



Matty Roth runs into trouble in Brian Wood's title *DMZ* #17 (May 2007).

Comic Book Journalists Beyond Clark Kent

*It's a different era of anti-heroes and realism,
but the reporter is still an effective device, comics insiders say.*

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The public respects journalists and holds “the press” in low esteem, according to several surveys – much like Congress’ approval ratings that are low collectively while individual incumbents usually are re-elected. Americans seem dissatisfied with institutions but appreciative of people they know who happen to make up those institutions. A We Media/Zogby Interactive poll released on February 29, 2008, showed that 70% of Americans believe journalism to be important to their communities, but 64% are dissatisfied with its quality.

In popular culture, journalists are often featured in novels, films, and other forms of entertainment, but one of pop culture’s most enduring uses of the journalist is in comic books.

However, comics' often shallow journalist characters – embodied by the milquetoast version of Clark Kent – recently have evolved into more full-bodied roles: weak or vain, blustery or cynical, realistic or at least somewhat more credible for twenty-first century audiences.

In the last few years, running characters or situations that expand the role of journalists in comic books range from *DMZ*'s Matty Roth and *Transmetropolitan*'s Spider Jerusalem to *Phantom Jack*'s Jack Baxter, *Deadline*'s Kat Farrell, and *Front Line*'s Ben Urich and Sally Floyd.

This year is the seventy-first anniversary of the publication of Action Comics No. 1 with Superman on the cover, and the seventy-sixth anniversary of the very first comic book, Eastern Color Printing's *Funnies On Parade*, a free promotional booklet of original works featuring such characters as Mutt and Jeff, and Joe Palooka.

"This definitely is a time when comics ... have found a lot more general acceptance," said American University literature professor Michael Wenthe in December 2007. "There's been an explosion of really good material in the last 10 years."

A comic book, of course, is a magazine collection of comic strips made up of visual images and text systematically placed as to tell a story, usually with narrative structure and recurring characters. The late, great comic creator and industry icon Will Eisner (*The Spirit*) defined comics as "sequential art ... a distinct discipline, an art and literary form that deals with the arrangement of ... images and words to narrate a story. The reader is required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The regimens of art and literature become superimposed."

With limited space and time, comics benefit most from familiar characters, and one of the most enduring has been the journalist.

The appearance of journalists in comic books may begin with Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olson, Perry White, and others from DC Comics, but comic-strip heroine Brenda Starr came out in 1940, along with radio journalist Billy Batson, the adolescent dual identity of Captain Marvel, followed by other series in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, Marvel Comics' Peter (Spider-Man) Parker and boss J. Jonah Jameson started a trend toward more realistic characters and settings for a specialized, increasingly adult market; in the last 10 years, standout journalist characters have become prevalent.

The depiction of journalists in comics is not as negative as in film and TV, according to Katherine Ann (Beck) Foss in her 2004 University of Minnesota master's thesis "It's A Bird, It's A Plane, It's A Journalist." Indeed, in cinema there are more unethical or corrupt journalists than decent, upright reporters. Still, what if *Superman* creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster had not made the often-humiliating disguise of Clark Kent a reporter but a carpenter, physician, or traveling salesman? Would subsequent creators have seen those as possibilities, or are journalists' flexibility and ties to action so suitable that they can't be passed up?

Bill Rosemann, an editor at Marvel Comics and creator of *Deadline*, a short series featuring feisty reporter Kat Farrell, said, "I'm sure creators would eventually choose the reporter job for their characters. The position provides natural access to potentially action-packed and dramatic plot developments. But everyone salutes Siegel and Shuster for showing how it's done."

Catwoman writer Will Pfeifer, a working reporter at the Rockford [Ill.] *Register Star*, said, "A reporter is tough to top as a secret identity – not exactly blue collar, but hardworking nonetheless, down there in the trenches, trying to get the story. The access to breaking news ... the newsroom has always been a fun environment to set stories, full of colorful characters and fast-paced dialogue. Though, I admit, as someone who's spent most of the last 20 years in a

newsroom, I never thought the *Superman* stories ever really captured the oddball spirit of the place.

“My only question is,” Pfeifer added, “since he was, more often than not, the story, when the heck did Clark Kent ever interview sources or actually sit down and write his copy?”

Another journalist, who covers comics for *Wizard* magazine, said Siegel’s choice set the right path.

“I’d hate to think what superhero secret identities would have followed if Siegel and Shuster had decided to make Clark Kent a ‘mild-mannered ice cream truck driver’,” said Chris Ward, a former writer and editor at *Wizard* who still freelances for it. “Deciding to make him a journalist is both incredibly practical in gathering information to fight crime, and a perfect visual cover. After all, can anyone look at one real-life journalist and easily peg them as a Superman? I think Clark Kent paved the way for guys like Spider-Man, who could stay out all day ‘taking pictures’ without anyone questioning why he’s never at his desk. Genius.”

A third journalist – who’s also a comics creator (of the recent *Phantom Jack* series) and the inspiration for fictional character Ben Urich as written by Brian Michael Bendis – said his profession is perfect for comics’ use.

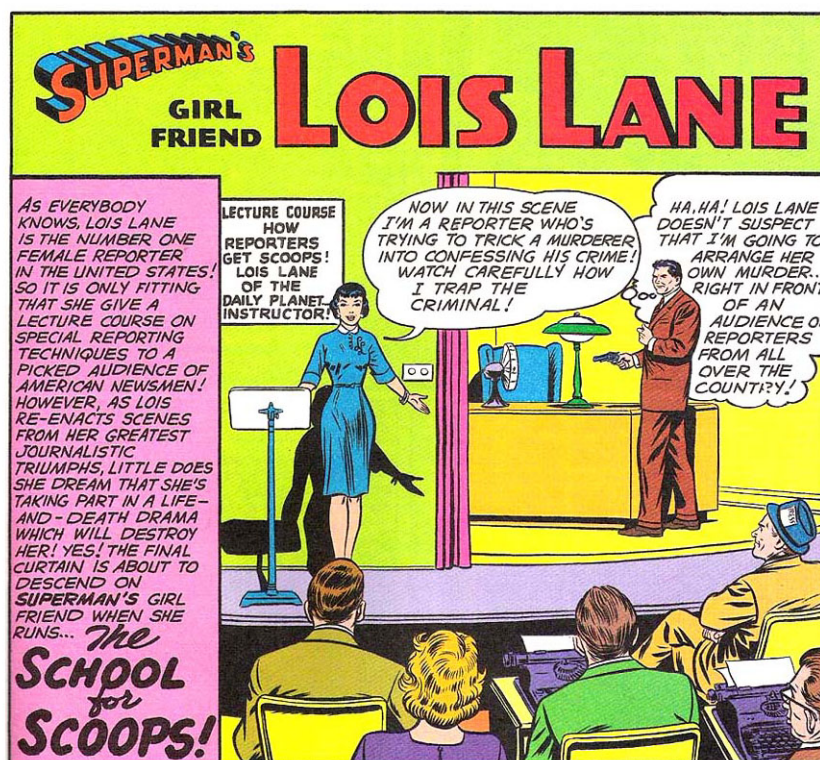
“Journalists were the closest thing to first responders, next to cops and firemen,” said Mike San Giacomo, who works at the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and teaches a course on comics at Case Western Reserve University.

“A reporter can disappear for an hour pretty easily, especially compared to a doctor with a roomful of patients. I suppose a writer could make any profession work, but a reporter seems to fit the bill nicely. The other ideal job is no job at all, hence the number of millionaire playboys that put on tights,” San Giacomo observed.

DC writer Mark Waid (*The Flash*, *Superman: Birthright*) agreed. “It’s just too good,” Waid said.

“Carpenters, as a general rule when it comes to falling bridges or super-villain attacks on midtown, are lousy first-responders.”

Award-winning comic painter Alex Ross, who has collaborated with Waid, noted that there’s more than accessibility and freedom. “The reporter is somewhat the conscience of the people, being concerned and bringing attention to things,” said Ross, who’s



A title panel from *Lois Lane* #29 (November 1961).

done *Astro City*, *Kingdom Come* and more, and even used a journalist character, Phil Sheldon, in his graphic novel *Marvels*. “Cops are authority figures tied to judgment and resolution of some sort – we don’t expect them to be concerned, really. So a reporter can bridge the gap between people and authority.”

Clark Kent isn’t just a journalist, of course. Siegel and Shuster used the secret identity concept introduced by Baroness Emmuska Orczy in the 1903 play *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (with foppish Englishman Percy Blakeney really a dashing adventurer) and also found in Johnston McCulley’s 1919 short story “The Curse of Capistrano” with the hero Zorro (Don Diego). Later in 1930, pulp publisher Street & Smith’s radio figure The Shadow hid behind his identity as playboy Lamont Cranston.

Siegel reviewed *Child of the Revolution*, Orczy’s novelization of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, for his high school newspaper, and enjoyed the silent film *Mark of Zorro* starring Douglas Fairbanks.

“As a high school student, I thought that some day I might become a reporter,” Siegel said years later, “and I had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn’t know I existed or didn’t care I existed ... The concept came to me that Superman could have a dual identity, and in one of his identities he could be meek and mild – as I was – and wear glasses the way I do,” he continued. “The heroine, who I figured would be a girl reporter, would think he was a worm, yet she would be crazy about this Superman character.”

In some ways reaffirming the human side of power – heroes can prevail despite apparent weakness or questionable backgrounds, etc. – the secret identity device helps create tension, conflict, and sometimes even a subplot. It supposedly protects heroes’ friends and families but also permits surveillance and quiet operations.

Comics’ secret identity concept is a modern version of folklore’s or myths’ heroes: sometimes abandoned or sometimes just not what they seem – bullied but capable of great power. But even timid-acting Clark Kent wasn’t embarrassing all of the time.

“Newspaper reporting was the first career I knew about,” said Los Angeles journalist Rip Rense, in an interview with Tom Mangan at sevenquestions.com in 2002. “All newspaper people are Superman, in a way. Being a reporter was like having a secret identity. It impresses the hell out of people, and inspires a little fear. They realize that you have the power of the pen, which is ... faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, etc.”

Popular culture’s use of the journalist can be an effective variation of police officers as protagonists (like a few other fiction substitutes: insurance investigators, lawyers, forensic scientists), said *Wizard*’s Ward.

“As long as it’s ‘journalist’ instead of ‘The Press’ – which almost has a negative connotation – there’s still a romantic image of the ‘hard-hitting, truth-seeking journalist’ in popular culture that strikes a chord with audiences, from Clark Kent to *All The President’s Men*,” Ward said. “I think the public really craves this trait in protagonists and reporters – someone selflessly looking out for their interests – but have been let down in real life and turned to fictional characters to fulfill that need.

“Sure,” Ward continued, “there’s probably one guy out there who actually believes ‘Channel 19 is the News Team you can TRUST!’, but the rest of us are a little more cynical than that. And I think people gravitate toward all ‘lone wolf’ protagonists – cops or reporters – who skillfully utilize, or even beat, the system in the face of great odds and



Big Town #44 (April 1957).

do what's right. There's an idea of the no-nonsense, underdog hero with 'Press' stuck in his hat who gets at the root of crime and corruption no matter what. And people are more likely to identify with this cliché of the loose-cannon hero than get behind 'The Police Force' as a protagonist. If popular culture is any indication, every U.S. police force is completely corrupt except for one officer."



Extra! #1 (February 1955).

The journalist character developed over decades. Starting in 1927, Frank Godwin's continuity comic strip "Connie" featured independent adventurer Constance Kurrige, who in 1934 started working as a reporter for the *Daily Buzz*. DC had a comic version of the radio and TV series *Big Town* with *Illustrated Press* editor Steve Wilson. Entertaining Comics (EC – known for its controversial *Tales from the Crypt* and, eventually, *Mad* magazine) published a hard-boiled, short-lived action series set in the 1950s in a news service, *Extra!*, with reporters Steve Lombard, "Slick" Rampart, and newswoman Geri Hamilton. There were several recurring characters named "Scoop" – Daly, Scanlon, Smith, and more in various comic titles.

The Green Hornet actually was publisher Britt Reid; Mark Trail dabbled in magazine journalism; and Mickey Mouse was editor of the *Daily War-Drum* in a series of 1930 comic strips later published as a comic book. In the 1940s, comics had several "vigilante journalists" like two featured in the *Golden Age Daring Mystery* title reprinted by Marvel

in January 2008: Joe Simon's The Phantom Bullet and Mike Robard's Phantom Reporter, with the slogan "By day, cub reporter ... by night relentless scourge of the underworld!"

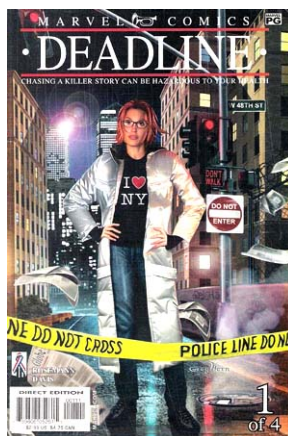
There also have been many supporting characters beyond Jimmy Olson, et al.: Cat Grant, Morgan Edge, and Linda Park in DC, and Robbie Robertson, Eddie Brock, and Jack Ryder in Marvel.

But recent characters show that journalists can be appealing even if they're not dual identities, even if they're unorthodox:



Title page from *Daring Mystery Comics* #3 (April 1940).

- **Jack Baxter** (*Phantom Jack*, by Mike San Giacomo). An experienced newsman in our universe is exposed to some chemicals and develops the ability to become invisible, which helps newsgathering but puts him in danger, too. "Any reporter who reads [*Phantom Jack*] will see his own newspaper," San Giacomo said in an *American Journalism Review* article in 2004. "Comics are newspapers with a lot more freedom."



Deadline #1 (June 2002).

• **Kat Farrell** (*Deadline*), by Bill Rosemann, who said in 2002, “I’ve always been fascinated with the idea of being a reporter for a big city paper.” Kat’s a young reporter at the *Daily Bugle* assigned to the beat no one wants: superheroes, who she calls “capes.” Kat resents them like some people resent pro athletes, for being inspiring role models to some and celebrity jerks to others.

• **Sally Floyd and Ben Urich** (*Front Line*, by Paul Jenkins). Sally’s a young progressive just off an internship and a gig with the *New York Alternative*; she has a drinking problem. Ben’s a conservative journeyman *Daily Bugle* reporter who’s covered Daredevil, Spider-Man, and others ethically (in *The Pulse* title) – despite working for the sometimes Murdoch-ian publisher J. Jonah Jameson. Floyd and Urich are caught in the middle of a superhero civil war and Hulk’s destructive return to Earth, and strike out on their own and publish a

scrappy independent sheet.

• **Spider Jerusalem** (*Transmetropolitan*, by Warren Ellis [*The Authority*, *Thunderbolts*]) is a post-cyberpunk, near-future, multimedia Hunter S. Thompson-style gonzo columnist for a high-profile newspaper, *The Word*, in a *Blade Runner*-type world. Anti-authoritarian, he’s a tattooed renegade except when on a story, when his lunacy serves the pursuit of truth.

• **Matty Roth** (*DMZ*, by Brian Wood [*Global Frequency*]). Also in a near future (but “our world” – without super-beings), when America is wracked by an armed insurrection, a young photojournalist intern from Long Island immerses himself in an isolated New York neighborhood after his government-cozy network abandons him, reporting as long as he can, then becoming part of the conflict.

Why have such characters emerged and succeeded? Critic Jeremy Adam Smith, writing in *Utne Reader* magazine in 2006, said, “Twentieth century heroes like Superman fought for all of us and for an American way that everyone supposedly shared. In the twenty-first century, comic book heroes are fighting over the very meaning of the American way.



J. Jonah Jameson muses about his “competition” – Ben Urich and Sally Floyd – in *World War Hulk: Front Line #5* (December 2007).

“Do we need an alien messiah to reunite us as a people,” Smith asked, “or do we need journalists like Sally Floyd and Matty Roth who can expose the truth?”

Comics’ current crop of truth-tellers are fairly realistic.

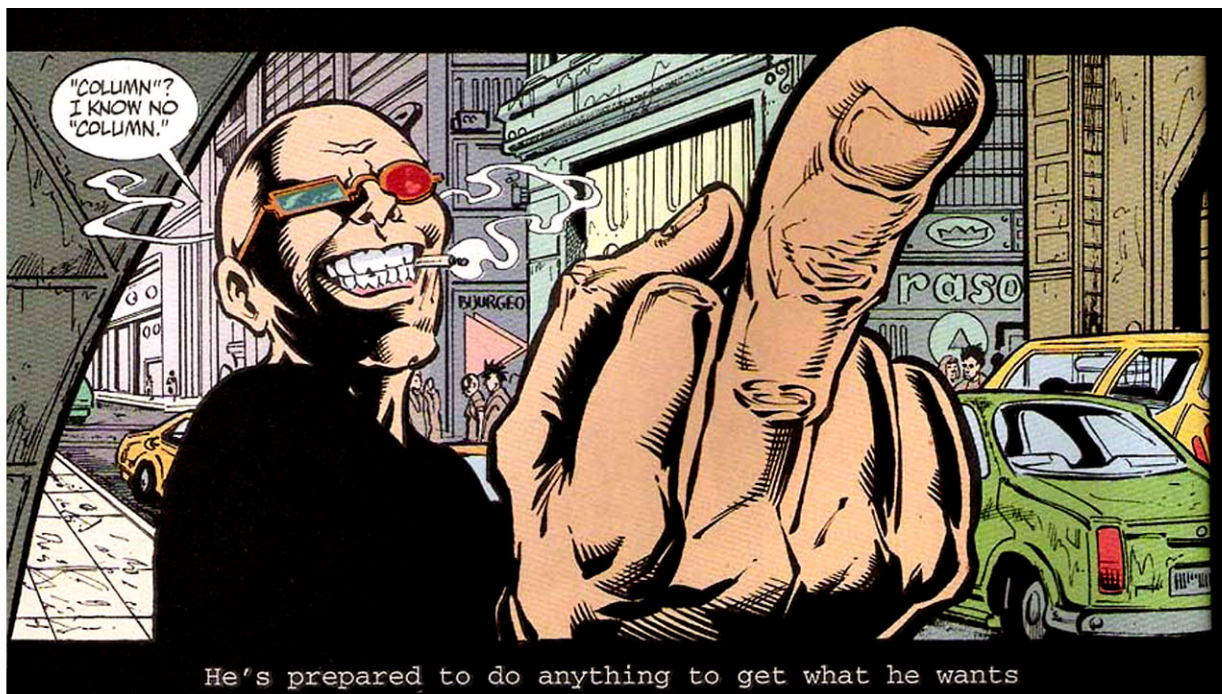
“Most of them are pretty good role models that accurately reflect the job, except for Spider, of course,” said San Giacomo. “He operates in a world of his own where journalists make the news, not report it. In *Phantom Jack*, every word is straight from the newsroom. Every story [is] based on real incidents. Jack is a journalist, at first reluctant to ‘affect’ the outcome of anything. The best journalists are invisible. They stand by and observe. Once they interact they can change the course of a story. Of course, as Jack gets more comfortable in his skin, he becomes more of a vigilante, using his powers to do good. But Farrell, Roth, Baxter, and Floyd [all] represent modern journalists who are even more pure than people like Jonah and even Kent.”

Ward likes another “New School” journalist character. “I think the best example is Jessica Jones from Brian Michael Bendis’ *The Pulse*,” he said, “a real and raw anti-hero journalist with a drinking problem. She’s a far cry from the baseball-and-apple pie morality of Clark Kent, but this makes her more relatable and fleshed out than the Big Blue Boy Scout.”

Characters simply tend to reflect their times, Rosemann said. “Each generation of creators likes to add characters that speak with their attitudes and beliefs,” he said, “so it’s only natural that each decade sees new versions of the reporter character enter the stage.”

If so, the mirror shows fallibility, according to Ross. “Some might be more experimental – maybe personalities show more flaws of themselves as human beings,” he said. “Instead of the ‘Puritan’ hero leading, some [reporter characters] are more anti-heroes in comics now.”

The credibility of comics’ journalists can vary widely. How accurately do insiders see them?



Spider Jerusalem is a gonzo journalist for *The Word* in *Transmetropolitan* #32 (April 2000).

“Real journalists would be able to point out the countless exaggerations and errors in creators’ portrayal of their work and lives,” Rosemann said, “but audiences don’t necessarily

realize these inaccuracies. But [they're] close enough to maintain an element of reality and entertain."

San Giacomo almost ranted about the lack of credibility. "Don't get me started on this," he said. "The best example is Ben Urich. I modestly report that Brian Bendis has said that he bases Ben on me, which is very flattering. Brian and I used to talk all the time about my job at the *Plain Dealer*. Brian understands what reporters do.

"More often, reporters are depicted badly in comics, television and novels," San Giacomo continued. "This has long been a sore spot with me because it seems writers make no effort to determine what a reporter actually does. I really despise the depiction of reporters as soulless jackals that hound innocent people mercilessly. That's a few television 'journalists' and some of the weekly tabloids. You don't see reporters for the *New York Times*, or even the *Plain Dealer*, screaming 'How do you feel?' out to a rape victim or chasing their car down the street. That's not what we do. I'm dismayed every time I see a reporter in a comic writing an article that uses the term 'this reporter' or writes his own headline. That does not happen. Nor does any reporter worth his salt threaten to expose people. You either write the story or not, based on whether it is the right thing to do. We never threaten or blackmail.

"I've always been troubled about Clark Kent's journalistic ethics," Giacomo said. "How can you write a fair story when your alter-ego is the subject? Though I suspect he tries to be fair, I would worry that he deliberately skews the story to under-emphasize his own heroics. That is as much a problem as being a glory hound. Peter Parker is not a journalist, he's an opportunist. The fact that he manages to get any usable pictures at all is a mystery, even with autofocus. He's never demonstrated any kind of true journalistic skill, or even knowledge of the profession. J. Jonah Jameson is a J. [Jonah] Joke."

Ward laughed at what he calls a tricky question. "If journalists were accurately portrayed in comics, it wouldn't be very interesting," he said. "Is it important for the comics medium to show journalists accurately, or is it to tell a story? If you're writing a comic ABOUT journalism, I'd argue that it is. But while most of us know newsrooms aren't the hustling, bustling, noise-filled bullpens we see them portrayed as in the storytelling medium, it makes a helluva better tale than showing what actually goes on: things like forgetting the password to the LexisNexis and trying to hunt it down. I think the core of journalist characters in comics is accurate – trying to get the story. But I'd say journalists are only truly used accurately if it's necessary to serve the story."

Pfeifer differentiates between effective and credible characters. "J. Jonah's a great character – one of the greatest supporting characters in the history of comics, I'd argue – but not exactly a dead-on portrayal of a newspaper exec," he said. "Peter Parker was a little closer, especially in his freelance days, but taking photos of yourself in costume, then selling them to a paper violates every idea of journalistic ethics I've ever heard. Actually, though it's a tad over-the-top and hard-boiled (in a good way), I'd say Frank Miller's portrayals of Ben Urich and the *Daily Bugle* in *Daredevil: Born Again* are just about the best newspaper moments in comics. They're not real, but they feel real – and that's the most important thing."

Waid and Ward show of bit of cynicism about current journalism.

"If journalists in comics today were actually realistic, they'd all be writing whatever they were told to write by their corporate masters," Waid said.

Ward echoed that: "Mickey Mouse is probably the most accurate portrayal of an editor that I can think of: a real rat-bastard."

Secret identity or not, hero or gonzo, the journalist character in comics is still viable, but it's unclear, to be charitable, the extent that such images influence public opinion.

“The action in most comics so overshadows whatever minor role journalists have that I think the impact is slight,” San Giacomo said. “Public perception varies with location. New Yorkers are pretty hard-boiled and often regard reporters with skepticism. Folks in smaller cities and rural areas are usually respectful of reporters and think of them as allies in the war for truth. I think that comes more from reading newspapers and watching TV than from comics.”

People are smarter than some observers think, Ward pointed out. “I think the public can see through the caricature of journalists, but have no problem accepting how they’re portrayed and going along for the ride,” he said. “If anything, these characters could do well to improve people’s perceptions of journalists. Just think what a character called ‘Super-Muckraker’ could do to spark a kid to question those in charge. Imagine a superhero bound by neither gravity nor corporate or advertising interests! Fantastic, I know. Like I said earlier, the public is wary of ‘The Press.’ Narrowcasting, talking heads, and the editorializing of news have put this country in a media spin that eventually makes you say ‘enough’ and shut them out completely. Journalistic ethics may always vary from paper to paper, channel to channel, but you always know where characters like Lois Lane and J. Jonah Jameson stand, for better and worse.”

The use of almost any occupation or endeavor in whatever media form falls short of reality, and generalizations happen.

“Most individuals have never met or have very limited exposure to journalists, and so they – as with any profession or social group – make assumptions and form opinions based on representations in pop culture,” Rosemann said. “From the pure-at-heart crusader to the greedy paparazzi, each version of this [journalist] character contributes to the public’s view of the journalist.”

Pfeifer seemed to shrug in his Illinois newsroom. “I think there’s a certain segment of the population that thinks all newsrooms are run like the *Daily Planet*, probably the version seen on the old George Reeves [*Adventures of*] *Superman* TV show,” he said. “They figure there’s one crusty editor who storms around the office saying ‘Great Caesar’s Ghost!’; one female reporter who constantly gets herself into trouble; one cub reporter/photographer who does the same thing; and one dull-but-effective reporter in glasses and a gray suit. Needless to say, this isn’t what newspapers are like – or ever were like.

“I’ve been working in a newsroom for almost 20 years, and I’ve never once heard the term ‘cub reporter’,” Pfeifer continued. “It’s all interns and the Internet now, but that’s not nearly as interesting as the stripped-down, fictional version. I suppose it’s like any other profession – when you see it portrayed in popular culture, you can’t believe how misguided the depiction is.”

Waid tried to add a reality check. “Over the past 20 years, we’ve successfully turned comics from a mass medium into a niche market,” he said. “The last time the ‘public’s’ perception of anything was influenced by the comics was when my mom tried to make me eat spinach because Popeye does.”

Ross is more idealistic. “Really, reporters have always been pushy strangers who could be nuisances,” he said, “but the net effect – the desired result, the story – also helped people.”

San Giacomo was talking about his creation, “Phantom” Jack Baxter, but he could have been describing any journalist: “He’s not perfect, but sometimes he’s all we’ve got.”