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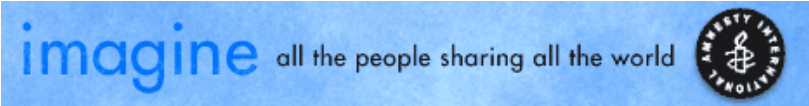


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from the December 06, 2002 edition



JOURNALISTS IN FILM: Michael Keaton depicts a CNN producer covering the Gulf War in HBO's 'Live From Baghdad.' MERIE W. WALLACE/HBO/AP

Can Michael Keaton solve media's image problem?

A new TV movie, 'Live in Baghdad,' offers insights into journalism, an often-maligned profession in film.

By [Kim Campbell](#) | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Name a famous actor and they've likely played a journalist. Jimmy Stewart? You bet. Denzel Washington? Think "The Pelican Brief." Mary Tyler Moore? Of course.

Saturday night, Michael Keaton dusts off his reporting skills for his second stint as a journalist in HBO's "Live from Baghdad," in which he plays a CNN producer working in Iraq in the days leading up to the Gulf War.

The fourth estate can use Batman's help, as journalists are in need of good PR. In a recent survey on [dilbert.com](#) - the

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Voting takes place today in Gujarat State, considered a test case for religious violence.

website for the Dilbert cartoon - news reporters were named the weaseliest profession, beating even tobacco executives for the top spot.

Charismatic actors and noble quests for truth - this is, after all, the profession that brought you "All the President's Men" - are apparently not enough to redeem the media's reputation.

Pop culture is partly to blame, as images of the journalist are everywhere these days, offering examples of both the mistrust and the curiosity the public has for the profession. More often it's the quick hits that leave an impression on people, observers suggest. They say that increasingly people are seeing packs of journalists hounding people in made-for-TV movies (and covering real-life sensational trials) than they are of the reporters whose work achieves a positive end, as in movies such as Clint Eastwood's "True Crime."

"Anecdotally, there's no question in my mind ... that the images of the journalist in film, television, and fiction influence the public," says Joe Saltzman, director of The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project at the University of Southern California.

But the range of portrayals goes beyond a person in a trenchcoat shoving a tape recorder in someone's face. Upcoming films include "The Life of David Gale," with Kate Winslet investigating a death-row case, and Cate Blanchett in "Victoria Guerin," about the slain Irish reporter who covered the mafia.

In recent years, films and TV programs featuring journalists have been almost as abundant as they were in the movies of the 1930s and 40s - the genre's golden era that prompted classics like the screwball "His Girl Friday." Back then, newsrooms were a staple in the movies, thanks in part to journalists turning to screenwriting when movies added sound.

In those days, journalists could be scoundrels, but they were charming scoundrels, à la Cary Grant. And one director, Frank Capra, may have been prescient when he made media owners the bad guys in movies like "Meet John Doe."

"He was way ahead of his time in figuring out, 'Hey, you know, control of the media by an individual or corporation ... is really the biggest danger to democracy in America,'" says Mr. Saltzman, author of "Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film."

Scholars of the journalism genre say it hasn't gone the way of the Western because of its relevance. "Whether viewing the press in a positive or negative light, the genre continues to reflect the importance of the news media in society," writes Richard Ness, a film historian, in his 1997 book, "From Headline Hunter to Superman: A Journalism Filmography."

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They also grapple with thought-provoking issues of ethics and truth-telling. ("Citizen Kane," anyone?)

In some cases, these depictions help make the process of journalism more transparent, as with the HBO movie, which recounts how CNN became the only network to broadcast live the night the Gulf War began. (HBO and CNN are both owned by AOL-Time Warner.)

"This is a bit like watching sausage making: It's not pretty, but I think it's important for people to know what's going on behind the scenes," says Eason Jordan, CNN's chief news executive.

"Live From Baghdad" is based on a book by former producer Robert Wiener, who is played by Mr. Keaton. The movie takes some liberties - it compresses events and implies a romantic tension between two colleagues - but Mr. Wiener calls it "accurate in many vital areas." He suggests that it may give people an appreciation of what it takes to bring them the news.

If it doesn't, perhaps media outlets should think about hiring whoever is handling PR for tobacco executives.



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