethnocentrism, and other forms of discriminatory myopia. Newspapers, and novels, too, rarely are more than a half- step ahead of society. 'When it comes to talking about homosexuality,' Randy Shilts writes, 'newspapers often are more invested in lying to readers than in telling the truth.' [60](#) In novels, minority reporters rarely appear. African Americans are invisible or the victims of white reporters--as in Langston Hughes's 'Name in Print'--or journalistic Tontos to white Lone Ranger reporters and editors.

While fiction rightly captures the sleazy side of the journalist, it may fail to capture the other side. The generation of real journalists dating from the 1960s combines, as James Boylan writes, 'the individualism and flair of *The Front Page* (that is, of yellow journalism) with the ideology and seriousness of "professionalism."' [61](#) But usually journalists' professionalism gets left out of contemporary fiction and film. So the public that views film, for example, judges 'journalists much more unsavory after the viewings,' [62](#) according to one recent study.

There is a danger. The public will want to punish the journalist. That, I fear, is what we are seeing increasingly. In a nationwide survey earlier this year, almost 59 percent of Americans said government should have some power of censorship. More than one- quarter of those surveyed believed the First Amendment's guarantees of free speech do not cover newspapers. Congress talks about editing the First Amendment, to punish those who might burn a U.S. flag in protest. And journalists worry about the long-term consequences of an attempt to amend the Bill of Rights. In courtrooms, judges and juries, supposedly representatives of the American public, increasingly interpret invasion-of-privacy laws and libel laws in ways that leave journalists less free to tell the truth. Having recently lost a libel case, let me suggest that even when statements that newspapers publish are true, judges now welcome plaintiffs' theories that there was 'libel by impression' or 'libel by innuendo.'

In *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton wrote that the survival of the press's liberty 'must altogether depend on public opinion, and on the general spirit of the people and of the govern- ment.' [63](#) What freedom the public gives journalists, the public can take away. But the ultimate irony may be that, insofar as the public--relying on its image of both fictional and real journalists--chooses to restrict journalists' freedom, the public restricts its own freedom.

This paper, in a slightly different form, was read at the annual meeting of the Society held in Worcester on October 17, 1990.

Notes

1. 'Councilman Charged with Choking Reporter,' *Editor & Publisher*, October 6, 1990, p. 35.
2. George Garneau, 'Journalists Assaulted Following N.Y. Trial Verdicts,' *Editor & Publisher*, May 26, 1990, p. 12.
3. As quoted in Robert L. Kierstad, 'Silber Takes on the Media--and Wins,' *Boston Globe*, September 24, 1990, p. 15.
4. 'A Press--ing Matter,' *Boston Globe*, September 20, 1990, p. 82.
5. See correction, (Webster, Mass.) *Times*, February 4, 1981, p. 3.
6. See Ann Marie Kerwin, 'Harassment in the Locker Room,' *Editor & Publisher*, October 6, 1990, p. 10.
7. *Newsweek*, October 8, 1990, p. 17.
8. Russell Baker, *The Good Times* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1989), pp. 8-9.
9. Jeff Millar, *Private Sector* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), p. 149.
10. Philip Freneau, *The Poems of Philip Freneau*, ed. Fred Lewis Pattee, 3 vols. (Princeton: The University Library, 1907), 3: 61 .
11. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
12. Richard Harding Davis, *Gallegher and Other Stories* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), p. 4.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
14. Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* (New York: Covici-Friede Publishers, 1928), p. 31.
15. Pauline Kael, 'Raising Kane,' in *The Citizen Kane Book* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 27.
16. Dennis Dooley, 'The Man of Tomorrow and the Boys of Yesterday,' in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend!*, ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (Cleveland: Octavia Press. 1987), pp. 29-30.
17. Jim Thompson, *The Nothing Man*, in *Hard Core: 3 Novels* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1986).
18. Maxwell Taylor Courson, 'The Newspaper Movies: An Analysis of the Rise and Decline of the News Gatherer as a Hero in American Motion Pictures, 1900-1974' (Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1976), pp. 230-32.
19. H. L. Mencken, 'More Tips for Novelists,' *Chicago Tribune*, May 2, 1926, as quoted in H. L. Mencken, *A Gang of Peeksniffs and Other Comments on Newspaper Publishers, Editors, and*

Reporters (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1975), p. 116.

[20.](#) Thomas Wolfe, 'Gentlemen of the Press,' in *The Hills Beyond* (1941; repr. New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 52.

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LOREN GHIGLIONE is president of Worcester County Newspapers and immediate past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

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