



Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film
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INTRODUCTION

The Image of the Journalist

The images of the journalist we cling to in the twenty-first century were created chunk by chunk, real and imagined, from biblical times through Elizabethan England when messengers, heralds, minstrels, gossips, busybodies, news criers, balladeers, travel correspondents, letter-writers, epitaphists, pamphleteers, hacks, freelance writers, and newsmongers hammered out what would be called journalism. The lust for news, for tydings, for gossip, for information about everything and anything goes back to the beginning of recorded history.

Inseparable from this passion for news was a dislike for those who peddled information. The messengers dealing in this valuable commodity always wanted something in return, some form of currency for their information – money, an exchange of information, favors of gratitude. Those who had information had power over those who wanted that information. The more valuable the news, the greater the power. The have-nots began to envy and even fear purveyors of news, and these emotions quickly turned to anger and hatred. This love-hate relationship, this dichotomy, winds itself throughout history: The news was valued, but those who brought it were despised, ridiculed, attacked, jailed, even murdered.

The earliest local news merchant was branded a gossip, a busybody, a witch, and treated with contempt in life and literature. Although the information was coveted, it was considered demeaning to talk about individuals behind their backs and to look down on the misfortunes and

frailties of neighbors. The heralds, the messengers, the news criers often had to run for their lives if the news they delivered was bad or considered inappropriate.

To survive, the news trader quickly learned how to please an audience, whether royal or common. The news balladeers cloaked their stories in patriotism, morality, and popular sentiment. Early publishers of newsbooks followed suit. And it continues to this day. Give the public what it wants became the catchphrase of the earliest of journalists.

From the beginning, journalism was what many would call “tabloid” today. No one is quite sure what tabloid means because, like pornography, it means different things to different people. But most readers and viewers swear they know it when they see it. Descriptions range from sensational, scandalous, lurid, exploitive, emotional, wildly dramatic, startling, thrilling, unscrupulous, exciting, offensive, titillating, shocking, outrageous, malicious, gossipy, shameful, corrupt, defamatory, and possibly libelous.

If you are someone in the public eye, *tabloid* is synonymous with lying and deceit. It usually refers to any journalist who talks to you, shoots your picture, or writes about you without your permission. If you are in the audience, *tabloid* means something faintly taboo, forbidden, and fascinating.

People always have been curious about the flaws and eccentricities of their neighbors. In the fifteenth century, the earliest journalists, the professional news-ballad writers, quickly figured out what the public wanted to hear and buy: verses about executions, battles, coronations, crimes, violence, scandal, witches, oddities, and magic. This was tabloid journalism in its infancy. The rhyming newswriters originated the image of the news mongering journalist who gives the public what it wants no matter how ugly or coarse the story and its presentation may be.

The earliest newswriters knew that a report on an execution of a notable traitor or a crime involving jealousy or passion was hot copy. No one worried about what was real or false. What they didn't know, they made up – fusing together topical facts, innuendo, rumor, libel, and gossip into vivid descriptions that captivated their audiences. The method of transmission may have been primitive, but the end result was the same: The elite moaned about the corruption of the populace's mind and morals while the people waited eagerly for the next story documenting an act of revenge or honor.

While it may be true that tabloid journalism tends to trivialize who and what we are, it always involves visceral emotions: love, hate, joy, fear. It usually involves the famous and the

infamous, the unusual, the criminal, or the bizarre. The concept of tabloid journalism and the elite who are appalled or fascinated with tabloid reporting, is as old as journalism itself.

The contradictory portrayal of the journalist as part hero, part scoundrel can be found in American popular literature of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the 1890s, a new class of fiction emerged in America that took the journalist for its hero. Between 1890 and 1930, two things happened to make the press a powerful influence on people's lives. A great mass readership for newspapers was created when record waves of immigration filled the cities. And mechanical breakthroughs made larger and faster press runs possible. Now the newspapers had the readers to give them economic success, and they had the presses to get the newspapers into the hands of millions of readers.

Historians point out that the educated classes from the beginning were critical of the new wealth and power of the press. They complained that the mass-circulation dailies, with their big, black headlines screaming of murder, misfortune, and madness, pandered to the semiliterate and poisoned the atmosphere of American life. Journalists, longing for public acknowledgment that their jobs were important, were cut to the quick by this kind of criticism. They may have appeared to be indifferent to the attacks on the press, but most were deeply hurt by their failure to gain respect. Because of this, the novels and short stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries featuring journalists continually attacked and downgraded the profession. In novel after novel, journalism was depicted as a strange world where brilliant young men turn into sad old men.¹

Although some newspaper novels won popularity and became best-sellers, they never attracted the mass audience that the early newspaper film did. On the big screen, the image of the journalist was magnified and put in noisy motion. Newspaper stories were filled with adventure, mystery, and romance. They were tough urban modern talkies. The journalists immediately were defined onscreen by brashness and cunning. They were creatures of the city familiar with its fast pace, crowds, and the opportunities to get ahead. They reflected the American audience's preference for action and accomplishment rather than ideology, and they embodied the myth of the self-reliant individual who pits nerves and resourcefulness against an unfair society.

These early images of journalists include reporters, editors, columnists, foreign correspondents, magazine writers, newsreel camerapersons, photojournalists, and publishers.

Their modern counterparts include broadcasters, news producers, assignment editors, media owners, and cyberspace journalists.

A newsroom is always filled with fast-talking, bright people whose main work is to speak to strangers, investigate a situation, get answers, develop a story. Since reporters are always finding out something about someone, they create countless stories with good beginnings, middles, and endings. The newspaper gave the moviemaker an endless flow of story possibilities in an atmosphere that soon became so familiar to movie audiences that journalists could be thrown into a film without the scriptwriter having to worry about motivation or plot.

By the early 1920s, audiences already knew that reporters were always involved in some kind of story, no matter how bizarre or melodramatic. They accepted it as a matter of course. In the process, they got not only large doses of entertainment but also a series of lasting impressions about the media that has stayed in the public mind for more than ten decades.

A journalist without a voice is only a shadow of the real McCoy. The images at first didn't speak, but all of the Jekyll-and-Hyde stereotypes of the newspaperman and woman were there in the pages of melodramatic fiction and in the silent films often based on that fiction. People who read newspapers didn't have the slightest idea how the news came to them until they read about it in lurid books or saw it on the silent screen. Right from the beginning of film, the world of the newspaper was an easily accessible and recognizable background.

The first recorded newspaper film was called *Horsewhipping the Editor*, made in 1900. It shows an editor being attacked by an irate man for some unexplained offense. A scrubwoman and a small boy come to the editor's rescue and rout the attacker. The earliest silent films, usually nothing more than a simple documentation of routine events, included *Delivering Newspapers*, a 1903 film showing a group of newsboys getting papers off a delivery truck. Newsboys yelling out headlines were commonplace by the turn of the twentieth century.

The age of yellow journalism (a name derived from a newspaper comic character called the Yellow Kid) was in full swing. From the 1890s, yellow journalism had, in the words of one historian, "choked up the news channels on which the common people depended with a shrieking, gaudy, sensation-loving, devil-may-care kind of journalism," twisting stories into the "form best suited for sales by the howling newsboy."² The people loved it. Even conservative newspapers were forced to take on a yellow hue to sell their products. By 1900, nearly a third of

the metropolitan dailies were turning news stories into melodramas that could be summed up in one loud headline. It was the perfect time for moving pictures.

Categorizing the Images

Alex Barris, who created the first comprehensive look at the journalist in American films,³ created specific categories of journalists that most historians have followed, with variations – the Reporter as Crime Buster, the Reporter as Scandal monger, the Reporter as Crusader, the Reporter Overseas, the Reporter as Human Being, the Sob Sister, Editors and Publishers, and the Newsmen as Villain.

Another historian, Loren Ghiglione, divided his journalists into the *Front Page* Reporter, the Big-city Editor, the Newswoman, the Scandal monger, the Small-town Editor, the War Correspondent, the TV Journalist, and the Owner, and then added the Newspaper Carrier.⁴

Richard Ness, who has completed the most comprehensive journalism filmography, concentrates on a chronological survey of films featuring journalists but in an introductory essay talks about reporters, editors, columnists, photographers, sportswriters, critics, and owners. He is more interested, however, in defining the genre of journalism films rather than in identifying specific categories.⁵

Another historian talks about the News Hound, the Sob Sister, the Crusader, the Rural Press as well as the Newspaper as Crime Drama, the Newspaper as Social Drama, and the Newspaper as Comedy Drama.⁶ A fifth researcher divides the newsgatherer into many categories and subcategories: the Male Newspaper Reporters, the Female Newspaper Reporters, the Magazine Reporters, the Radio Reporters, the Television Reporters, the Editors, the Publishers, the Columnists, the Sportswriters, the Cameramen, the Foreign Correspondents, the War Correspondents, and the Celebrities. He then adds “the News Gatherer and Cupid,” “the News Gatherer and Crime,” and “the News Gatherer and Strong Drink.”⁷ Other authors have taken a piece of the pie and have divided the group into heroes and villains, with the heroes being the investigative reporters and war correspondents who first and foremost serve the public interest, and the villains being the scandal mongers, those journalists who deceive the public by using the media for their own personal, economic, or political gain, betraying the public trust.⁸

The reporter as detective is probably one of the most popular categories, since both the journalist and the detective are curious inquirers trying to solve a mystery, whether it be a crime or a complex unknown story. They are both trying to piece together the various aspects of a puzzle, to come up with a reasonable conclusion as to what happened, where it happened, when it happened, and to whom it happened, combined with the more difficult aspects of the story or case – how it happened and why it happened. But dividing reporters into crimebusters or crusaders or scandalmongers creates a whole host of problems because often they are the same journalist who ends up being a combination of all three in the last fifteen minutes of the film.

The following categories, listed in alphabetical order, seem to fit the great majority of the images of journalists in films and television programs:

- **Anonymous Reporters** – By the last decades of the twentieth century, the journalists most people remember are the anonymous journalists, played by nondescript actors, who chase after a story by rudely invading the privacy of the person involved. These reporters become bit players, an anonymous piece of an intrusive pack of harassing journalists, many armed with lights, cameras, and microphones. The public watches uncomfortably as these obnoxious reporters fill the movie and, especially, the television screens. They poke their cameras into people's faces, yell out questions, recklessly pursue popular actors – the kind who used to play journalists once cheered by audiences. The result of this particularly offensive image of the reporter from the 1970s to the new century is the public's rejection of the reporter as a hero, as someone helpful and necessary to society and to the moviegoers. In the beginning, these anonymous reporters were more likable because they were given witty lines, and they asked questions the audiences wanted answered. They were often used to advance the plot and summarize the action. They were created by former journalists who, no matter how critical of the profession, couldn't disguise their true love of the people in it.

- **Columnists and Critics** – One of the most popular villains in newspaper movies is the power-hungry gossip columnist who always seems to end up at the bottom of the journalistic barrel. In the movies, gossip columnists stop at nothing and hurt anyone to get that must-read item. They are cocky and power mad, ready to sacrifice anyone and everyone to get ahead and then to stay on top. And yet, they are played by such likable and ingratiating actors that their evil

is muted. You seem to like them in spite of what they do and how they act. And by the end of the film, they usually redeem themselves a bit by acting human and doing the right thing. Most were modeled on Walter Winchell, the Broadway gossip columnist, and Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper, the Hollywood gossip columnists, who achieved enormous power from the 1930s through the 1950s. Their bylines were well known to millions of readers across the country. Particularly nasty in films are the unscrupulous, circulation-building Broadway gossip columnists who are always in hot water. They are shot at, beaten up, threatened, and generally hated by everyone in town. Other movie and television columnists include the adviser (advice-to-the-lovelorn, marriage, children, consumer affairs, manners and etiquette, how-to), the political commentator (local and/or national), the social commentator (opinions, issues, point of view), the detective (the police beat, unsolved cases), and the generalist (writing on any subject of interest).

Critics often write columns as well as reviews, and many are cold-blooded, unscrupulous journalists who use their power to get what they want when they want it and collect their pound of flesh whenever they feel like it. Often writers and directors get revenge against critics by holding them up to scorn and ridicule in their films and television and radio programs. The nicer critics are usually married and mired in domestic comedies.

• **Cub Reporters** – Beginning reporters make the same mistakes in silent films as they do in high-tech digital movies and television programs. The cub reporter is the one journalist with whom everyone in the audience can identify. He or she knows nothing about journalism, and everyone else knows everything about journalism, so the cub can ask all the questions that the audience wants to know. When veteran journalists correct the cub, either the audience laughs with knowing derision or learns something. It is a win-win proposition, and it makes for an easy plot device to let the cub find out what the audience already knows or wants to know.

• **Editors** – These journalists throughout the century are always gruff and sharp-tongued but usually soft under their bluster. There are editors in chief, managing editors, and city editors. In later years they are the news directors or executive news producers or news producers. The editors in chief are sometimes indistinguishable from the publishers. They dress better than the other editors, seldom raise their voices, and leave the dirty work to the managing editor or city

editor. In most films, the managing editor, the city editor, and the broadcast news director look and sound alike. If they aren't the stars of the film, they seldom leave their desks. They smoke cigars any chance they can, scream out orders at cubs and veterans alike, regularly fire their star reporter (who always comes back for more), and decide what stories to run and where to place them. Almost every media film has at least one major argument between the reporter and the editor or news director or executive producer. The mold was cast in *The Front Page* (1931) when the reporter Hildy Johnson and the editor Walter Burns (Pat O'Brien and Adolphe Menjou, respectively) went at it from the first reel to the last. In 1940, *His Girl Friday* added sex to the mixture by turning Hildy into a woman who, with her editor (Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant), spoke faster than most humans can think. Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau picked up the argument thirty years later in a remake of *The Front Page* (1974), and Kathleen Turner as Christine Colleran, a TV reporter, and Burt Reynolds as Sully, the news director, continued the all-out fight in 1987 (*Switching Channels*).

•**Flawed Male Journalists** – This category includes all media reporters, from newspaper newshounds to newsreel cameramen to radio and television broadcasters to Internet journalists. Most male reporters in the movies and television are, like those in the audience, flawed human beings. They are not all good and not all bad but simply trying to get the story at all costs. They may lie or cheat or act more like detectives than reporters, but they are usually forgiven their trespasses because the end result favors the public rather than themselves.

•**Investigative Reporters** – Next to the war correspondent, the investigative reporter, who always works tirelessly to aid the public, is often the only other legitimate hero of journalism films. He or she usually risks life and limb to get the story that will help the public. They join a handful of editors and even publishers who do not let personal gain or safety stand in the way of running down a story that exposes crime or corruption. They often end up dead – killed by a mobster they were trying to expose, or a crooked policeman, or a corrupt politician. More often they end up beaten – but never broken. They are always threatened and show great courage in putting their lives on the line to get the story in the newspaper or on television. Many of the reporters who are killed in action are secondary actors whose deaths are avenged by the star reporters. These journalists are expendable in Hollywood because they give the hero a

motive to go after the bad guys with a vengeance: Their pal has been murdered and nothing will stop the reporter from capturing the killers and putting their mugs on page one and their bodies in jail. Newspapermen and women are incredibly loyal to their publications and, most of all, to their colleagues.

• **Memorable Newsroom Families** – Journalism wreaks havoc on most personal relationships. Movies aping real life seldom feature journalists in marriages that last. Journalists usually end up alone in the big city without family. Divorce rates in TV newsrooms are astronomical. The only marriages that seem to work involve a man and a woman who are both working journalists. The only friends most newspeople have are the people who work with them. And these people – the reporters, editors, photographers, producers, and the others who work in a newsroom – become an extended family, often the only family most journalists have. Frequently, a film would feature a family of journalists that would include many different kinds of journalists working together or, at times, against each other, but all part of a separate nuclear family. Movies and television programs offer some of the best examples of the extended family of journalists, whether it be in a 1929 newspaper office or in a state-of-the-art TV newsroom. No one journalist here stands out – each has a role, and each plays it to the fullest. Most embody all of the film-TV clichés of what it means to be a journalist in the big city, alone, cynical, hardworking, ready to do anything for the paper or news program even it means giving up a personal life, and always ready with a wisecrack, a funny line, a joke. Laughter is sometimes the only thing that keeps a journalist going even in the worst of times.

• **Photojournalists and Newsreel Shooters** – Photographers using still film or moving pictures often risk their lives to get the images that show us what is going on in this country and around the world. Often news photographers shoot pictures of indescribable horror and barely escape death to bring back pictures to the public. Some photographers, especially newsreel shooters, are among the most courageous and corrupt journalists on film. These newshawks use a camera instead of a pad and pencil, and they frequently will do anything to get an exclusive picture of a hot news story. Lie, cheat, deceive a friend, take advantage of a loved one – all's fair in this end of the news business. The faking of newsreel film is rooted in history. Newsreel cameramen began faking coverage of news events as soon as the camera was invented. Although

these films are a bit exaggerated, real-life newsreel cameramen earned similar reputations in the field. Photojournalists are natural heroes and villains for the movies and television. Sometimes their fictional tales are grafted onto footage of actual fires, earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters.

•**Publishers and Media Owners** – Whether they be publishers of big-city newspapers or new media, these men and women are usually depicted trying to use the media for their own ends. At first there was only the newspaper publisher. Many are shown as benevolent journalists who tried to offer a good product at a fair price. But the movies soon discovered that they needed a villain, and reporters and editors were too busy trying to capture the crook or expose corruption to make very good bad guys. Publishers, and now the media moguls, are rich and powerful, so movie audiences love to hate them. Soon, greedy, hypocritical, amoral publishers were crowding the conscientious publishers off the screen. They are either concerned with economic power – willing to do anything to increase circulation – or they lust after political power. Money-mad or power-hungry, it doesn't matter. They are the ones who are destroying the media's role in a free society: to serve the public interest at all costs.

•**Real-Life Journalists** – These reporters and editors are thrown into movies from the 1920s on to give the newspaper film more authenticity. From columnists Walter Winchell to Jimmy Breslin, these real-life byliners are valuable cameo stars. Newspaper headlines and, later, radio and television broadcasts are often used as the easiest and fastest way to sum up what is going on, even in films and television programs that have nothing to do with journalism. In recent decades, the familiar TV journalist shows up in almost every film either as background to the action or as a commentator on the people in the news who happen to be the stars of the movie. In addition, many real-life journalists are portrayed by actors, from war correspondent Ernie Pyle (Burgess Meredith in *The Story of G.I. Joe*) to Philadelphia investigative reporter Jonathan Neumann (Rob Morrow in *The Thin Blue Lie*).

•**Sob Sisters** – Female journalists in silent films face almost the same problems as many females face in today's media. In real life, few ever heard the words *sob sister* until the movies popularized the term. It sums up the dichotomy of the movie female reporter – she is considered

an equal by doing a man's job, a career woman drinking and arguing toe-to-toe with any male in the shop, holding her own against everyone and anything, yet often showing her soft side and crying long and hard when the man she loves treats her like a sister instead of a lover. By the end of the film, most sob sisters, no matter how tough or independent, would give up anything and everything for marriage, children, and a life at home. They simply have no choice. Female journalists moving into broadcasting and new media show more independence, but the parallels between the early sob sisters and the modern female journalists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are striking.

•**Sports Journalists** – Sports reporters and writers aren't much different from their city room counterparts, although their venue makes them unique. There are syndicated sports columnists who will do anything to get an exclusive, including using blackmail and payoffs. But the majority of sportswriters depicted in film and on television simply go out and do their job. Some are heroic in that they ferret out corruption in sports, risking public animosity. Most often they are used as realistic dressing for biographies of sports personalities, both in the movies and on television.

•**War and Foreign Correspondents** – The undisputed journalist hero is the war correspondent, even if these journalists sometimes hide behind a patriotic and jingoistic script. During the 1940s, the war correspondent became a national folk hero. Popular actors couldn't wait to play the glamorous overseas war reporter who would save democracy, his loved one, and his country in less than a couple of hours. Some war correspondents were a variation on the oldest stereotype in newspaper films – the crime reporter. During dangerous times abroad, they were working on a larger canvas but still solving the crime without official help or guidance. When there aren't any conflicts, the foreign correspondent in movies is a lot less dramatic. The war correspondent is the perfect movie hero, whose daily work involves patriotism, danger, violence, and drama. The war correspondents are where the action is, and a whole nation holds its breath while they risk their lives overseas to get the story back to the home front. Issues of censorship and distorting the truth in times of war are sometimes touched upon in the movies, but when bullets are flying and lives are in jeopardy, these are nuances in which American moviemakers and the American moviegoers aren't much interested. Kill the enemy and save our

boys no matter what it takes – and if that means journalists who practice jingoism and racism, that is a price everyone seems willing to pay. Many war correspondents died on the battlefield or trying to get a story out of enemy territory.

Each of these categories will be explored in future publications.

¹ For a survey of early American novels dealing with journalists, see Howard Good's *Acquainted with the Night: The Image of Journalists in American Fiction, 1890–1930* (Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1986).

² Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretative History of the Mass Media*, Sixth Edition (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1988 Sixth Edition), p. 227.

³ Alex Barris, *Stop the Presses! The Newspaperman in American Films* (Barnes, South Brunswick, 1976), p. 7.

⁴ Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 1990), pp. 97–162.

⁵ Richard R. Ness, *From Headline Hunter to Superman: a Journalism Filmography* (Scarecrow Press, Lanham, MD, 1997), p. ix, the best resource book on the subject.

⁶ Larry Langman, *The Media in the Movies: A Catalog of American Journalism Films, 1900 – 1996* (McFarland, Jefferson, NC, 1998), pp 1–13.

⁷ Courson Maxwell Taylor, *The Newspaper Movies: An Analysis of the Rise and Decline of the News Gatherer as a Hero in American Motion Pictures, 1900–1974* (University of Hawaii, 1976), one of the most comprehensive studies of the journalist in films up to 1974 and only published as a dissertation, pp. 66–165.

⁸ Howard Good, *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1989) is one such example.