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Journalism in the Spotlight:

An analysis of Hollywood's portrayal of the journalist in American films

By: Merri Shaffer

Cinema has an incredible power. It holds a broad, flexible role in the vast majority of societies and cultures. It can be used as a soapbox. It can be purely as an experiment of art. It can be used to entertain, educate, inspire and raise awareness, as well as be a tool of propaganda, escapism or just art. Along with literature, music and paintings, films have always had a complementary relationship with society - able both to affect it and reflect it. They create an investment in societal concepts, opening people up to issues and views. Films such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Hotel Rwanda* and *Blood Diamond* are all examples of movies that have impacted and affected society. They have inspired change and awareness in popular thinking. *To Kill a Mockingbird* advocated equality, justice and racial tolerance among Americans. *Hotel Rwanda* shone light onto the devastating genocides that were occurring in Rwanda. *Blood Diamond* forced Americans to become more aware of the crisis in conflict diamonds.

However, just as film has the ability to influence societal change, it also can reinforce common, dominant social and cultural ideas and values.

When audience members place themselves in front of a screen, they sign an invisible contract indicating they understand what they are most likely witnessing is a fictional story. At the same time, directors and writers must remember they should present characters in a way that is believable and acceptable. In doing so, when constructing a character, creators often draw on a cast of stereotypes to meet this need. Fortunately for some and unfortunately for others, those stereotypes often stick and grow in strength.

Fueled by this formulaic representation, Hollywood has somewhat stereotyped journalism as well as the journalist. It has created a rather standard image and placed it in different roles. For example, fast-talking, cigarette-smoking alcoholics are how an uncountable number of journalists have been portrayed since the 1920s. Sometimes they are villainous, like in *All About Eve* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and sometimes they are heroic, as in *The Killing Fields* and *Hotel Rwanda*. These films also suggest that the journalist can see through hypocrisy, unveil lies and defend the common man. But often, film journalists demonstrate an ulterior motive. The journalist's motivation is getting the byline on the best story. It's about being the first paper to get the scoop. It's about increasing to increase the network's ratings. The public comes second to the fame of the journalist, newspaper or network, despite the fact this is often overshadowed by one simple principle: the public's right to know.

In the following pages, I investigate whether an ambivalent image has been created to depict reporters in movies or if there is an underlying characteristic shared by all journalistic characters. It explores the origin of the stereotypical image of the journalist and discusses how this image has been incorporated into different roles. From the start of the sound era to the present, movies have managed to show both flattering images as well as critical, unfavorable ones. One day the hero, the next a villain - the journalist can be seen in various roles as crime buster, perk-sniffer, vixen, saint, crusader, detective, public servant, lover or fiend. I engage the question: is the image of the journalist fabricated, or was it created to reflect societal attitudes toward the journalist? And who is to blame for the image?

In this paper, I also will dive into journalism's specific film genre. Often the plot of the journalism film revolves around the pursuit of a story, filled with tales of obstacles encountered and the consequences of the pursuit. I will pay much attention in the paper to films such as *The*

Front Page, *All the President's Men* and *Broadcast News* to explore how this genre may have evolved. In addition, I will look to at the journalist in a supporting role. Films like *All About Eve* and *Thank You for Smoking* feature a character who is a journalist. Though these are not the main characters, they often provide an integral piece to the plot—sometimes the conflict, sometimes the helping hand.

Journalists, newspaper men and women, reporters, editors and everyone in between cannot claim to be saints. Journalism's central role in politics and culture, as well as its vested economic and work-related interests, make questions regarding its boundaries and uses come to the surface. Using examples such as *Shattered Glass*' Stephen Glass, I will discuss the responsibility of the media in society and the complex relationship between the media and the masses.

From the unforgettable image of the sleazy journalists created in Howard Hughes' 1931 film *The Front Page* to the public servant-style journalists of George Clooney's 2005 *Good Night and Good Luck*, Hollywood has expanded its portrayals of journalists to beyond those engaged in a shady profession – it has partially subdued the negative images as well. Ultimately, this paper will trace that progressive transformation.

Director Lewis Milestone's 1931 film *The Front Page* opens with three men testing the gallows for a hanging. The film cuts away to one of the men walking away from the gallows when an empty Old Kentucky liquor bottle shatters at his feet. With it just early afternoon, the owner of the bottle is no other than a reporter, hanging out the window yelling at them to quit making so much noise with the gallows. After the man responds with a threat, the reporter laughs while saying "Ain't much respect for the press around here."

A long-lasting image of the journalist that ultimately dominated his depiction was birthed. As silent films became obsolete and the era of the talking film invaded the nation, the newspaperman was stereotyped. His prototype consisted of a fast-talking, chain-smoking, wise-aleck/wise-cracking reporter who always managed to find time for a “stiff one” at any point in the day. The image of the journalist is firmly established, and from that moment on, there really was very little reason to give any of the reporters respect in the film.

Based on the 1928 play of the same name and written by ex-journalists Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, *The Front Page* is a screwball comedy centering on a newspaper reporter and his unsuccessful attempt to leave the newspaper industry for marriage and an advertising career. Soon after, he gets derailed by a big break on a story that leads to him hiding an escaped convict in a roll-top desk in the press room to ensure getting his scoop. Furthermore, the reporter’s overbearing editor is very much in the picture, sabotaging any effort his star reporter makes to leave, i.e., framing him for theft. Besides offering great comedy, what this film did was create an image of the press. It established many roles and themes that are reproduced in too many journalism films that came after.

Contemptuous and lazy, the reporters of the press room spent their day speaking crudely and cynically, insulting victims, neglecting investigative work, lounging around the room waiting for a break or a big story to fall on their laps. And while demonstrating yellow journalism at its best, downplaying legitimate news with exaggerations, sensationalism and scandal, the men twist the words of anyone and everyone from whom they receive a quote – the mayor, the sheriff, the hooker with the heart of gold. They seemed to have their own interpretations of the news of a story. The movie presented a vision of the quick-witted urban

reporter who would do almost anything to break the story. They either haphazardly conducted their work or used conniving tactics to get the truth.

The overbearing, scheming editor was pronounced. The men of the press were tactless, rude and manipulative. The idea of the impossible escape from the profession was introduced. Cigarettes, quick wit, liquor and cynicism defined the journalist, and it's an immortalized image that has been repeated, rehashed and reincarnated. These elements that built the character in film were just "badges, costumes, symbols by which characters were recognized and accepted by the movie-going public," wrote former broadcast journalist Alex Barris (13).

When *The Front Page* first hit the big stage, it was a great hit of the Broadway season, most likely attributed to the characters created. Hecht and MacArthur created "hard-boiled cynics" who were also human and amusing. "They drink, play cards to stave off boredom, insult each other, tell tall tales, show an irresistible lack of respect for all public officials, alibi for each other's absences (as when an irate wife is searching for an errant husband), and, most of all, hate their editors with a burning passion" (Barris 14). They were extreme in their vulgarity, but their wit, sarcasm and fast-talk established characters an audience enjoyed disapproving of.

Though the story debuted in a time of controversy about tabloid news and press' role in society, the authors simply used the story as entertainment. Hecht and MacArthur wrote the story to reflect their "intellectual disdain of and superiority to the newspapers," reads their epilogue in their 1928 published edition. But what they felt they ultimately produced was a "romantic and rather doting tale" (Hecht, MacArthur, and Hilton 187). Hecht and MacArthur based the premise of their play on two events: a practical joke played by MacArthur's editor at the *Herald Examiner* and the escape of a convict from the Cook County Jail four days before he was to be hanged in 1921. In reality, MacArthur's editor, Walter Howey, had MacArthur arrested when his

train reached Gary, Indiana after he took a woman from the newspaper's staff to New York to marry her. As for the escaped convict, both Hecht and MacArthur had covered the story for their newspapers. The escaped convict made use of a smuggled pistol to break out of jail, and eventually made the police laughable figures, having them follow several false leads, none being fruitful because the escaped convict was never seen again.

Numerous other characters were based on Hecht and MacArthur's fellow reporters, colleagues and victims. But despite their negative traits, they demonstrated a fanatic devotion to duty. Translated very well to film, the 1931 version received Academy Award nominations for best picture, best director and best actor. Though it did not receive any wins, it left a strong story that has been remade two more times (Howard Hawks' 1940 *His Girl Friday*, in which Hildy's character is portrayed by a female journalist, and Billy Wilder's 1974 revival). In addition, it left an accepted stereotype – much to working journalists' dismay.

At the time, the press did not appreciate the characterization. The real-life newspaperman refused the image being created by movies. *New York Times* publisher Adolph Ochs considered refusing advertising for the play. George Gordon Battle, the paper's attorney, wrote an editorial attacking the portrayal of managing editors, saying they are not “all conscienceless and cruel.” As for the movie version, *American Press* condemned Hollywood for creating and presenting a degrading impression of the newspaper business.

An irony exists in this particular situation of being reviewed by the same people that are being portrayed unfavorably on the screen. That irony is found in that the portrayal itself was created by their own peers. Hecht and MacArthur had been Chicago newspapermen. *Five Star Final's* writer, Louis Weitzenkorn, had been an editor for a New York newspaper. 1929's *Gentlemen of the Press*, was based on a screenplay written by journalist Ward Morehouse.

Herman Mankiewicz, who collaborated with Orson Welles to write the screenplay for *Citizen Kane*, also was a journalist. The list continues. Allen Rivkin, once a Minneapolis newspaperman, wrote the screenplays for *Picture Snatcher* (1933) and *Behind the News* (1940). Dudley Nichols, a former reporter and feature writer for the *New York Post*, is responsible for *It Happened One Night* (1944) and Billy Wilder, a stringer for a number of newspapers, for *Ace in the Hole* (1951). These former newsmen did much to shape the language and behavior that became the identifying emblem of onscreen newspapermen. These journalists were partly responsible in, what Barris called “molding and perpetuating that romantically magnified image of reporters and editors that made real newsmen cringe as often as it made audiences laugh” (19). They set the pace and path for many of the films to come.

But no facet of journalism has been untouched. Both print and broadcast journalism have been depicted, though newspapers more than magazines, and television more than radio. Photojournalism has always been in a league of its own, especially as sensationalism in the news was fueled by the appetites of the consumers. Newspapers by far had it the worst, possibly because of their longer history of existence. The drunken journalist whose work was as yellow as it could be dominated the image for decades.

The 1930s and 40s were an era dominated by the films of the infamous Frank Capra, and a number of those films cashed in on simple stereotype of the press. Members of the tabloid press were insensitive vultures. Though the revered director had fashioned films with the leading man being a journalist, such as *The Power of the Press* (1928), *Platinum Blonde* (1931) and *It Happened One Night* (1934), films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* both pushed journalism into a different territory. Journalism was not the star but the ultimate villain, an obstacle to the film’s hero.

In *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, a naïve small-town man, Jefferson Smith, is asked to fill a vacancy in the Senate, although he is unfamiliar with the political ways of the capitol. Once in Washington, he discovers many of the failings of the political process as his sincere goal conflicts with a state political boss' plans. Though this film highlights political corruption more than anything – hypocrisy, manipulation and exploitation in the nation's capitol – it had something to say about the tabloid press.

This group of journalists acts as vultures upon their initial encounter with Smith – swarming around him, misquoting and misusing pictures to create a different story – leading to multiple knockouts as Smith charges through Washington, his angry fist raised in the air. “Why don't you tell the people the truth for a change?” Smith asks in a moment of rage after numerous newspapers criticize him, attacking his reputation and his competence in and of Washington. Frame by frame, flashes of front pages fill the screen with less-than-accurate headlines, demonstrating the puppet-like role of the journalist, controlled by the planted words and lies of the politicians. “JEFF TELLS TRUTH” and “SMITH LIES, SAYS SENATE” are both headlines that appear in different papers on the same day.

1936's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* centers on another seemingly naïve small-town boy moving to the Big Apple after inheriting millions of dollars from an estranged uncle. Almost immediately after his arrival, the press pounces on him. Familiar characters arrive on the scene: the overbearing editor hungry for the big story and the chain-smoking reporters, though this time a female, using manipulation to get a story. Newspaper photographers lurk in the trees to snap a picture, and the headlines of the papers infringe on the life of the protagonist.

Journalist Babe Bennett, played by Jean Arthur who arguably is the epitome of the female screwball comedy actress, pushes the exploitation card – a concept/theme that is still

repeated in journalism films today. She instead seduces the target, but eventually comes to terms with her conscience and quits.

Mr. Deeds demonstrates the too fast, too busy world of journalism and breaking news — with an emphasis on disregard for the truth. The tabloid press, as a group, can best be described as vultures. In Capra's films, the individual reporter, once set apart from the pack, almost always had a change of heart and worked to correct any wrongs he or she had done. Capra repeated this scenario in his 1934 comedy and romance *It Happened One Night*, the tale of a runaway spoiled socialite who is helped by a reporter, who in turn was in search for a story. But in the end, the reporter walks away.

Capra was promoting an ambiguous image, one separating the individual from the press as a whole. Perhaps the most powerful and dangerous image is that of anonymous reporters chasing after stories. However, the beginning of the next decade saw *Citizen Kane*, what the International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers called “one of the most written about films in cinema history,” which in itself saw a different contradiction in journalism.

Orson Welles' well-celebrated 1941 film *Citizen Kane* did nothing less than portray two aspects of journalism. Claimed to be based on the life of William Randolph Hearst, a leading American newspaper publisher of that era, *Citizen Kane* followed the life of Charles Foster Kane, a man who eventually inherited a fortune and decided to run the *Inquirer*, simply because he thought “it would be fun to run a newspaper.” Initially, his paper was run with honesty and as a fighter for the people, but soon he abandons his principles for a more political agenda once he starts his run for governor.

The familiar montage of front page headlines appears in the film again, as well as the inability of the editor to separate the job from his personal life. The drunken journalist appears

once again, in the form of Kane's partner Jed Leland. At the same time, it's a reporter who begins the whole film, searching for the meaning of Kane's dying word "Rosebud." Contrary to the image of the tabloid press, journalist Jerry Thompson was deeply investigating the life of Kane, locating past love interests, friends, partners and enemies, and not depending solely on sensationalism to tell his story.

The latter part of the 1940s and the 1950s reinforced the unpleasant side of journalism, giving the journalist villainous roles.

Waldo Lydecker of 1944's film noir *Laura* depicted a villainous and merciless columnist. Addison DeWitt, a theater critic portrayed by George Sanders in 1950's *All About Eve*, was equally wicked as Eve Harrington, the antagonist to the film's star. He was conniving and manipulative. His ruthless behavior matched that of Eve's, whose ambitions could not be stopped, despite anyone's expense.

But a year previously, Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* came to the screen by acclaimed film director King Vidor, bringing with it evidence of the press' power. Though the film centers around idealistic architect Howard Roark and his unyielding ideas of individualism, Roark's most influential obstacles are the press, owned and headed by Gail Wynand and Ellsworth Toohey. Wynand is a powerful newspaper tycoon and a man who wants nothing but power and usually gets it. Toohey is a writer of a popular architectural column, and his word is generally accepted by most. Both Toohey and Wynand's ability to influence the masses was unconscionable.

The '60s were not a very prominent decade for newspaper films. The decade saw great changes in society through the civil rights movement, with Martin Luther King leading the struggle. The race for space against the Soviets was highlighted by Alan Shepard being the first

American in space in 1961 and was followed with Neil Armstrong's first steps on the moon in 1969. The nation witnessed President John F. Kennedy's assassination in 1963 and endured King's in 1969.

As for journalism films, the nation's preoccupation with Vietnam War, political assassinations and race riots may have put the progression of the genre on the backburner.

Shock Corridor and *Black Like Me* were products of the decade, both dealing with intensive investigative and undercover reporting. In *Shock Corridor*, an ambitious journalist determined to win a Pulitzer Prize has himself declared insane and sent to an insane asylum to solve a murder. *Black Like Me* follows a reporter who succeeds in passing as black in the South, attempting to experience life from a black man's point of view. The decade culminated with *Gaily, Gaily*, a movie adapted from the memoirs of Ben Hecht, one of the original writers of *The Front Page*. It was a "nostalgic" look at Hecht's earlier reporting days (Barris 202). But in the decade of *Dr. Strangelove or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Bomb* and *The Graduate*, no real defining journalism movies were introduced. It wasn't until the mid-70s when a new turn came around, rather simultaneous to the press's glory years.

The 1970s was a time of inventiveness and artistic achievement in Hollywood. It reflected a growing cynicism regarding government, especially in light of the ongoing Vietnam War, the Cold War and strong government secrecy. People questioned social structures, especially government and corporate bureaucracies. It was in this decade that *All the President's Men* emerged, bringing one of the fondest depictions of the journalist. It provided audiences and fellow journalists an image that was neither insulting nor distasteful. *New York Times* writer Vincent Hanby wrote that no film has come remotely close "to being an accurate picture of American journalism at its best."

All the President's Men is a 1976 docudrama based on the nonfiction book of the same name that details two journalists' path to exposing corruption in the government. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein were two fairly unknown reporters for *The Washington Post* working on a story about the Watergate burglary, a scandal that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. The film focused on the investigation of the break-in of Democratic Party headquarters offices and examined how two young journalists who were what their editor called "hungry" for a little notoriety unraveled the nation's biggest conspiracy.

It placed the journalist back into the rightful spot of watchdog. "Nothing's riding on this except the, uh, first amendment to the Constitution, freedom of the press, and maybe the future of the country. Not that any of that matters..." states editor-in-chief Ben Bradlee to Woodward and Bernstein after months of their investigation. While classic films of the past were disdainful of the press, this film was the opposite. The investigative journalist had become "the new American folk hero" and the "watchman of liberty" (Good 109). Investigative reporting became respectable again. Woodward, played by Robert Redford, and Bernstein, played by Dustin Hoffman, held government officials at the highest level accountable for their crimes. Even some of their sly tactics for obtaining information – such as pretending to have some information to gain more – are overlooked in the bigger picture of unraveling governmental conspiracies and lies.

However, this film leaves out some of the traditional stereotypes of the genre. The newspaper drunk and the hidden bottle of liquor are absent. The slimy editor is now an encouraging supporter, found in the city editor Harry M. Rosenfeld, played by Jack Warden. The chain-smoking image is powerfully encouraged with Bernstein. At one point, Woodward turns to Bernstein in an elevator and asks, "Is there any place you don't smoke?" But more so than any

stereotype, the devotion to the job is of high degree in this film. *All the President's Men* depicted two men with no devotion toward anything but their story. In the film, Bernstein was divorced and Woodward had a girlfriend who complained about the lack of time he was spending with her and the massive amount of time he was spending on the story. Papers overtake Woodward's apartment: his coffee table, dinner table and the side of his bed are stacked with papers and documents. The news room is either buzzing with the fast-paced life of the journalist or it's rather empty, with just Woodward or Bernstein furiously typing or researching. Neither Bernstein nor Woodward seems to have any time for anything else.

Another impressive thing this film did was reenact a legitimate pursuit of a story. Critic Roger Ebert said, "It provides the most observant study of working journalists we're ever likely to see in a feature film." The film did not omit the parts of boredom that come with the job, such as the dead ends or the countless hours of sifting through documents. The competitive nature of newspapers is seen in repeated references to the *New York Times*. "Somewhere in this world there is a Kenneth H. Dahlberg, and we've got to get to him before the *New York Times* does." The idea of being the first on the story is still prominent. The reporters were both hungry for the byline but also for the truth.

But it did not take long for Hollywood to again depict a journalist in unfavorable light.

Just five years after *All the President's Men* and its praise of journalism, *Absence of Malice* delivered just the opposite in the story of an irresponsible reporter. This film is what the staff of *Variety* called "a whale of a good story with something important to say." Director Sydney Pollack's 1981 flick *Absence of Malice* depicted journalism as a tool for mass manipulation. Written by Kurt Leudtke, a former executive editor of the *Detroit Free Press*, the story revolved around a young reporter unknowingly becoming a pawn in discrediting a dead

Mafia boss' son. Megan Carter, a reporter for a Miami newspaper played by Sally Field, writes accurately, but not necessarily truthfully, in her article about how Michael Gallagher, played by Paul Newman, was being investigated for a murder. The film's portrait of an investigative reporter was not favorable. The ethics of journalism are tested, and the reporter fails. Besides becoming romantically involved with a source, Carter allows herself to be manipulated by an ambitious prosecutor whose attempts to solve the case had come to a dead end. Though Carter is clear under the "absence of malice" rule of libel, her negligence is unforgivable, resulting in the destruction of an innocent man's business and a young woman's suicide. Ultimately, this film is a look at the possible effects sloppy reporting can have on others.

Ron Howard's *The Paper* (1994) strongly reinforced the journalism field's negative effect on one's personal life. The movie follows the story of Henry Hackett, well played by Michael Keaton, as the workaholic metro editor for the *New York Sun*. His wife Martha is a former reporter currently on maternity leave. She yearns to be back on the paper and at the same time irritated by Hackett's relentless devotion to it. In one scene, Hackett skips out on a dinner with his Martha and her parents to "put the paper to bed." Hackett is at risk of following the steps of his editor-in-chief Bernie White, who admits he puts his work first at the expense of his family.

Besides emphasizing deadlines, possibly highlighted with the help of Hackett's "Stop the Presses!" shriek across the press room, the film hints at the lost of values in journalism. It becomes evident when Hackett and Alicia Clark, his nemesis, argue over changing the headline of a news story. Clark wanted to run the headline "Gotcha" over the story of two youths who were arrested for a murder despite last-minute confirmation that "they didn't do it," which is the

headline Hackett wanted to run. “As far as I can remember we never ever, ever knowingly got a story wrong, until tonight,” Hackett says.

Just a decade earlier, *The Killing Fields*, the title referencing sites in Cambodia where large numbers of people were killed and buried under the communist Khmer Rouge’s rule, told the real-life story of *New York Times* correspondent Sydney Schanberg and his assistant Dith Pran, a local journalist and translator. The story unfolds as they cover the civil war and instability after a takeover by the Khmer Rouge. The foreign correspondent is generally one who is portrayed with a much better image. They are selfless, determined, and always inches away from danger. Here, the journalist’s irresponsibility was not found in his work, but rather toward his life, as he embedded himself into a hostile environment. The film chronicles Schanberg and Pran’s time in Cambodia from 1973 to 1975 as they reported the destruction of the country.

From the opening scenes Schanberg is depicted as a serious journalist, immediately jumping back to work as soon as returns from a trip with no time off for a break. He was what *Time* writer Richard Schickel called, “brave, adversarial in his relations with the American mission supporting the Lon Nol government [and] unaware of how brutal the Khmer Rouge [was]. He is the classically impatient American journalist, overriding his better instincts in order to get the story.” This he was, but also very dedicated. Alongside him was Pran. More dedicated than any journalist there, Pran risked his life remaining in the country when he had a chance to escape. When Pran sent his family away to safety, he demonstrated the belief that the job gets in the way of family life, something reiterated in *The Front Page*, *The Paper* and various film depictions of the journalist.

Though Alfred Hitchcock’s 1940 film *Foreign Correspondent* took an American reporter into Britain to expose enemy spies, *The Killing Fields* used the new century’s technological

advances to depict a more perilous environment, surrounded by bombs, death and war. The film, nominated for seven Academy Awards, depicted journalism on a very different field with a different level of danger.

Foreign correspondents are heroic, brave and willing to risk their lives for the truth or for the sake of humanity is the message such films send. *Hotel Rwanda* had photojournalist Jack Daglish, played by Joaquin Phoenix, striving to capture the happenings around him. *Blood Diamond* had investigative reporter Maddy Bowen, played by Jennifer Connelly, seek out a story on the illegal smuggling of conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone. *A Mighty Heart* told the story of Mariane Pearl as she attempted to locate her journalist husband Daniel after he went missing in Pakistan. Each time reporters put their lives in danger, usually they heroically continue their mission. What these films have said about the foreign correspondent is that they have a dedication to the truth and put forth relentless efforts to help an underrepresented and repressed group.

To deviate from print journalism, in the films depicting broadcast journalism, there is rarely an emphasis on the individual being's able to make the change as in movies emphasizing newspaper journalism, i.e. *Absence of Malice* and *All the President's Men*. In broadcasting, a whole network is involved. The two very defining and memorable movies that portray broadcasting news are *Network* (1976) and *Broadcast News* (1987). These films reiterate the dismal personal life; moreover, they suggest the evolving field of broadcast journalism.

Network illustrated television as, what Ebert called "an economic process in the blind pursuit of ratings and technical precision, in which excellence is as accidental as banality." In this Academy-Award winning film, unhinged veteran anchorman Howard Beale, played by Academy-Award winning Peter Finch, publicly breaks down after being fired because of poor

ratings, promising to commit suicide on air in two weeks during a live show. Demonstrating either an apathetic environment or a newsroom focused on technology, barely anyone realizes what was being said until they go to break. “Uh,” says someone in the control room during the commercial, “did you hear what Howard just said?” Only two people did.

At the same time, programming director Diana Christensen, portrayed by Faye Dunaway, is on the hunt for new programming – looking for unconventional programming or angry shows. “I want counterculture. I want anti-establishment.” Soon after Beale’s declaration, Christensen attempts and succeeds in exploiting him.

Set in the mid-1970s when America was plagued by inflation, an oil crisis and worry about the Russians, *Network* highlighted the idea of the “reorganization of the newsroom.” Changes were happening as the world evolved and the news needed to follow. The film suggested that the American people were looking for something or somewhere to channel their anger.

The reorganization of the newsroom and its priorities are seen in Christensen – pouncing on the opportunity to exploit Beale’s breakdown for higher ratings. It is seen in the dismissal of both Beale and William Holden’s Max Schumacher. They represent an aging newsroom and “old” news. At the same time, a loss of values is seen as the priorities are shifted from news to sensationalism. It’s a cynical look on the industry, with programmers and businessmen controlling the overall product.

Nevertheless, the impossibility of having a life outside of the job arises – more obvious in Beale and Christensen than anyone. Beale was a man with nothing but his work. “This show is the only thing I had going in my life,” he states right before his promise to commit suicide.

Christensen, in a self-defining dialogue, says she is “inept at everything” except her work, so she confines herself to it. “All I want out of life is a 30 share and a 20 rating,” she says.

But while *Network* focused on the economics of broadcast news and the system, *Broadcast News* illustrated the “job,” emphasizing a cynical look into the inner workings of TV news. It is what Ebert deemed “as knowledgeable about the TV news-gathering process as any movie ever made.” The film revolves around three characters – aggressive and talented reporter Aaron Altman, inexperienced news anchor Tom Grunick and obsessive network producer Jane Craig. Grunick represents the “talking head” (one who looks good but lacks substance) and essentially everything Altman and Craig are against – the vanity of news. Most importantly, it deals with the evolving field of journalism and TV news, exploring cutbacks and the changing ethical lines and ideals.

As for the news anchorman, it gave a rather superficial outlook on such a job, hinting that it may be something “you do when all you do is look nice.” It tackles the thin line between ethical and unethical choices, addressed after Grunick produces an artificial tear to create a more touching, sentimental story on date rape. The question of real news versus show business is raised. *Broadcast News*, in a sense, gives a nostalgic look at a time where journalistic integrity was at its peak, when the news was impulsive, hard and true versus fluffy and fun. While again showing devotion to the job, the film raises questions on the smallest ethical decisions.

Furthermore, it spotlights the harshness of the job – the deadlines, the stress, the inability to separate the two. Though a love triangle is created with no winner in the end, it inevitably reiterates the idea the one cannot maintain an ideal personal life when dealing with the job, more so the female journalist than the male – something seen in *His Girl Friday*. Though Craig’s character begins an affair with Grunick, because of the ethical beliefs she holds for news, she

ultimately rejects him. It helps proposes insinuates the idea that news isolates and dehumanizes people, much as *Network* strongly suggested. Craig, like Christensen of *Network*, was just another long-suffering professional whose uncommon intelligence only resulted in romantic disappointments. Though created in the 21st century, 2005's *Good Night and Good Luck* was a breath of fresh air in the subcategory of broadcasting under the journalism genre. It never really highlighted personal romantic affairs, but concentrated on television broadcasting's duty to the public. The film is set in 1950s McCarthy era, when the threat of Communism created an air of paranoia in the nation. In director George Clooney's portrayal of the conflict between veteran radio and television journalist Edward R. Murrow, played by David Strathairn, and U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who is depicted through actual historical news footage, a depiction of broadcast journalism's earlier days is seen.

By far, this film portrays television broadcasting positively more so than any other. Murrow and his co-producer Fred Friendly defy corporate pressures to uphold media responsibility. It's not a dry, historical recreation that waters down the story with facts and background information for the audience's benefit. It's an intelligent film that gets straight to the point. Amid McCarthy's false accusations and unyielding determination to prevent communism from spreading, Murrow, Friendly and a dedicated CBS staff challenged McCarthy, exposing his contradictions and opportunistic capitalization on the nation's fear.

Reverting back to the idea of media being used in a checks-and-balances system, *Good Night and Good Luck* addressed the situation and responsibility of media speaking up for the little guy, producing a voice of dissent against government. It told how these characters, though fearful, were among the few in the press who "were willing to stand against McCarthy," Clooney expressed in a "Behind-the-Scenes" feature. "They did it because they thought it was the right

thing to do.” This film serves as a soapbox from which characters prompt modern media to be aggressive again, not to let the crusade for true, hard news be buried under sensationalism, tabloid journalism, and fluff.

Though this film focuses on the pursuit of the truthful story over corporate pressures, familiar stereotypes of the journalist that were identified in the earlier flicks reappear in this modern one. The news field was still dominated by sharp-tongued men, working and living in a fast-paced environment, smoking cigarettes and pipes.

While *Good Night and Good Luck* is the *All the President’s Men* of broadcasting, *Anchorman*, produced in 2004, would be *The Front Page* – presenting the worst of broadcast in an entirely laughable way.

This comic film, starring Will Ferrell as legendary anchorman Ron Burgundy, pokes fun at the male-dominated broadcasting networks and the changes that began to occur there in the 1970s. When the Channel 4 News team of San Diego adds a little “diversity” in the form of an ambitious female, her reception is ill-received by the men of the newsroom. Though it is a purely comical flick, from its inclusion of one-liners to its battle royale scene involving the various news teams of the city, it includes a speck of real themes and common stereotypes of the genre.

Most obviously, it demonstrated the progression of women’s roles in the workplace as reporter Veronica Corningstone (played by Christina Applegate) works to be taken more seriously and become the first female anchorwoman. The idea that a woman was “dying to quit her job so that she can take care of” a man and have babies, which Burgundy strongly believes, disappeared with the rise of feminism. In actuality, like the film suggests, the 1970s saw the rise of female anchors in American news, as well as on-screen “happy talk,” the friendly chatter between co-anchors, which sours with Ferrell and Applegate’s characters.

The importance of the anchorman's image is best defined in the news team war scene when only one rule was proposed: no touching of the hair or face. In this era of on-air news, reporters were aware of the fact that they were often "hired not simply for reporting skills but also because they look good," (Berkowitz 282). It was a concept that *Broadcast News* suggested with Tom's good looks but his inability to report the news. Similar to Tom, Burgundy had the good looks but was a complete idiot.

Underneath the crude humor and satirical wit, the film also manages to reaffirm the dehumanization of news providers that *Network* included when Burgundy reports his news in a rather detached manner, simply reading anything that is on the teleprompter. But at the same time, it suggests Burgundy's important role in the community. He was a man whom families all over San Diego, as well as biker boys in a bar, brought into their home and lives.

The bartender said it best to a drunken Burgundy: "Times are changing."

There seems to be a general consensus about journalists' centrality in politics, culture and society. They play the dual roles of gatekeepers and watchdogs, representing to a degree a checks-and-balances system with the government, functioning as a liaison between government and the people. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's attention to the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s exposed a conspiracy in the government, leading to President Richard Nixon's resignation in 1974. *The New York Times'* publishing of various excerpts of a top-secret study conducted by the Department of Defense detailing the United States' involvement in Vietnam exposed what some would deem unconstitutional behavior and a "wrongful" war.

But aside from babysitting government, journalism exists to inform the masses – on regional, national and international events, as well as entertainment, arts, sports, etc. Reliable,

unbiased, accurate, timely information is expected to be relayed. However, media-related scandals have demonstrated that journalism is not without its problems and mishaps. The fabricated and/or plagiarized stories of Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair and Janet Cook are all testimony to strong ethical disturbances. Journalists, newspapermen, reporters and editor cannot even begin to pretend to be exempt from shortcomings and controversy. Economic and occupational interests make questions regarding journalism's boundaries, uses and behavior of more than idle concern.

Films rarely portray a purely heroic image of a journalist defending the truth against "the many dragons in the modern world" without particular strings attached. Often depicting a caricature of a perk-sniffer, Hollywood depicts the journalist as an individual looking at for him or herself first and the people second. From the conniving tactics of Hildy Johnson and Walter Burns of *The Front Page* to the seductive approach of journalist Heather Holloway in 2006's *Thank You For Smoking*, sly tactics, exploitation and yellow journalism have been Hollywood's key components when drafting the reporter. Often coated by the phrase "the public has a right to know," the ethics of the journalist almost always comes into play in the genre. But at times, the ethics of journalism can be a little complicated to define.

In the free society America claims, the role of the press is to scrutinize government activities and keep it within appropriate bounds. It should defend rights and liberties of the people whenever they are threatened. *All the President's Men* and *Good Luck and Good Night* demonstrated the press' success in fulfilling this role. Unfortunately, contradictions experienced in the practice of journalism weaken the confidence in the profession.

The Society of Professional Journalists has compiled a set of ethics and codes that is voluntarily embraced by millions of news professionals. While the duty of the journalist remains

to serve the people and provide public enlightenment, they must still do so with a fair, honest and inclusive account of events and issues. What Hollywood often capitalizes on is the journalist's failure to obtain information in honest ways. *The Front Page* and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* achieved this decades ago. But as Hollywood pressed on with its contradicting images of the journalist, ethical distortions became more and more prevalent in the films.

In the earlier part of the Twentieth century, journalism films or films that included the press almost always had them engage in the violations of the ethical code. The vast majority of films in the journalism genre involve reporters engaging in activities that may not be purely honest – i.e., undercover work and the exclusion of sources' names. The tabloid press of the '30s and '40s – with its yellow journalism and fiendish attack on news – rarely questioned the accuracy of information from their sources, nor did they thoroughly seek out subjects to give them an opportunity to respond to the allegations against them. Newspaper reporters in the early works of the genre were blue collar.

Content was distorted and surreptitious methods of gather information were used too often.

Picture Snatcher, a 1933 film about an ex-con, Danny Kean, who decides to pursue an honest life path by taking a job as a photographer at a newspaper, ultimately demonstrates the utter absence of ethics in photojournalism. The male-dominated newsroom has its smokers, its fast talkers and its alcoholic who drinks from a flimsy, home-made paper cup. But it also has Kean pretending to be an insurance man to steal a photograph of an angry fireman who murdered his wife and her lover. "I feel kinda sorry for that poor fireman, but, after all, I have to make an honest living!" he says after the deception.

Kean also hides a camera in his trousers to obtain the only picture ever of an execution, a take on the actual execution of Ruth Snyder, who murdered her husband in the 1920s. Her death was captured by a photographer working with the *New York Daily News*, despite the fact that cameras were forbidden in the execution chamber.

But in actuality, those are both conflicts to the code of ethics and are rarely implemented outside Hollywood, especially after court cases such as the 1971 court case *Dietemann v. Time, Inc.*, where a *Life* magazine reporter went undercover and used wireless equipment to obtain information against a man, Dietemann, who was engaged in the practice of healing patients, using clay, minerals and herbs. Because of the unlawful approach to gaining information, Dietemann won the case.

The Front Page demonstrated the newspaper exposing a political conspiracy but showed the use of distasteful tactics of bribery and lies – and demonstrated a disreputable trade.

But 2003's *Shattered Glass* showed the extremes of unethical behavior in journalism. Taken from the true account of *New Republic* writer Stephen Glass, *Shattered Glass* relates the rise and fall of a young, hotshot writer. While the modest yet narcissistic writer constantly asks, "Are you mad at me?" or "Did I do something wrong?" It is clear he did something unmistakably wrong. Twenty-seven of the 41 stories he submitted and had published in the *New Republic* were fabricated in some way. But his bubbly personality kept almost everyone around him entertained and oblivious.

Though this film can be seen as an insult to young reporters, depicting them as disillusioned and desperate, it identifies changes in the journalism culture. The staff's attraction to Glass, the young, energetic and ambitious writer, gives the idea of a void of fresh writing and originality. Peter Sarsgaard's character, Chuck Lane, continually attempts to convince the editor

of the need of photographs in the publication. Furthermore, the online magazine is introduced and highlighted as it exposes the fraudulent work of Glass.

Hollywood has displayed the exploitation, the deception and the heroic behavior. The image may be an ambiguous one, but it merely reflects the professionals of the profession. The history of journalism provides a mixed bag of reporters. The profession had what Dr. Ed Caudill, a professor of journalism at the University of Tennessee, called “pathetic drunks who were barely making a living,” but at the same time had prominent writers like Ernest Hemingway and Mark Twain. When the 19th century brought Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst, it was something that people were taken aback by. People from money did not typically fall into the journalism profession. It was generally people who were reflective of the public.

A common theme among these films is a dual message about the world of journalism. Holding a social responsibility and obligation to the masses, journalism has and will always have a prominent role in society. However, that does not mean it is free from controversy, shortcomings and problems. Though ethics and the law may sometimes get muddled, these films demonstrate the permanence of journalism. And though films may dramatize and reiterate journalistic weaknesses, they never conclude with the world’s being a better place without journalists.

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