

Harry Potter and the Exploitative Jackals:
Media Framing and Credibility Attitudes in Young Readers

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The public image of journalists has taken a steady beating for at least a quarter of a century. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism's *State of the News Media* report in 2007, "Since the early 1980s Americans have come to view the news media as less professional, less accurate, less caring and less moral."¹ Two years later, the same organization reported that little had changed in the public's skepticism about the news media.² Journalists are unquestionably facing a credibility crisis.

One culprit the Project for Excellence in Journalism identified in its 2007 version of the report as a contributing factor to this difficult environment for journalists is the depiction of journalists by entertainment media as "exploitative jackals."³ This is not a new problem; as one scholar studying images of journalists in contemporary film noted, "There have been anti-press films nearly as long as there have been 'talkies.'"⁴ And one of the most widespread entertainment phenomena of this generation is a series of books that has taken numerous unsubtle digs at the credibility and decency of journalists for more than a decade.

In the magical world of Harry Potter, the boy wizard created by British author J. K. Rowling, nobody surpasses Lord Voldemort in the evil category. But just trailing Voldemort and his cohorts in the pursuit of immorality, unfairness and abuse are conniving journalist Rita Skeeter and her employer, the *Daily Prophet*, the primary news media source

in the wizarding world. In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the fourth installment of Rowling's wildly popular series of children's books, Skeeter is introduced as one of Harry's chief antagonists, a journalist with no morals and a penchant for skewering those who dare defy her pursuit of the next big, tabloid headline.⁵ In *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, the fifth installment in the series, the *Daily Prophet* works hand-in-hand with the ignorant wizarding government, the Ministry of Magic, to portray Harry as a misguided and possibly mentally deranged teenager who tells lies about the return of Voldemort to get attention.⁶ In the seventh and final book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Skeeter reappears as the author of a scandalous unauthorized biography of Albus Dumbledore, Harry's mentor and one of the most admirable heroes in the series.⁷ A content analysis conducted by scholars Amanda Sturgill, Jessica Winney, and Tina Libhart in 2008 on how news media are portrayed in the *Harry Potter* series suggests that the "overwhelmingly negative" portrayal of journalism in the books could have devastating consequences: "Children who read the series could infer that all news media are slanted and deceptive. They could also come to believe that a career as a journalist is not an honorable profession."⁸

If *Harry Potter* readers make judgments about journalists based on Rowling's portrayal of Rita Skeeter and the *Daily Prophet*, the credibility problem journalists face may not go away soon. The Potter series has sold more than 400 million books worldwide,⁹ and more than 50 percent of children ages 9 to 17 have read a *Harry Potter* book.¹⁰

Rowling has exposed a generation of readers, mostly children, to exaggerated stereotypes of immoral, unprofessional, and untrustworthy journalism. But simply because a large portion of children around the world have been exposed to these images does not mean that they will see journalists as "exploitative jackals." To what extent does Rowling's

framing of journalists in the *Potter* books contribute to perceptions of media credibility in young readers? This article builds on the literature exploring the image of journalists in popular culture by examining any relationship Rowling's portrayal of journalists may have on young readers' perceptions of media credibility by using a targeted survey of young readers.

Literature Review

As Rowling's *Harry Potter* books have grown in popularity, so has scholarship regarding the boy wizard and his magical world. One scholar noted that the *Harry Potter* books "are an extremely important source of social norms," reflecting American society's need for popular culture.¹¹ Another noted that the books have become "such a pervasive part of the cultural environment" that they transcend being simply a work to be purchased, read and enjoyed. Rather, "the text and images of *Harry Potter* become a part of who we are."¹²

Much of the research on *Harry Potter* has come from critical and cultural scholars who have reviewed the books "in terms of their social, political, economic, and cultural influence."¹³ Rowling's books "reflect something about the values of the age and society that produce them."¹⁴ These values will be examined in this study in the context of the image of journalists in popular culture, specifically in the way Rowling portrays Skeeter and the actions of journalists and journalism institutions, and the ways in which audience attitudes may reflect these images.

While the image of the journalist in popular culture has been explored from several perspectives and approaches, one scholar has suggested that one area in special need of attention is any effects "that popular culture may or may not have on public perceptions of journalism and how people interpret such portrayals of the press," in particular whether they

have any impact on audience attitudes of media credibility.¹⁵

Although the potential effects of journalism's portrayal in works of fiction has not been the subject of much inquiry, the image of journalists has been explored deeply in recent years. This image is complex, with journalists appearing generally as outlaws, whether as heroes or villains.¹⁶ The hero journalists are independent and fight against "injustice and unfairness,"¹⁷ serving as reporters and detectives who are "hard-working and highly moral, even when breaking the law."¹⁸ Two examples of this identified by Howard Good in his study of journalists in contemporary film are the war correspondent in films such as *Salvador* (1986) and *The Killing Fields* (1984) and the reporter investigating a nefarious conspiracy in films such as *The China Syndrome* (1979) and *Fletch* (1985).¹⁹

On the other hand, villainous journalists are "socially undesirable, usurpers, abusers, snobs, strangers, traitors, sneaks, chiselers, narcissists... (who) care nothing about the public and repeatedly abuse its trust and patronage," according to Joe Saltzman.²⁰ When journalists as villains are presented in modern film, as Matthew C. Ehrlich discovered, journalism as a field is seen as "shallow, oppressive and compromised."²¹ In the end, such villainous journalists typically have their comeuppance, often paying "a steep price for their misdeeds."²² Good also identified silver screen reporters as having "the too common failure of journalists to look beyond the surface in their eagerness for the scoop" in films such as *Absence of Malice* (1981) where an innocent life is destroyed.²³ It is this brand of villainous journalist that can be found in Rowling's *Harry Potter* series.

The images cultivated by Rowling in her portrayals of Skeeter and the *Daily Prophet* can be considered as a kind of framing. Robert Entman conceptualizes media frame selection as the process of taking "some aspects of a perceived reality" to "make them more salient in

a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”²⁴

From this perspective, framing is behavior by a communicator that influences how the audience may perceive the communicator’s message. Outcomes of this framing process could be the adoption of these frames by the audience or the alteration of existing schema to conform with the frames presented.

Children get their pictures of the world from somewhere, and entertainment media may play an important role in this process. Children who read the *Harry Potter* series and see the villainous journalists, as Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart concluded, “may infer that journalism is corrupt in general, deceptive, and would not make an attractive career choice.”²⁵ Even though the *Harry Potter* books are clearly fantasy-based fiction, critical and cultural scholars suggest that they have a “narrative realism”²⁶ and can impart meaning about “real-life issues” for children to process.²⁷

A study of the frames Rowling employs to describe and define the image of journalists in the *Harry Potter* series adds to our understanding of the role of journalists in popular culture, but to determine any impact of those frames on the audience, another layer of analysis is required. To study any links between Rowling’s frames and the perceptions of young readers about media credibility, further research must be done that includes assessment of audience attitudes.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

This study tests the conventional wisdom offered by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and other scholars that the public’s attitudes about journalists and media credibility are, in fact, shaped by the way journalists are portrayed in popular culture.

One approach that mass communication scholars have taken to investigate media effects on public attitudes is second-level agenda setting theory, which posits that news media not only tells the public what people and issues to think about, but also how to think about them. Second-level agenda setting theory typically involves studies of the attributes that news media assign to people, issues, and objects.²⁸ But at least one scholar has suggested that agenda setting theory's "neglect of entertainment-oriented media is increasingly problematic," in part because of the increasing role of entertainment media in society.²⁹

While second-level agenda setting is not a perfect conceptual fit for this research, its underlying framework provides guidance for structuring a study of media frames and public attitudes. Second-level agenda setting compares attributes associated with people or issues in the news media with the salience of those attributes in the public. These attributes operate at two levels: cognitive and affective. Cognitive attributes are those that associate an attribute with an issue or person, such as "electability" with George W. Bush and "trustworthy" and "patriotic" with John McCain during the New Hampshire Republican Primary in 2000.³⁰ Affective attributes are those that evoke positive or negative feelings about issues or people, thus potentially generating public like or dislike of a person such as a political candidate.³¹

Using this framework, this study investigates the following hypotheses and research question. Cognitive attributes, such as particular behaviors that audiences could associate with journalists, are the subject of H1:

H1: Cognitive attributes depicted in the *Harry Potter* books in which journalists behave in an irresponsible or unethical manner will be more salient in readers of those books than non-readers of those books.

Affective attributes, specifically positive or negative feelings about journalists, are the

subject of H2:

H2: Affective attributes depicted in the *Harry Potter* books in which journalists are framed negatively will be more salient in readers of those books than non-readers of those books.

Other possible interactions between Harry Potter readership, personal political attitudes, demographic characteristics, and how these may contribute to perceptions of media credibility are explored in RQ1:

RQ1: How does *Harry Potter* reading interact with other characteristics to help explain the young audience's perceptions of media credibility?

Method

The most common method used in research about agenda setting is a two—tiered process employing a content analysis of the relevant news media, the results of which are compared to the responses of audiences gathered in a survey.³² A survey instrument was employed as the primary method of gathering data in this study. However, because this study does not use traditional news media as the sources of the frames, quantitative content analysis of the *Harry Potter* books was not deemed an ideal way to examine the way Rowling frames journalists. Rather, a qualitative framing analysis of the two Harry Potter books in which journalists play a prominent role — *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix* — provided a basis for discovering the dominant attributes associated with journalists. This analysis was informed by the content analysis conducted by Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart of portrayals of journalism in the *Potter* series³³ and the aforementioned critical and cultural research that has examined Rowling's work.

Four dominant cognitive frames emerged from the framing analysis of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* and *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*:

1. *Journalists seek scandals and the sensational.* Rather than focusing on weightier

matters in its role as the wizarding world's daily newspaper, the *Daily Prophet* often takes a gossipy, tabloid approach. For example, Skeeter reports on Harry Potter's girl troubles and tries to make a scandal of the half-giant ancestry of Harry's sympathetic friend and teacher Hagrid.³⁴ Skeeter is always chasing the next big, scandalous story.³⁵ Skeeter particularly cares most about a lurid headline featuring the famous and disturbed Harry Potter, regardless of the potential effects of her irresponsible journalism on the subjects of her coverage. The wizarding government officials at the Ministry of Magic fear Skeeter's "ferreting around, looking for more Ministry mess-ups to report."³⁶

One element of this sensationalist coverage is the profit motive. As Skeeter tells Harry's friend Hermione Granger in the fifth book, "The *Prophet* exists to sell itself, you silly girl."³⁷ Even *The Quibbler*, the tabloid magazine of Rowling's wizarding world, shows a savvy sense of the bottom line, selling its atypically straightforward profile of Potter to the *Prophet* at the end of book five to help fund a summer vacation for the publisher's family.³⁸

2. *Journalists invade people's privacy.* Throughout *Goblet of Fire*, Skeeter shows she will break any rule to get a story, including illegally transforming into a beetle so she can listen in on conversations by hiding on windowsills and, in one case, in Hermione's hair.³⁹ Skeeter does this even after the headmaster bars her from the grounds.⁴⁰ As a result, she is able to inform the public of Hagrid's ancestry (in a story titled "Dumbledore's Giant Mistake") and to report on a fainting episode Harry had during a class ("Harry Potter Disturbed and Dangerous").⁴¹ Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart identified a similar image, Skeeter's acts of gathering information through "unethical and/or illegal means," as one of three frames of news media in the series.⁴²

3. *Journalists make mistakes and twist the facts.* Journalists in the *Harry Potter*

books, as personified by Skeeter, are seemingly “unconcerned with truth or justice,” according to one scholar.⁴³ The *Prophet* routinely gets facts wrong. Arthur Weasley is misidentified as “Arnold Weasley” in a story written by Skeeter.⁴⁴ In another story by Skeeter, Hogwarts student Cedric Diggory is wrongfully not included as one of the contestants in the Triwizard Tournament, and the other competitors’ names are misspelled; only Harry is mentioned as the Hogwarts representative, which Skeeter believes makes for a better story.⁴⁵ Skeeter also incorrectly identifies Hermione as Harry’s girlfriend, and when Harry refuses to talk to Skeeter any more, the reporter errantly vilifies Hermione for breaking his heart.⁴⁶

Skeeter also gleefully misquotes people. Her “Quick-Quotes Quill,” a floating pen that transcribes interviews, embellishes what speakers say (and don’t say) during their conversations with Skeeter, turning silence and routine quotes into dramatic scenes she can use to craft her stories. When Harry is silent during an interview, the quill writes, “Tears fill those startlingly green eyes as our conversation turns to the parents he can barely remember,” to which Harry objects that he most certainly does not have tears in his eyes.⁴⁷ Harry is described as thinking that Skeeter “had reported him saying an awful lot of things that he couldn’t remember ever saying in his life.”⁴⁸

Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart also identified this news media frame, finding references to “obviously misleading, inaccurate, or libelous” acts of journalism throughout the series.⁴⁹

4. *Journalists are not concerned about the public interest.* Harry’s friend Hermione once barks at Skeeter, “You don’t care, do you, anything for a story, and anyone will do, won’t they?”⁵⁰ The *Prophet* alternately chooses to unduly frighten the public or to

coddle them by not covering real dangers. In *Goblet of Fire*, the *Prophet* criticizes Ministry of Magic officials for failing to control a rowdy bunch of former Voldemort supporters at the Quidditch World Cup, portraying a world where “dark wizards run unchecked” and calling it a “national disgrace,” further going on to print unqualified “rumors that several bodies were removed from the woods” after the incident.⁵¹ However, in *Order of the Phoenix*, the *Prophet* is all too willing to report the Ministry’s official position that Voldemort has not returned, that Harry Potter is just a “deluded, attention-seeking person who thinks he’s a great tragic hero or something,”⁵² and that Dumbledore is “rumor-mongering” so he can take over from the incumbent Minister of Magic.⁵³ This government control of journalism was also recognized as one of the frames of the news media by Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart.⁵⁴

Related to this lack of concern for the public are profit motives and the drive to keep the status quo. Skeeter, who by the fifth book is no longer in the employ of the *Prophet*, notes that the Minister of Magic “is leaning on the *Prophet*” and that the paper “won’t print a story that shows Harry in a good light” because it’s “against the public mood.”⁵⁵ Skeeter’s scurrilous journalism, one commentator noted, does “considerable damage to life at Hogwarts by irresponsible manipulation of the written word,” ultimately allowing “evil to gain a foothold in the larger wizarding world” by the end of the fifth book.⁵⁶

These four frames are cognitive attributes that readers can associate with journalists and serve as the basis of survey questions intended to explore H1.

At the affective level, a dominant negative attribute is evident in both the fourth and fifth books. Rowling systematically brings journalism to life in the character of Rita Skeeter, who one commentator calls “the odious queen of tabloid tittle-tattle.”⁵⁷ Her name evokes the mosquito, a blood-sucking insect that is a pest to humankind, an image that has

been conjured before by authors seeking to demonize a journalist.⁵⁸ Skeeter's physical descriptions are frightening, with her hair "set in elaborate and curiously rigid curls that contrasted oddly with her heavy-jawed face," three glinting gold teeth, and "large, mannish hands" and "scarlet-taloned fingers" that clutch a crocodile-skin handbag.⁵⁹ One commentator noted that her masculine frame and her "detestably unethical" behavior provide clues to her "antagonistic and untrustworthy nature."⁶⁰ Characters refer to her as "that wretched Skeeter woman,"⁶¹ "that revolting Skeeter woman,"⁶² "that foul Skeeter woman,"⁶³ "that excuse for a human being," and "that old cow"⁶⁴ throughout the fourth book.

In *Goblet of Fire*, Skeeter portrays Harry as a troubled teenager out to seek glory by entering the Triwizard Tournament, even though he is underage and the reader knows that Harry did not, in fact, want to compete in the tournament.⁶⁵ When Harry is uncooperative with Skeeter's efforts to portray him to the public as a tragic hero, she gets back at him by going after two of his closest friends, Hagrid and Hermione.⁶⁶ Skeeter even has the gall to call Harry's mentor, Albus Dumbledore, the most powerful wizard alive, an "obsolete dingbat."⁶⁷

In *Order of the Phoenix*, Skeeter's former employer, *The Daily Prophet*, continues to heap unwarranted abuse on Harry. While the readers of the book know that Harry has witnessed the return of the evil Lord Voldemort, the *Prophet* portrays Harry as a troubled boy crying wolf to get attention. Unlikely stories are referred to as tales "worthy of Harry Potter."⁶⁸ The only example of trustworthy journalism in the fifth book is half-hearted at best; Skeeter returns, at the demand of Hermione, to write a story sympathetic to Harry for *The Quibbler*, a tabloid rag that usually features stories about the sighting of non-existent creatures such as the crumple-horned snorkack.⁶⁹

Sturgill, Winney, and Libhart identified this “extremely negative depiction of journalism” in their study.⁷⁰ This dominant affective attribute of untrustworthy journalists is intended to provoke negative feelings from the audience. This attribute will be used to explore H2.

Variables to be considered in RQ1, which explores the roles that personal factors or beliefs may have on shaping attitudes about journalists, were culled from previous studies about trustworthiness of journalists and media credibility. Demographics such as age, education and gender have been related to perceptions of media credibility.⁷¹ In another study, respondents’ political ideology showed significant correlation to their level of trust in journalists.⁷² These variables were examined for covariance and interaction with the cognitive and affective attributes to explore any other possible relationships.

To measure the salience of cognitive and affective attributes in a young audience, classes made up largely of first-year students at a large Midwestern state university were recruited to participate in a survey. These students were chosen because they were most likely to be born between 1987 and 1989, making them between the ages of 10 and 12 when the *Harry Potter* books began to peak in popularity in 1999. To avoid any potential confounds regarding media credibility attitudes in the participant pool, journalism courses were deliberately avoided in recruiting participants for the survey. Instead, the students recruited were taking introductory level courses in anthropology, economics, philosophy, political science, psychology, and sociology. The students were either given extra credit or entered into a drawing for \$100 as inducement to participate in the survey, which was administered via the Internet. Participants took the survey over three weeks in February 2007, well after the sixth book in the series and the film version of *Goblet of Fire* had been

released, but more than a year before the final installment of the book and the fifth movie, *Order of the Phoenix*, was released. The total number of students contacted to participate in the survey was 1,683, and 674 valid surveys were returned for a response rate of 40 percent. Because the study intends to examine young audiences, the surveys of respondents age 23 and over were excluded from consideration, resulting in 657 completed surveys analyzed in this study.

The surveys measured respondents' attitudes about journalists relevant to the aforementioned cognitive and affective attributes. Questions were based largely on media credibility indexes used in previous studies by mass communications scholars.⁷³

Results

H1: Cognitive attributes

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the cognitive attributes regarding poor journalist behavior depicted in the fourth and fifth Harry Potter books would be more salient among readers of those books than non-readers of the books.

To measure this, independent samples T tests were run comparing readers who read book four and/or five to non-readers of either book. Readership between books four and five was highly correlated (Pearson's $R = .856$, $p < .01$), suggesting that there was little difference between readers of *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix*.

Four scales were created to measure the cognitive attributes identified in the framing analysis. Each included five items from a four-point Likert scale. Less favorable views of journalists received 1 or 2 points while more favorable views received 3 or 4 points. The Cronbach's alpha scores for each scale was above .70 (see Index 1). For H1 to be supported, means of readers of the fourth and/or fifth Harry Potter books would need to be lower than

non-readers on each scale.

H1 was not supported on any of the four scales. In fact, on all four scales, readers of books four and/or five had higher mean scores (Sensationalization: 2.11, Privacy: 2.35, Accuracy: 2.55, Public Interest: 2.75) than non-readers (Sensationalization: 2.06, Privacy: 2.30, Accuracy: 2.47, Public Interest: 2.60), suggesting that readers were *less* likely to associate these unflattering attributes to journalists than non-readers (see Table 1). The differences in means were significant on two scales, suggesting that readers of books four and/or five thought journalists were more accurate ($T=2.15$, $p < .05$) and more concerned about the public interest ($T=4.14$, $p < .01$) than non-readers.

One possible confound in this analysis is that young people who choose to read even one *Harry Potter* book have different outlooks and attitudes about the media than those who have avoided the series altogether. To measure variance within *Harry Potter* readers, a separate round of independent samples T tests was run, comparing people who had read between one and three of the *Potter* books to people who had read between four and six of the *Potter* books. Because the number of readers gradually decreased from the first book to the sixth, it is plausible to assume that people who read three or fewer books read the first three books in the series, in which journalists appear infrequently, while people who read four or more of the books read both books four and five, in which journalists play substantial roles and in which the dominant negative frames of journalists begin to appear.

However, the results on this round of tests were largely the same (see Table 2). For each cognitive attribute, mean scores on the attribute scales were higher for readers of the fourth and fifth books (Sensationalization: 2.10, Privacy: 2.34, Accuracy: 2.55, Public Interest: 2.75) than for non-readers (Sensationalization: 2.07, Privacy: 2.28, Accuracy: 2.45,

Public Interest: 2.63), significantly so for the attributes of accuracy ($T=-1.99$, $p < .05$) and public interest ($T=-2.57$, $p < .05$).

H2: Affective attributes

Hypothesis 2 predicted that salience of the negative affective attribute would be greater among readers of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books than among non-readers. An independent samples T test was run comparing readers of books four and/or five to non-readers, comparing means on a 10-item scale (Cronbach's alpha=.82, see Index 1) of feelings about journalists. Positive feelings about media credibility were scored higher on a four-point Likert scale, so for the hypothesis to be supported, means of readers would need to be lower than non-readers.

Hypothesis 2 was not supported. On the contrary, readers had a higher mean score (2.62) than non-readers (2.56) at a significant level ($T=-2.07$, $p < .05$), suggesting that readers of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books were more likely to have positive affective feelings about journalists than non-readers (see Table 3).

As was done in the analysis of H1, readers of between one and three *Potter* books were compared to readers of four or more *Potter* books to see if the distinction between readers and non-readers of *Potter* books was confounding any correlation regarding affective attributes. Again, the direction remained the same (see Table 4), suggesting that readers of the fourth and fifth books had more positive affective views (mean score=2.62) about journalists than readers who read three or fewer books (mean score=2.54). However, significance fell outside the $p < .05$ standard ($T=-1.83$, $p=.067$).

RQ1: Other interactions

Gender: Additional tests were run to examine the influence of gender on the

results. Literature suggested that demographic factors such as age, education and gender may correlate with perceptions of media credibility. Because there was little variance in age and education in the sample of students in first-year college classes, only gender was considered as a variable in this analysis.

Female participants had significantly higher means on both cognitive and affective scales than male participants, suggesting that women associate more positive cognitive and affective attributes with journalists (see Table 5).

Young women also were more likely to be readers of the *Harry Potter* books; 45 percent of female participants reported reading books four and five, compared to only 37 percent of male participants. To examine any role gender may have played in attribute salience, it was included in an Analysis of Variance test with readership of the fourth and/or fifth *Harry Potter* books. When considered as a covariate, mean differences between readers and non-readers on the scales remained consistent directionally, but significance fell outside the $p < .05$ standard on four of the five scales (see Table 6). The relationship between readership of the books and the public interest attribute remained strong and positive ($F=15.23, p < .01$).

A separate Analysis of Variance test was also run to examine whether the relationship was any different among respondents who read between one and three *Harry Potter* books and those who read four or more, with gender as a covariate. Results remained directionally consistent with the distinction between non-readers and readers of books four and five in general (see Table 7); again, the public interest attribute was significantly more positive among readers than non-readers ($F=5.85, p < .05$).

Political attitudes: The literature also suggested that political partisanship and

ideology correlates to less positive feelings about media credibility. Thus, participants were asked whether they considered themselves to be more liberal or more conservative politically. On the four cognitive scales and one affective scale, more conservative respondents consistently had lower mean scores than more liberal respondents (see Table 8), suggesting that conservative respondents had less positive feelings about news media credibility. These results were significant for the accuracy ($F=2.61$, $p < .01$), public interest ($F=5.46$, $p < .01$), and affective ($F=3.22$, $p < .01$) attributes.

A Multivariate Analysis of Variance with both political attitudes and readership of *Harry Potter* book four and/or five as independent variables yielded significant interactions on one of the cognitive attributes and the affective attribute scale (see Table 9). In general, book four and/or five readers who said they were more conservative had equal or less positive views of journalists than conservative non-readers, while more liberal readers had more positive views of journalists than more liberal non-readers. This interaction was significant on both the privacy scale ($F=4.72$, $p < .05$) and on the affective attribute scale ($F=3.87$, $p < .05$).

Even more significant relationships emerged when readers of one to three *Harry Potter* books were compared with readers of four or more *Potter* books, with political attitudes as an additional independent variable (see Table 10).

Once those who read no *Harry Potter* books were removed from consideration, the interaction between political attitude and readership of book four and/or five reached significant levels ($p < .05$) on three of the four cognitive attribute scales and on the affective attribute scale ($p < .01$). The only attribute not showing a significant interaction instead remained as a strong covariate; readers of *Potter* books four and/or five have more positive

feelings about journalists' concern about the public interest than non-readers, regardless of political ideology.

On the other four scales, however, negative attributes from the fourth and fifth *Potter* books were less salient among liberal readers and more salient among conservative readers. Liberal readers of the fourth and/or fifth books associated less negative attributes at the cognitive and affective level to journalists than liberal non-readers, while conservative readers associated more negative attributes than non-readers.

After considering the strong effect for gender, it was added to an additional Multivariate Analysis of Variance as a covariate. The interaction between political attitudes and *Harry Potter* books four and/or five reading was slightly weaker, but still significant ($p < .05$) on the same four scales as the previous analysis (see Table 11). **Discussion**

The conventional wisdom that negative images of journalists in popular culture are linked to declining perceptions of media credibility was not evident in this study. It was expected that readers of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books, which are rife with negative images of journalists, would have reflected some of the negative attributes at the cognitive and affective level depicted in those books. On the contrary, readers of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books instead expressed more positive views about media credibility and the performance of journalists. Further analysis revealed that readership of the books may be reinforcing existing schemata affiliated with participants' political ideology. The only situation in which *Goblet of Fire* and *Order of the Phoenix* readers showed more salience of the negative attributes was among participants who reported that they considered themselves more conservative politically.

This does not necessarily mean that young readers exposed to negative images of

journalists take nothing away from these images, of course. But in the context of this study, in which a distinctively negative frame of journalists was portrayed in a hugely popular series of books aimed at young teens, there was no link evident between readership of the book and negative attitudes about journalists. While the survey was a convenience sample of young college-age students that cannot be generalized to the broader public, it is a broad enough sample to provide some insight into perceptions of news media credibility among readers of the *Harry Potter* books and those who have not read the books. The results did nothing to confirm the suspicions of other studies that these negative images would damage media credibility in young audiences.

That said, other factors that are difficult to measure could be playing a role in young readers' perceptions of journalists. Some factors particular to *Harry Potter* readers, for example, could have an impact. Besides gender and political beliefs, some of the qualities inherent in young book readers could be contributing to more positive beliefs about behavior and trustworthiness of journalists. For example, the "habit" of newspaper readership is likely formed in the teenage years,⁷⁴ and young audiences more intent on reading may be more likely to develop news reading as an adult. People who read books, then, may be more likely to both read and trust news media later in life. This could help to explain why *Harry Potter* readers expressed so much trust in journalists' concern about the public interest and the community's well-being. Future studies could incorporate reading habits and exposure to news media as factors in the development of a young person's perceptions of media credibility.

Some of the variance between non-*Harry Potter* readers and those who have read books in the series was accounted for when non-*Harry Potter* readers were excluded from

consideration and variance was examined between readers of fewer than four *Harry Potter* books and those of four or more of the books, leading to one of this study's more interesting findings. While making this adjustment had little impact on attitudes about media credibility in general, it revealed a significant interaction between political attitudes, readership of the fourth and fifth *Harry Potter* books, and correlated media credibility attribute salience.

Readers who said they were more liberal had more positive views of journalists than non-readers who said they were more liberal, while readers who said they were more conservative showed the exact opposite result. Because liberals generally express more confidence than conservatives in the credibility of news organizations,⁷⁵ the results of this study suggest that the audience may be reinforcing existing attitudes rather than changing them. Thus, a person more conservative politically, who generally trusts the media less, may take Rita Skeeter as an exaggerated version of the real thing, interpreting Rowling's vile character as an accurate reflection of the pitfalls of bad journalism. On the other hand, a person with more liberal political views may instead see Skeeter as a caricature, with behavior so out of line with norms of journalism that it refreshes, or even reinvigorates, those norms in the person's ideology.

This finding would seem to support Ehrlich's suggestion that even when journalists are presented as villains in film, "they still tend not to challenge seriously the idea that the press can and should play a central role in society."⁷⁶ As such, when Skeeter is punished by being trapped in a jar by Hermione after transforming into a beetle one too many times,⁷⁷ she has been "duly punished for (her) sins" in a way that reinforces the importance of good journalism to our culture.⁷⁸

It is also plausible that the audience attitudes reflect the more complex portrayal of

journalists in popular culture, not only in the *Harry Potter* books, but also in entertainment media in general. While the dominant frames of journalism in the *Harry Potter* books are negative, there are times when journalists are shown as reputable providers of information to the wizarding community. When the *Daily Prophet* is introduced in the first book of the series, it is trusted by Hagrid as a source of news about the Ministry of Magic and by Harry and his friends about a break-in at the wizarding bank.⁷⁹ Other big news, such as the escape from prison of convicted killer Sirius Black in the third book in the series, is followed by wizards in the *Prophet*.⁸⁰ After Rita Skeeter has her comeuppance, her return in the fifth book to write a truthful profile in *The Quibbler* earns Harry some sympathy from other students and the public.⁸¹ After Harry's explanations about Voldemort's return are vindicated, the *Daily Prophet* is "very complimentary" of him as well.⁸²

Conclusion

Journalists looking for sources of the widespread lack of trust and waning perceptions of media credibility by the American public may want to set their sights somewhere other than the *Harry Potter* books. While J. K. Rowling may have been able to cast a spell that turns children into book lovers, there does not appear to be any such magic that turns young readers against journalists, despite the worst efforts of Rita Skeeter and the *Daily Prophet*.

The results of this study suggest that young readers of the *Harry Potter* series harbor little, if any, ill will toward the press compared with those who have not read the books. In fact, readers of the books may actually trust the press more not to focus on sensational news, to respect people's privacy, to be accurate, to be concerned with the public interest, and to have generally more positive feelings about journalists. This could be attributed simply to

the nature of reading books; Rowling's works have inspired young audiences to be excited about reading, which may end up benefiting the practice of journalism in the long run.

However, the *Harry Potter* books are just one aspect of popular culture that often frames journalists in a negative light. Future studies could examine the messages to which young audiences are exposed more broadly to determine any impact these negative frames may have on perceptions of media credibility and trust. Refining second-level agenda setting theory for study of attributes evident in popular culture could be one way to help researchers understand the associations, if any, between entertainment media consumption and framing depicted in fictional books, movies and television.

This study can serve as a pilot to aid future examination of any links between portrayal of journalists in popular culture and media credibility attitudes. While the results of this study seem to indicate no link between negative portrayals of journalists and adoption or reflection of those attitudes by the audience, it is only one data point in what should be an ongoing examination of the impact of entertainment media framing of journalism.

The media credibility crisis continues to plague journalists in this country. The portrayal of journalists in popular culture can be both a mirror of our culture's attitudes about media credibility and a force for shaping people's attitudes about the news media. There is no shortage of images of journalists in popular culture aimed at young audiences; consider the novel and film versions of American Girl's Kit Kittredge, an aspiring young journalist, and the wretched Eleanora Poe and *The Daily Punctilio* in Lemony Snicket's best-selling books in *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. These images should be studied further to improve understanding about how our culture speaks about journalism to future generations of news media consumers.

INDEX 1 – Cognitive and Affective Attribute Scale Components

The affective scale and four cognitive scales were assembled using responses to the following questions, using a four-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to choose from “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree” and “strongly agree” on each item. To make the direction of scores consistent, items framed negatively (e.g., “Journalists are biased”) had scores reversed; these items are noted by an asterisk (*).

Sensationalization Scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.754)

Journalists pay too much attention to scandals.*
 Journalists tend to sensationalize their stories.*
 Journalists care too much about bad news.*
 Journalists care too much about sensational news.*
 Journalists care too much about selling newspapers or getting good ratings.*

Privacy Scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.729)

Journalists respect people’s privacy.
 Journalists will do anything to get a story.*
 Journalists are too invasive of people’s privacy.*
 The daily newspaper I am most familiar with invades people’s privacy.*
 The television news program I am most familiar with invades people’s privacy.*

Accuracy Scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.770)

Journalists are accurate.
 Journalists work hard to get the facts right.
 Journalists often misquote the people who talk to them.*
 Journalists make too many mistakes.*
 Journalists tell the whole story.

Public Interest Scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.704)

Journalists want to make society better.
 Journalists are concerned with the public interest.
 Journalists are concerned about the community’s well—being.
 Journalists are necessary for democracy to function.
 Journalists serve as a check on government.

Affective Attribute Scale (Cronbach’s alpha=.816)

Journalists are independent.
 Journalists report the news fairly most of the time.
 Journalists are fair.
 Journalists can be trusted.
 Journalists are responsible.
 Journalists tell the truth.
 Journalists are biased.*
 Journalists are immoral.*
 Journalists are patriotic.
 Journalists separate facts from opinions.

TABLES**Table 1.** Mean scores and T-test results for comparisons of cognitive attributes for readers of *Harry Potter* books four and/or five (n=265) and non-readers(n=379).

| | Mean Scores | | T | Sig. |
|--------------------------|-------------|---------|-------|--------|
| | Non-readers | Readers | | |
| Sensationalization Scale | 2.06 | 2.11 | -1.29 | .198 |
| Privacy Scale | 2.30 | 2.35 | -1.29 | .199 |
| Accuracy Scale | 2.47 | 2.55 | -2.15 | .032* |
| Public Interest Scale | 2.60 | 2.75 | -4.14 | .000** |

* p < .05

** p < .01

Table 2. Mean scores and T-test results for comparisons of cognitive attributes for readers of one to three *Harry Potter* books (n=130) and readers of four to six *Harry Potter* books (n=259).

| | Mean Scores | | T | Sig. |
|--------------------------|---------------|---------------|-------|-------|
| | HP1-3 readers | HP4-6 readers | | |
| Sensationalization Scale | 2.07 | 2.10 | -.608 | .543 |
| Privacy Scale | 2.28 | 2.34 | -1.29 | .198 |
| Accuracy Scale | 2.45 | 2.55 | -1.99 | .047* |
| Public Interest Scale | 2.63 | 2.75 | -2.57 | .010* |

* p < .05

** p < .01

Table 3. Mean scores and T-test results for comparison of affective attributes for readers of *Harry Potter* books four and/or five (n=265) and non-readers(n=379).

| | Mean Scores | | T | Sig. |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|-------|-------|
| | Non-readers | Readers | | |
| Affective Scale | 2.56 | 2.62 | -2.07 | .039* |

* p < .05

Table 4. Mean scores and T-test results for comparison of affective attributes for readers of one to three *Harry Potter* books (n=130) and readers of four to six *Harry Potter* books (n=259).

| | Mean Scores | | T | Sig. |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|-------|------|
| | Non-readers | Readers | | |
| Affective Scale | 2.54 | 2.62 | -1.83 | .067 |

Table 5. Mean scores and T-test results for comparison of cognitive and affective attributes of male (n=245) and female respondents (n=410).

| | Women | Mean Scores | | Sig. |
|--------------------------|-------|-------------|-------|--------|
| | | Men | T | |
| Sensationalization Scale | 2.18 | 1.91 | -7.37 | .000** |
| Privacy Scale | 2.37 | 2.22 | -4.50 | .000** |
| Accuracy Scale | 2.57 | 2.39 | -5.16 | .000** |
| Public Interest Scale | 2.70 | 2.61 | -2.59 | .010** |
| Affective Scale | 2.64 | 2.48 | -5.48 | .000** |

** p < .01

Table 6. Mean scores and Analysis of Variance test results for comparison of cognitive and affective attributes for readers of *Harry Potter* books four and/or five and non-readers, with gender included as a covariate.

| | Mean Scores | | | | F | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|-------|--------|
| | Female | Female | | Male | | |
| | Non-readers | Readers | Non-readers | Readers | | |
| Sensationalization | 2.16 | 2.21 | 1.93 | 1.90 | 0.54 | .463 |
| Privacy | 2.36 | 2.41 | 2.22 | 2.22 | 0.91 | .340 |
| Accuracy | 2.52 | 2.62 | 2.39 | 2.39 | 3.33 | .068 |
| Public Interest | 2.64 | 2.77 | 2.57 | 2.70 | 15.23 | .000** |
| Affective | 2.62 | 2.66 | 2.46 | 2.53 | 2.83 | .093 |

** p < .01

Table 7. Mean scores and Analysis of Variance test results for comparison of cognitive and affective attributes for readers of one to three *Harry Potter* books and readers of four to six *Harry Potter* books, with gender included as a covariate.

| | Mean Scores | | | | F | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------|---------|-------------|---------|------|-------|
| | Female | Female | | Male | | |
| | Non-Readers | Readers | Non-Readers | Readers | | |
| Sensationalization | 2.21 | 2.21 | 1.86 | 1.89 | 0.07 | .796 |
| Privacy | 2.38 | 2.40 | 2.13 | 2.22 | 0.93 | .336 |
| Accuracy | 2.54 | 2.62 | 2.30 | 2.39 | 3.07 | .081 |
| Public Interest | 2.68 | 2.77 | 2.54 | 2.70 | 5.85 | .016* |
| Affective | 2.62 | 2.65 | 2.42 | 2.53 | 2.53 | .112 |

* p < .05

Table 8. Mean scores and T- test results for comparison of cognitive and affective attributes between more conservative (n=284) and more liberal respondents (n=368).

| | Mean Scores | | T | Sig. |
|--------------------|--------------|---------|------|--------|
| | Conservative | Liberal | | |
| Sensationalization | 2.05 | 2.10 | 1.29 | .199 |
| Privacy | 2.29 | 2.34 | 1.68 | .094 |
| Accuracy | 2.45 | 2.54 | 2.61 | .009** |
| Public Interest | 2.56 | 2.75 | 5.46 | .000** |
| Affective | 2.53 | 2.62 | 3.22 | .001** |

** p < .01

Table 9. Mean scores and Analysis of Variance test results examining interaction between readership of *Harry Potter* books four and/or five and political attitudes on cognitive and affective attributes.

| | Mean Scores | | | | F | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------|---------|--------------|--------------|------|-------|
| | Liberal | Liberal | Conservative | Conservative | | |
| | Non-Readers | Readers | Non-Readers | Readers | | |
| Sensationalization | 2.07 | 2.15 | 2.05 | 2.04 | 1.20 | .274 |
| Privacy | 2.30 | 2.41 | 2.31 | 2.25 | 4.72 | .030* |
| Accuracy | 2.49 | 2.61 | 2.45 | 2.46 | 2.31 | .129 |
| Public Interest | 2.68 | 2.82 | 2.53 | 2.62 | .68 | .409 |
| Affective | 2.58 | 2.68 | 2.54 | 2.52 | 3.87 | .050* |

* p < .05

Table 10. Mean scores and Analysis of Variance test results examining interaction between readership of more or less than four *Harry Potter* books and political attitudes on cognitive and affective attributes.

| | Mean Scores | | | | F | Sig. |
|--------------------|-------------|----------|--------------|--------------|-------|--------|
| | Liberal | Liberal | Conservative | Conservative | | |
| | 1-3 books | 4+ books | 1-3 books | 4+ books | | |
| Sensationalization | 2.01 | 2.15 | 2.14 | 2.04 | 5.14 | .024* |
| Privacy | 2.24 | 2.40 | 2.32 | 2.26 | 5.19 | .023* |
| Accuracy | 2.42 | 2.60 | 2.49 | 2.46 | 5.04 | .025* |
| Public Interest | 2.67 | 2.82 | 2.57 | 2.62 | 1.17 | .280 |
| Affective | 2.49 | 2.68 | 2.61 | 2.52 | 12.59 | .000** |

* p < .05

** p < .01

Table 11. Analysis of Variance test results examining interaction between readership of more or less than four *Harry Potter* books and political attitudes on cognitive and affective attributes, considering gender as a covariate.

| | ANOVA results | |
|--------------------|---------------|--------|
| | F | Sig. |
| Sensationalization | 4.38 | .038* |
| Privacy | 4.15 | .042* |
| Accuracy | 4.32 | .038* |
| Public Interest | .88 | .348 |
| Affective | 11.49 | .001** |

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Endnotes

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