

The Reel World
*Women's Film Portrayals as Reflectors
of Journalistic Practices and Social Mores*

Sammye Johnson
Professor
Carlos Augustus de Lozano Chair in Journalism
Department of Communication
Trinity University
San Antonio, TX 78212
sjohnson@trinity.edu

I've watched *His Girl Friday*, *Meet John Doe*, *Woman of the Year*, and *Arise, My Love* so many times I know the dialogue by heart. In *His Girl Friday*, I lip sync Hildy Johnson's rapid-fire response to Walter Burns' passionate attempt to keep her on the job by saying she'd be a traitor to leave the newspaper business: "You're a journalist, Hildy!"

Hildy: A journalist? Now, what does that mean? Peeking through keyholes, chasing after fire engines, waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them if Hitler's going to start another war? Stealing pictures off old ladies? I know all about reporters, Walter. A lot of daffy butt-inskies running around with a nickel in their pockets. And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives will know what's going on.

But that isn't the defining quote in *His Girl Friday* for me or the students in my Women Journalists in Film class, where we look at gender issues relating to journalistic practices and the role of women journalists in society as shown in Hollywood movies. Two exchanges set the tone for the course. The first has to do with the need for a woman to be attractive:

Walter: What were you when you came here five years ago? A little college girl from a school of journalism. I took a doll-faced hick ...

Hildy: Well, you wouldn't take me if I hadn't been doll-faced.

The second exchange is equally telling because it signals the challenges and professional expectations women face when being journalists:

Walter: You can't quit the newspaper business. ... You're a newspaperman!

Hildy: That's why I'm quitting. I want to go someplace where I can be a woman.

Students—male and female—nod their heads in agreement at the statements Hildy has made. They know that in this course we're going to be talking about how the images of women reporters, producers, broadcasters, and editors in films can be used to analyze, study, and discuss the ways women are portrayed in their occupational roles in media outlets, from personal, physical, and professional points of view.

When I developed this course in 1991, I chose to focus on films with women journalists, as opposed to men, for three reasons. One, women journalists are not as widely referenced in journalism and mass communication textbooks as are male reporters, editors, news directors, producers, and publishers. By using films with women journalists, I bring in examples of real women journalists working at newspapers, radio and television stations, and magazines.

Two, most of the majors in my department are women—in many upper division classes, I may have only two or three men and 14 or 15 women. Often the Women Journalists in Film class becomes a consciousness-raising experience for everyone because we cover attitudinal shifts toward marriage and motherhood, feminist issues concerning work and power, and relationship norms occurring in the ongoing battle of the sexes. We also look at gender stereotypes, keeping in mind these words from Julie Burton, president of the Women's Media Center about the status of women in media jobs in 2015: "The bad news is stark and clear in nearly every media platform: We have a long way to go before we reach gender and racial/ethnic parity. If the top positions are still held by white males, this

has an impact on the ability of women and minorities in the job market and general economic landscape.”¹

Three, by concentrating on women journalists, my course is cross-listed with the women’s and gender studies program at Trinity University and this opens the class up to a wide-ranging group of students who are not majoring in communication. They often offer different frames of reference.

Movies, as an image-forming medium, have been influential in determining the public’s attitudes toward journalists—whether male or female. How accurate and realistic are the film portrayals of women journalists; have these portrayals affected how society perceives the media as a whole? If you’ve been thinking about developing a journalism, mass communication, or media studies course using films to cover wide-ranging topics, this essay offers suggestions for a seminar that will constantly challenge you and your students.

The thrust of *Women Journalists in Film* is multi-level because we’re examining 16 films from three perspectives: sociological, historical, and journalistic. The sociological perspective looks at the representation of gender. We study the emotional and physical depiction of women in general (mostly gender stereotypes) as well as the emotional and physical depiction of women journalists. We examine whether the films show women journalists having a successful career and a successful marriage: How are they depicted when they are not on the job, when they are at home? We also discuss the expectations society has of professional women in general.

We look at the historical framework and how certain social expectations are built into the script or the plot that reflect their times, from *The Front Page* in 1931 through *Morning Glory* in 2010. We consider what reviewers said about each film and what critical awards the films received (many won Academy Awards for best original story and acting, as

well as nominations for best film, director, cinematography, and musical score). We study how women are stereotypically depicted in the movies—then and now—such as being a good sport or breaking down in tears when overwhelmed by a situation.

Finally, we explore such key journalistic themes as the perceived and real power of the press; the conflict between the press and public officials; the morals and ethics of the press; the relationship between reporters and editors; and reporting practices and techniques (especially the scoop)—from the point of view of women journalists over time. Of course, these themes also apply to male journalists, but the nuances of their application to female reporters give this course its flavor, flair, and fundamental impact.

The text for the course is *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* (2nd edition) by Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons.² The book offers real life examples, from Elizabeth Timothy taking over as a printer when her husband died in 1738 to Christine Brennan covering the Washington Redskins from 1985-1988; from Sally Joy talking her way onto a job at the *Boston Post* in 1870 to Christiane Amanpour reporting the Gulf War. Their stories offer comparison, contrast, and support to the fictional depictions shown in the films.

I also include personal stories from my own experiences as a newspaper reporter in Chicago during the 1970s and as a magazine editor in the 1980s. Plus, I bring in guest speakers (women, of course)—a local TV anchor, a photojournalist who has worked in Mexico and the Middle East, a newspaper reporter, and a magazine lifestyle editor—to talk about their personal and professional experiences.

The course operates as a lecture/seminar that meets twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 75 minutes; 30 percent of the grade is based on participation and class discussion. Generally, during the Thursday class period I provide historical background

about the films (cast, director, gossip about the production, reviews, and awards or accolades won), as well as context about the political and social issues of the time period. Students are given “prompts,” or suggestions about what to be looking for and what to be thinking about as they view each movie.

Students are expected to talk about the films on the following Tuesday, which gives them the weekend for viewing each movie. (The films are available on their personal computers through the campus library’s streaming service, or they can rent them on their own. The list of films and discussion due dates are provided on the first day of class. The end of this essay has the complete list of films shown during the spring 2015 semester.) During the discussion class period, I act as a facilitator who keeps the comments flowing; I don’t offer my opinion or “take” on a film, but make sure everyone has a chance to share his or her observations and reactions.

I start with a quick overview about journalism in general in the United States since most students have not completed a mass media history course (not required at Trinity). Along the way, I include information about women as printers during colonial days and as early 19th century publishers.

Students are told about the working conditions of journalists in the early 20th century and how working at a newspaper was literally and figuratively a young man’s game because of the long hours, low pay rate, and lack of job security. The outrageous yellow journalism tactics occurring at the end of the 19th century are dramatically revealed when we watch the PBS documentary *Around the World in 72 Days: The Audacious Adventures of Nellie Bly* about Bly’s attempt to beat the fictional 80-day record depicted in Jules Verne’s novel.

I also distribute U.S. Census figures about the increasing numbers of women working in journalism from 1880 to the present and track the pay scales for men and women over time. We set the professional scene for urban newspapermen—and women pioneers like Elizabeth Cochrane—before turning to the films themselves.

The 16 films studied are a mix of old and new, revolving around newspapers, magazines, and broadcast outlets featuring women as the key characters. I start with the original *The Front Page* by Charles MacArthur and Ben Hecht, that quintessential 1931 journalism movie that establishes five enduring themes about journalists and how they do their jobs.³

First, the film shows that reporters have a love-hate relationship with their editors, although some simply hate their editors passionately. (Conflict with editors—news directors or executive producers when we look at movies taking place at television stations.)

Second, there is a lack of respect for all public officials, including the police. (Conflict with public officials.)

Third, reporters lie and cheat; they are rude and pushy in their quest to get the story. Basically they are amoral and cynical individuals. But there usually is a “softer” side to the best reporter in the bunch; that individual is unwilling to perpetuate an injustice. (Morals and ethics of the press.)

Fourth, reporters have a fanatic devotion to the prospect of an exclusive or scoop. The story is always the prime consideration of newspaper reporters and to get that story, they believe any tactics are justified, any deceptions are excusable, and any extremes are worthwhile. When editors are at their most encouraging and generous is when a reporter has an exclusive. The pursuit of the scoop is when the reporter is most loyal to his or her job and most fearless in tracking down crime or injustice. (Reporting practices.)

And fifth, the press has power, which can be used for good or for evil, to expose corruption, or to manipulate the public. (Power of the press.)

I like beginning with *The Front Page* because it sets up a number of identifiable symbols or clichés: Reporters always wear hats; they are hard drinkers; they dictate flawless front-page stories over the telephone; they exaggerate; they are city people who operate in the fast lane—they move fast and they talk faster.

As for visual clichés, *The Front Page* gives the audience numerous establishing shots: printing presses rolling; bundles of folded newspapers lurching down a conveyer belt; and tied newspapers dumped off a truck and landing on a sidewalk. A different set of visual clichés are established later in the broadcasting films, such as rows of television monitors in a control booth; a reporter doing a sound check; and an anchor checking his or her hair. We track changing clichés and the variations that occur, along with identifying critical journalistic themes in all the movies viewed in class.

Students are told to pretend they're seeing *The Front Page* in 1931 when it was released, and they are asked to come to class with responses to these questions: How do reporters cover a story? Would you want to be a reporter? Would you want to be married to a reporter? What are the images of women shown in this film? What does the film say about women and their place in society?

Despite my familiarity with the films—but never to the point of ad nauseum—the students still surprise me with their observations and connections when we discuss each movie. Students' comments are always thoughtful, and I learn what the next generation of journalists and communicators see as significant or silly.

What follows are brief summaries of the films studied along with the key journalistic practices found in each one. Also included are social and cultural points to include that lead

to great (even scintillating) discussions that pay attention to current events and bubble over to other classes.

Before turning to the foundational four newspaper films of the 1940s—*His Girl Friday*, *Meet John Doe*, *Woman of the Year*, and *Arise, My Love*—I show the “The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture, 1929-2007” from the Image of the Journalism in Popular Culture (IJPC) video collection.⁴ There are spoilers in several of the clips (particularly *The China Syndrome*, *The Electric Horseman*, *Broadcast News*, and *Absence of Malice*), so I’m careful about how much I show before we’ve viewed the entire movie for class.

I point out that because film images have to be viewed within the context of our American culture, a key aspect of how women are depicted revolves around the notion of femininity. Here is where I riff off Susan Brownmiller’s book *Femininity* about the history of being feminine in Western culture and four factors of femininity: figure, height, hair, and clothes.⁵ We look at each of those factors when discussing every film.

His Girl Friday (1940) shifts the dynamics in *The Front Page* to a female point of view with Rosalind Russell in the role of ace reporter Hildy Johnson and Cary Grant as her editor (and in this version, her former husband) Walter Burns. Here is an indomitable girl reporter who is depicted as a liberated professional woman who can fight it out with the toughest of men. But now she wants to quit so she “can be a woman.” This film is the first depiction of the woman journalist as superwoman since she works harder than any of her peers and is a better reporter and writer than all of them. *His Girl Friday* has it all: conflict between the press and public officials; the love/hate relationship between reporters and their editors; the morals and ethics of the press; how reporters get their stories; and the power of

the press in American society. It's also a great screwball comedy about the battle of the sexes.

His Girl Friday offers a baseline for viewing feminist and femininity issues. Walter wants Hildy to cover the pending execution of Earl Williams so she can “bring a woman’s touch” to the story. Fiancé Bruce Baldwin doesn’t care about Hildy’s success as a reporter; he wants her to be a stay-at-home wife.

Students love the fact that Hildy is taller than Bruce and the other male reporters and eyeball to eyeball with Walter, showing equality. They admire her trim figure decked out in the power suit of the day (complete with hat, gloves, and handbag), and they notice that she’s a dark brunette (code for being smarter than blonder, softer women). Women in the class dislike *His Girl Friday*’s ending, irritated that such an intelligent woman is manipulated by her male editor and that she breaks down in tears. However, they acknowledge that the ending would have been considered a happy one by the original audience.

Meet John Doe (1941) looks at a sob sister columnist who perpetuates a hoax on the public, thereby breaking a cardinal rule in journalism. Barbara Stanwyck is the writer, Ann Mitchell, and Gary Cooper is the “John Doe” she creates. The movie provides a strong look at journalistic morals and ethics and at the power of the press to move people. Also intriguing in this movie is the depiction of the newspaper’s publisher as a conniving media mogul who is hungry for money and power—and wants to set himself up as a kind of dictator of the United States.

In my background comments about *Meet John Doe*, I include a real fabrication story: Janet Cooke’s “Jimmy’s World” series about an 8-year-old heroin addict. I talk about New Journalism techniques, the use of telescoping, and fictional devices in writing a story.

How far can a writer go in order to dramatize an event? How far should a writer go? Should editors at the *Washington Post* have been more vigilant in scrutinizing Cooke's article before publication? Students are appalled at the lies in the article itself and the résumé deceit perpetuated by Cooke, with a bottom line that resulted in the return of the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing and her firing.

Ironically, during the week we were discussing *Meet John Doe*, the story erupted about network news anchor Brian Williams's exaggeration about being in a helicopter in Iraq that received enemy fire in 2003. Students came to class wanting to talk about lies, memories, and the public's trust in journalists. It was a great opportunity to also talk about the personas of network anchors who have become celebrities in addition to their traditional roles as journalists.

Arise, My Love (1941) introduces the foreign correspondent and the issues that a woman faces in this job. Played by Claudette Colbert, Augusta (Gusto) Nash is a fashion writer who wants to do bigger, better stories. Though she lies to get her big break, it works because she saves American pilot Tom Martin (Ray Milland) from a Spanish firing squad: It's a front page exclusive. Soon Gusto is covering Hitler as he begins invading Europe.

The film, which was ripped from current headlines with references to British and German political players of the day, includes such themes as the conflict between reporters and their editors, reporting tactics, and the power of the press. In the final scene at Compiegne in 1940 where the Germans solidified their hold over France through a signed "armistice," a weary Gusto vows to return to the United States with Tom to tell about the need for Americans to become involved in saving the world from Hitler. It's a hokey ending, but one that is appropriate for the audience of the time.

Gusto's character was based on foreign correspondent Martha Gellhorn, who covered the Spanish Civil War (and preferred not to be known as Ernest Hemingway's third wife). Here's an opportunity to study women correspondents who have covered World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Beasley and Gibbons have two excellent chapters dealing with war correspondents and modern diplomacy where students read excerpts from dispatches by Rheta Childe Dorr, Marguerite Higgins, and Marlene Sanders.

I also distribute a 2010 speech by *London Sunday Times* correspondent Marie Colvin about the importance of frontline war reporting: "Our mission is to report these horrors of war with accuracy and without prejudice."⁶ We discuss her comments along with her obituary—she was killed while covering the siege of Homs in Syria—two years later.⁷ Lists of the deadliest countries for journalists reporting the news are compiled from the Committee to Protect Journalists and distributed as part of the discussion.

Though it's billed as a romantic comedy with a handsome leading man, *Arise, My Love* asks viewers to consider seriously whether a woman can have a successful career and a love life. *Arise, My Love*'s femininity markers offer strong contrast to *His Girl Friday*. Gusto and Hildy are ambitious women, but the difference in image is dramatic. Gusto is a petite fashion plate with short, curly, auburn hair; she carries a suitcase full of shoes when on assignment and there are multiple costume changes in the film. In a bit of screen trivia, I point out that Colbert was offered the role of Hildy Johnson by Hawks and turned it down.

Woman of the Year (1942) introduces witty and sophisticated Tess Harding (Katharine Hepburn), a successful world affairs columnist who falls for sports writer Sam Craig (Spencer Tracy). The film is an opportunity to talk about op-ed columnists, their role

in shaping and reflecting public opinion, and the fact that men dominate the bylines on these pages at newspapers. We talk about editorial writers Mary McGrory, Ellen Goodman, Kathleen Parker, and Maureen Dowd, as well as the differences in how men and women write about issues. The students notice that men columnists write to persuade, while women write to connect and are more likely to put a personal face onto political stories.

As Tess and Sam fall in love and marry, it becomes clear that *Woman of the Year* asks, “Can career women make successful wives?” Since this movie was made in 1942, the ending should be that the career woman is properly domesticated, finally happy and secure in realizing that in being submissive to her man, all is right with the world. But *Woman of the Year* is really a pre-Women’s Liberation success story because Sam doesn’t want a traditional homemaker as his wife: “Why can’t you be Tess Harding Craig?” he asks at the end.

Although the class is not convinced that Tess will be able to do so, students give Sam points for that, saying he is clearly the better person in the relationship. (More than one student has referred to Tess as a cold bitch because of the refugee Greek child she adopts without telling Sam.)

Woman of the Year was Hepburn and Tracy’s first film together—they would make nine films together. Although she admired his work, Hepburn had never met Tracy, and when she did, one of her first comments was that she was a little too tall for him. Tracy responded, “Don’t worry, I’ll cut you down to size.”⁸ Their on-screen chemistry is aided by a great screenplay—*Woman of the Year* won the Academy Award for its original script.

Following this film, I introduce the 1947 Commission on the Freedom of the Press Report, published as *A Free and Responsible Press*, but primarily known as the Hutchins Report.⁹ This study of the press and how it affects American values produced a working

blueprint with five requirements for a socially responsible press and supported the need for press criticism. For the first 200 years of American history, the press had been fighting for individual voices; now the press would be responsible for giving the widest possible range to societal voices for the collective good. Obviously, this would have an impact on films featuring journalists as we move into the 1950s and 1960s.

I jump forward to the 1970s to show *Network* as the first serious broadcasting movie. I don't think there are many top-notch journalism films with women as the lead characters in the 1950s and 1960s, except for *Teacher's Pet* with Doris Day and Clark Gable, which is a little too cute. However, there are some exceptional male-dominated films, such as *Call Northside 777* with James Stewart; *Ace in the Hole* with Kirk Douglas; and *Deadline U.S.A.* with Humphrey Bogart.

Network (1976) associates TV news with the worst kind of sensationalism and greed. The film stars Faye Dunaway as TV programming whiz Diana Christensen, who is described by one character as "television incarnate ... indifferent to suffering and insensitive to joy." Diana's ruthless ambition is a result of being "the television generation. She learned life from Bugs Bunny. The only reality she knows comes to her over the TV set." *Time* called *Network* "the most controversial movie of 1976."¹⁰

My students, who grew up watching television and who are predominately women, find this film very, very disturbing. They dislike Diana, but are fascinated by the storyline and the satire about a "mad-as-hell" anchorman turned prophet of the airways. They are amazed by the fact that much has come true since then: live reports, studio audiences, flashy computer graphics, perfectly groomed anchors, and opening and closing music. It's the first film to deal with news versus fluff, a theme that will occur in subsequent movies with a broadcasting environment.

The line between entertainment and information is blurred in *Network*, with Diana's development of "Sybil the Soothsayer," "Mata Hari and Her Skeletons in the Closet," and the radical "Mao Tse-tung Hour"—scarily prescient to today's show-biz reality shows. Broadcasting visual stereotypes are established here, including the control room and banks of television screens showing all the networks. Underlying the storyline are two new themes: the rise of conglomerates and the internal and external conflicts in the network television business model.

While *Network* doesn't follow traditional journalistic tropes, it does cover ethical standards, as exemplified by Max Schumacher (William Holden), a holdover from the Edward R. Murrow days of righteous news reporting, and his struggle with Diana's power race for increased ratings at any cost. Diana's drive is equal to that of men, and she wants to be on top—even in bed where she talks about ratings until orgasm. It's a disturbing depiction of a woman to students in the class, and they agree with Max's description that for Diana: "All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality." With her champagne blonde hair, beige silk blouses and equally beige tight skirts or flowing slacks, there is no color in Diana's life, not in her personal life and not in her apartment; everything is sterile.

The China Syndrome (1979) has life imitating art, due to the fact that this movie about a nuclear power plant experiencing a near meltdown opened just 12 days before the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. Kimberly Wells (Jane Fonda) is a pretty TV feature reporter who wants to cover hard news rather than the birthday of the tiger at the local zoo. Through a fluke, she lands an exclusive story while covering a feature about a nuclear power plant in California. This film does a good job of showing Kimberly's development from a fluffy former actress in commercials to a decent investigative broadcast reporter.

In *The China Syndrome*, we return to several important themes found in the earlier newspaper movies: dedication to the story, wanting to get a scoop at all costs, and not having a personal life. Kimberly knows she was hired for her looks and not her investigative abilities. Like Diana, Kimberly's ambition pushes everything aside—she has no friends and her “family” consists of a pet turtle and a mother's voice heard on an answering machine.

At this point, we talk about women's roles in broadcasting and how few become prime-time national network anchors. Clearly, Katie Couric and Diane Sawyer were the exception rather than the norm. Data from the Women's Media Center's “Status of Women in the U.S. Media Report” and the Pew Research Center's “State of the News Media” are examined, detailing the lack of women at the top.

Research about the news industry by the Women's Media Center (WMC) “found that women, who are more than half the population, are assigned to report stories at a substantially lower rate than men. In evening broadcast news, women are on-camera 32 percent of the time; in print news, women report 37 percent of the stories; on the Internet, women write 42 percent of the news; and on the wires, women garner only 38 percent of the bylines.”¹¹

According to the 2015 WMC report, “Overall, men staffers comprised 58.8 percent of all TV news employees; women comprised 41.2 percent in 2014, up from 40.3 percent in 2013. Men were 61.2 percent of the workforce in the top 50 markets; women were 38.8 percent; and men were 55.9 percent of the workforce in the 100-plus smallest markets in 2014; women were 44.1 percent. Men were 69.2 percent of all TV news directors in 2014. Women were 30.8 percent.”¹²

As the WMC president, Julie Burton, notes, “Who tells the story is every bit as important as what the story is—and often the former determines the latter. The lack of women in decision-making and prominent positions in the media is the breeding ground for defamatory and sexist coverage and comments, and it lowers the standard of excellence by cutting in half the pool from which talent is chosen. It also results in media missing major stories—and missing viewership.”¹³

But that’s not the only problem facing women in broadcasting that smacks students in the face. The beauty factor of women on television is examined as we read various articles about double standards relating to makeovers (particularly hair), clothing (the rise of the sexy sleeveless sheath dress), and ageism (the Christine Craft story).¹⁴ In *The China Syndrome*, Kimberly is constantly sneaking peeks at her mirror, checking her hair and lipstick because, as her boss says, she’s essentially a performer who has to look good on air.

What is exciting about this film is seeing Kimberly develop a social and professional conscience as she goes up against the establishment TV station in order to reveal the truth about the accident in the nuclear power plant. In doing so, she learns about the power of the press. She also learns about the importance of sources and her encounters with nuclear engineer Jack Godell (Jack Lemmon) are painful and revealing.

The China Syndrome is the first movie to showcase the relationship between a reporter and her source. In *Meet John Doe*, the John Doe character was not an original source, but merely a mouthpiece for Ann Mitchell. In *Arise, My Love*, the American pilot was only momentarily a source; he was primarily a love interest for Gusto Nash. Now the reporter is seen negotiating that delicate balance between the source and the reporter. Emphasizing this relationship, we examine Herbert J. Gans’s research about the

perspectives of sources and journalists in terms of incentives, suitability, proximity, and power, as well as productivity, trustworthiness, authoritativeness, articulateness, and reliability.¹⁵ Who is really leading and who is following when it comes to managing the news?

The Electric Horseman (1979) also stars Jane Fonda, but now she's playing Hallie Martin, an ambitious, pushy TV reporter who wants an award-winning story—the BIG STORY—so she can get national network recognition. Hallie is gutsy, cynical, and rebellious against corporate bullshit. Her route to that exclusive story is through world champion cowboy Sonny Steele (Robert Redford)—and Hallie even sleeps with him.

What does that say about a journalist's morals? Does it help Hallie get a better story? We have a lot of discussion about their relationship, as well as about the themes of rebellion, redemption, and reward found in *The Electric Horseman*. Students point out that corporate greed is no match for a love story. As one student observed, "It's not just a boy meets girl story; a horse is part of the equation. Though boy and girl get each other briefly, the bad guys lose, and the horse, Rising Star, is free. Hallie makes it to network news by making things right as a reformer who almost didn't report the story."

Although real-life reporters argued at the time that the storyline was unrealistic, today's students appreciate *The Electric Horseman* and believe it makes sense. As one student noted, "It's the old battle of the sexes story, but between a reporter and her source this time. Besides, there's no way Hallie and Sonny would make it together as a couple."

Newspaper reporters and students were outraged after viewing *Absence of Malice* (1981) with its legal (rather than moral) approach to libel, manipulation of reporters through leaks, and lack of sensitivity on the part of a reporter in dealing with her sources. Megan Carter (Sally Field) is not only manipulated by her sources, she also is manipulated by

her editor.

Like *The China Syndrome* and *The Electric Horseman*, *Absence of Malice* focuses on a general assignment reporter, as opposed to a more experienced beat reporter. General assignment reporters tend to be younger and newer to the job; because they haven't built up beat relationships, they operate as outsiders with sources and within the media hierarchy. The result is ethical bewilderment for Megan, who crosses the objectivity boundary when she sleeps with Michael Gallagher (Paul Newman), who is an FBI suspect in their wide-ranging attempt to find out about a crime. Megan falls for the FBI obfuscation, while also falling for Gallagher. In the process, a fragile young woman commits suicide as a result of Megan's veneer of professionalism and lack of moral responsibility.

The depiction of journalistic practices and reporting techniques reach an all-time low with this film, say students, who point out that it's not surprising that the public has negative opinions of the press. Pew Research Center data over the past 25 years reveal that people think news stories are often inaccurate, biased, and influenced by powerful individuals and organizations.¹⁶ Students ask whether the power of the press is being used for the good of society, or are newspapers and broadcasting outlets so driven by financial imperatives in their race to break the latest news that they forget about consideration and civility?

Absence of Malice is the most hostile, most anti-press film shown in the course, and students are appalled at Megan's behavior as a reporter who lacks ethical boundaries and is not to be trusted. During the week we were discussing *Absence of Malice*, Germanwings Flight 9525 crashed, and that tragedy raised questions about whether journalists should be interviewing grieving friends and families and jockeying for images at a vulnerable moment.

Social media users complained about the publication of stunned and suffering families. It was a real-life ethical situation for us to ponder.

Should grieving individuals have time to process a horrific event before cameras are flashed and microphones shoved in their faces? Aren't reporters supposed to go after breaking news and capture the moment—whether positive or negative? Reporters question relatives of murder victims or witnesses at the scene of environmental disasters. Aren't they just doing their job, according to best journalism practices?

This was an opportunity to learn what professors of media ethics and law had to say, such as Jane Kirtley of the University of Minnesota: “A journalist has to think carefully about the long-term impact on that individual. For many reporters, this is a one- or two-day story, and then they move on to the next thing, but this is obviously something that’s going to affect these individuals’ lives forever.”¹⁷

According to Roy Gutterman, director of the Tully Center for Free Speech at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Journalism, “The general ethical standard is the reasonable expectation of privacy. That’s not only an ethical issue, that’s sort of the legal standard as well. Anything that’s captured in a public place or even a quasi-public place is fair game for recording and publication.”¹⁸

Yet sleeping with a source doesn’t receive the same kind of concern or criticism when students talk about *Absence of Malice*, nor were they perturbed by that happening in *The Electric Horseman*. Film critic Roger Ebert observed this phenomenon in his review of *Absence of Malice* by recounting the following exchange:

One of my colleagues cornered me at the water fountain to say indignantly that, whatever else you might think about this movie, you’d have to admit that no reporter would ever sleep with a news source.

“Oh, yeah?” asked a woman who was standing by. “Who was the news source?”

“Paul Newman,” I said.

“I’d sleep with that news source in a second,” she said.¹⁹

Broadcast News (1987) revolves around the most sophisticated and self-possessed woman seen in any newspaper or television film—producer Jane Craig played by Holly Hunter. Here we have a fascinating triangle involving Tom Grunick (William Hurt), a newscaster with charisma and no ethical grounding; Aaron Altman (Albert Brooks), a great reporter with no anchor pizzazz; and the female producer who is involved with both of them. Above all, Jane Craig is a professional who chooses ethics over love.

With this movie students learn that fine reporters end up in the boondocks because they don’t look good on camera; that anchors may be puppets who simply read the news; and that greed at top corporate levels translates to the firing of the people who are important to the news function. Students say they learn from this film that personalities sell the news and that attractive airheads who can present ideas in 15-second soundbites will be rewarded.

Students appreciate the satire in many of the romantic scenes in *Broadcast News*. They love Jane’s control and the fact that such a tiny woman (Hunter is only 5 feet 2 inches tall) is the energetic mover and shaker at a news bureau in Washington, D.C. They talk about their favorite scenes, particularly when Jane is told by a network executive, “It must be nice to always believe you know better, to always think you’re the smartest person in the room.” To which Jane responds, “No, it’s awful.”

They ask each other, “Wouldn’t this be a great world if insecurity and desperation made us more attractive? If ‘needy’ were a turn-on?” They also quote Aaron’s belief that the devil will be attractive and helpful like Tom:

He will be attractive! He'll be nice and helpful. He'll get a job where he influences a great God-fearing nation. He'll never do an evil thing! He'll never deliberately hurt a living thing ... he will just bit by little bit lower our standards where they are important. Just a tiny little bit. Just coax along flash over substance. Just a tiny little bit. And he'll talk about all of us really being salesmen. And he'll get all the great women.

But they also are very aware of the moral dilemma Jane feels as a professional when she learns that Tom faked tears while filming a report about date rape. Students are bothered by that as much as Jane is, with one student stating at the end of the semester that *Broadcast News* affected his attitude toward the press more so than any other movie: "When I first saw how Tom edited in his cry scene in his interview with the date rape victim, I did not think it was that big of a deal. The more I thought about it, however, the more it bothered me. This movie came out in 1987, so news stations' editing capabilities have exponentially increased since then. I am now especially wary of any possible editing that I see in television news."

At this point, we've viewed 10 films and discussed each one; only six sessions are left in the semester. The last two classes are used for a broad look at all of the films and discussion about their positive or negative impact as sociological, historical, and journalistic artifacts. In order to include six more movies that make important points about women working in media, I double-up on the approach. Teams of four to five students (the seminar typically has 12-15 students enrolled) become responsible for developing a presentation and leading a discussion for an entire 75-minute class period about two films. All members of the group must talk about the same amount of time. All students must view the remaining films, but the emphasis is on the group presentation (with PowerPoint) that is given.

With two films each that have newspaper, broadcasting, and magazine settings, straws are drawn to determine which team gets which set of films. The pairings are *The Paper* and *State of Play*; *Up Close and Personal* and *Morning Glory*; and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* and *The Devil Wears Prada*. Each group is responsible for providing background information and presenting an overview of the social, political, cultural, and journalistic issues occurring during the storyline's time frame of the two films selected.

Each group sets the stage for understanding the films in terms of how the audience at the time would have reacted (keeping gender issues in mind); the critical response to the films (what critics and reviewers said in newspaper and magazine articles as well as Oscar nominations and wins); and how the actors saw their roles (articles and interviews that were published at the time).

The two movies in each set offer direct comparisons and contrasts, with teams required to comment about images, depictions, expectations, and themes, while also involving the class in feedback. What has changed, evolved, or morphed over time in the depiction of women journalists in these two films? The presentation is expected to explore how women journalists are reflected in the films being analyzed and discussed, while also covering the following:

- Ongoing visual images of the workplace.
- Journalistic stereotypes about behavior, dress, language, and attitudes.
- Femininity issues, gender roles (including marriage), and personal relationships.
- Societal expectations of women as professionals, as wives, and as mothers.
- Relationships with sources.
- Libel, the facts, and the truth.

- The five themes of the course: the perceived and real power of the press; the conflict between the press and public officials; the morals and ethics of the press; the relationship between reporters and editors; and the reportorial techniques used to get the story or an exclusive.

Presentation formats have varied. Some teams decide to open with an overview of the films and their place in relation to what's been studied so far, then talk about each film individually, followed by a comparison of similarities and differences before asking for comments from the class. Another format is to have each team member "weigh in" on the two films in a point/counterpoint discussion. Starting with the critical response at the time and building from that also has been done. Other teams have organized their presentation topically around the five foundational themes for the class or focused on relationships, particularly whether a woman journalist can have a successful career and a successful relationship or marriage.

The Paper (1994) offers an ensemble cast of newspaper characters, led by Glenn Close as Alicia Clark, the tough-as-nails, penny-pinching managing editor of the *New York Sun*, a down and dirty tabloid. Marisa Tomei is Marty Hackett, a former *Sun* feature reporter reluctantly on leave (and 8½ months pregnant) who is pushing her husband Henry (Michael Keaton) to leave the *Sun* where he is metro editor for a more laid-back job at a conservative newspaper (a thinly disguised *New York Times*).

The Paper has a fast-paced tempo, covering one 24-hour period at a tabloid daily newspaper in New York City, including its petty internal politics. It captures all five themes, along with an emphasis on deadlines and the message that because of deadlines we run the risk of compromising our values for the sake of expediency. As one student observed, "This film is about how working on a newspaper screws up your personal life,

with ‘I’m on a deadline’ becoming an excuse for everything.” Others say it’s more than just personal life versus professional life; the key story revolves around journalistic integrity: Are you going to get that story the easy way or the right way?

Getting the story right also dominates *State of Play* (2009), where the techniques and journalistic practices of new social media and old-school investigative reporting clash when gossip blogger Della Frye (Rachel McAdams) is told to work with long-time *Washington Globe* metro reporter Cal McAffrey (Russell Crowe) on a fast breaking story. Della will publish first and worry about whether it was accurate later, an approach that is anathema to Cal’s methodical work habits and scrupulously honest journalistic ethics.

As in *The Paper*, a critical dimension is provided by editor Cameron Lynne (Helen Mirren) who is being told to cut costs, get more scoops, and publish what’s hot today instead of spending time on investigative pieces that are potential Pulitzers. Relationships with sources and the power of the press are additional themes in *State of Play*.

Up Close and Personal (1996) is the most romantic movie viewed, called a journalistic version of *A Star Is Born* by some critics because the two leading characters are at opposite turning points in their careers when they meet. Tally Atwater (Michelle Pfeiffer) is a pathetically bad local weather girl who can only go up as she is turned into a smooth network anchorwoman by Warren Justice (Robert Redford), a former network superstar who has moved down the ladder to news director at a Miami station. Tally becomes his protégé, a different take on the relationship between the editor/news director and reporter.

Up Close and Personal is primarily a love story, although there are enough journalistic angles to study: Tally has on-air charisma (“She eats the lens,” says Warren), and she quickly learns that “if it bleeds, it leads.” The packaging of talent is realistic in this film, although students say too much time is spent on makeovers, especially hair (at least

five distinct hairstyles and numerous subtle variations). But the consultants, agents, rating services, ethical issues, and former wives ring true, as does the scene with the news anchor who is pushed out of her job because she is “too old” at 42.

Morning Glory (2010) is also about credibility, as Becky Fuller (another perky performance by Rachel McAdams) is under-qualified to be an executive producer, but she’s driven and ambitious. Similar to *Network*, there’s a battle between fluff and news, although this time it’s on a morning talk show with bickering celebrity co-anchors Colleen Peck (Diane Keaton) and Mike Pomeroy (Harrison Ford). There’s an obligatory romantic relationship for Becky to muddle through, but it’s subordinate to her workaholic determination to do a great job.

Morning Glory revolves around relationships in the pressure cooker of a television station, and the best relationship in the film is the one between Becky and Mike, who sees himself as a real journalist. Students say they are glad it didn’t become a May-December romance, as in *Up Close and Personal* where Warren seemed too old for Tally. *Morning Glory* is not as substantive or critical about broadcasting as *Broadcast News*, but issues of media credibility and accountability are still addressed. The maneuvering for interviews and the planning of stories are accurate, as is the mix of glamour and grit.

How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days (2003) is on target in its depiction of how stories are assigned and played out at a typical women’s lifestyle magazine, where cute and clever reign. Andie Anderson (Kate Hudson) has an editor who is both barracuda and nurturer; Lana Jong (Bebe Neuwirth) doesn’t want Andie’s brand of investigative journalism in *Composure*’s pages. But that’s what Andie is determined to do—similar to Gusto Nash wanting to cover European politics. Andie is bright and bubbly, maybe a bit too bubbly to be a real-life reporter. But the issues that are dealt with are real: getting information from public

officials, working with demanding editors, involvement with sources, and toying with people's lives in the quest for the front page or cover story.

How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days introduces advertising into the battle of sexes storyline, recognizing it as another dimension in today's power of the press paradigm. Andie has a master's from Columbia University, which makes her the most educated of the film heroines. But she's not necessarily the smartest because of her involvement in the scheme to literally lose a guy in 10 days. Unfortunately, the journalistic impact is weakened because the love story's comic ramifications take over. Students ask whether this is a journalism movie with romantic comedy overtones or a romantic comedy with journalistic overtones.

The Devil Wears Prada (2006) is a better movie than novel, primarily because the characters are more fleshed out and the struggle between a personal life and professional career is revealed at both the top and bottom of the masthead. Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway), a recent graduate of Northwestern University, where she was editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper, lands a job as an assistant to the assistant to *Runway* editor Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep channeling *Vogue's* Anna Wintour). Surprisingly feminist in its attitude and tone, *The Devil Wears Prada* develops the superwoman theme on the job and at home.

Other themes come through, such as the power of the press—albeit in the fashion world. An interesting twist involves the interchanges between Andy and her slightly higher-in-power peer, Emily (Emily Blunt), who is the “first” assistant. Andy still dresses like a Midwestern undergraduate, and a lot of the fun of this film is her transformation into a stylish New Yorker.

In their final paper at the end of the semester, students are asked which film viewed

was the most negative and which the most positive in its portrayal of women journalists and how they do their jobs. They are also asked if their attitude toward the press was changed by any of the movies seen.

Year after year, Diana Christensen of *Network* “wins” for being cold-blooded, ruthless, and so desperate for a hit show that she is willing to cut a deal with a radical terrorist group. As one student wrote, “*Network* sends the message that for women to succeed in journalism, they have to give up any semblance of a personal life outside of work and be calculating, unfeeling, and willing to manipulate and cut down others to rise to the top and stay there.”

Absence of Malice’s Megan Carter usually takes second place in the negative portrayal category. “Megan is Hollywood’s portrayal of an ambitious young reporter who plays fast and loose with journalistic ethics in order to get the exclusive and she eventually gets burned. She is the character that we love to hate because of how naive she is and how ridiculously egregious her mistakes are throughout the film,” said another student.

Since its inclusion in the class in 2010, the most positive portrayal has gone to Becky Fuller and *Morning Glory*. This is typical of what students said: “Becky is quick on her feet, does what is best for the show without sacrificing ethics or morals, and really fights for the show and her employees. Overall this movie portrays her in a very positive light despite the fact that she is totally dedicated to her work and can be very bossy and tenacious at times throughout. We see her bossy nature more as a respectable character trait in this film rather than her simply being a bitch, as we saw with other characters this semester.”

Also often named as the most positive film is *The China Syndrome*, where a student wrote, “Even though Kimberly Wells was the only female journalist in the movie, the sexism she faced in the workplace and the way she reacted to it were very realistic. She was

also an honest journalist who was trying to do the right thing. Her portrayal was positive because it said a lot about the problems female journalists face in the workplace and how big corporations try to hide important and sometimes dangerous information.”

As for whether their attitude toward the press was changed after viewing the 16 films, here’s what two students wrote:

After watching all of these films, I have a greater appreciation and respect for women working in the media industry. I think some of the films did a really good job of portraying their respective industries accurately, and I think that gave me insight into how those industries work. I also learned that reporters are often put in difficult situation where they are forced to decide whether to sacrifice their morals for their jobs (or vice versa). While a part of me is still wary about reporters and the press, through this class I have come to understand that not all reporters are dishonest and that not all producers are just after high ratings. Perhaps most importantly, though, I learned that a woman does not have to be the “bitchy boss” in order to be successful in the media industry.

I know that Hollywood often skews our perception of the press through these films, but watching them has made me more skeptical when I view the press in real life. I now often find myself questioning the ethics of reporters and looking at their work with more scrutiny than before. It has also given me some insight into how the media are run and the way they are structured, especially with the magazine movies, which had a fairly accurate portrayal of the industry. After watching these films I feel like I have a better understanding of what it takes to be a female working in the media industry. I have an idea of the hard work they must go through to achieve status as an editor or producer, and the scrutiny that they face, every day when they go into work, from the executives, their co-workers, and the public.

Students definitely appreciate a course revolving around women journalists in films as a way of learning about journalistic practices, media history, and the changing images of women across time. Here are some comments from student evaluations:

- “I’m impressed by the power of the mass media to shape public opinion and perception.”

- “We had wonderful, thought-provoking discussions about the problems encountered by women journalists then and now.”
- “I never fully realized exactly how stereotypically films portray female journalists. This course gave me special insight into the problems women encounter in journalism. I don’t think any other course would have raised these important issues about gender relations and stereotypes in society.”
- “I very much enjoyed all of the discussions of the movies. We were encouraged to go beyond the obvious layer of it being a fun movie to look at the messages and meanings. I found that the themes were easily translatable to other depictions of working women, and I often referenced this course in my sociology and psychology classes.”
- “This was a great course! I didn’t realize how much we’d be talking about serious media issues that really made me think. How women are depicted in movies was often irritating, but oh so true. By looking at movies chronologically, it made me understand different trends and social issues taking place. Plus the journalistic component made everything even more interesting.”
- “The instructor always began class asking what we think of a film—not that we should have the same opinion of her. Her questions during class facilitated genuinely critical analysis of subtle and pervasive themes and imagery in the films.”
- “I learned how journalists are perceived by themselves and by society. It made me wonder if I want to be a part of that.”

MOVIES SHOWN IN WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN FILM COURSE

(in order of release year)

<i>The Front Page</i> (1931)	Newspaper
<i>His Girl Friday</i> (1940, Rosalind Russell)	Newspaper
<i>Meet John Doe</i> (1941, Barbara Stanwyck)	Newspaper
<i>Arise, My Love</i> (1941, Claudette Colbert)	Newspaper
<i>Woman of the Year</i> (1942, Katharine Hepburn)	Newspaper
<i>Network</i> (1976, Faye Dunaway)	Broadcasting
<i>The China Syndrome</i> (1979, Jane Fonda)	Broadcasting
<i>The Electric Horseman</i> (1979, Jane Fonda)	Broadcasting
<i>Absence of Malice</i> (1981, Sally Field)	Newspaper
<i>Broadcast News</i> (1987, Holly Hunter)	Broadcasting
<i>The Paper</i> (1994, Glenn Close, Marisa Tomei)	Newspaper
<i>Up Close and Personal</i> (1996, Michelle Pfeiffer)	Broadcasting
<i>How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days</i> (2003, Kate Hudson, Bebe Neuwirth)	Magazine
<i>The Devil Wears Prada</i> (2006, Anne Hathaway, Meryl Streep)	Magazine
<i>State of Play</i> (2009, Rachel McAdams, Helen Mirren)	Newspaper
<i>Morning Glory</i> (2010, Rachel McAdams, Diane Keaton)	Broadcasting

Endnotes

¹ “The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015,” Women’s Media Center, 2015 (womensmediacenter.com) online at http://wmc.3cdn.net/83bf6082a319460eb1_hsr680x2.pdf.

² Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons, *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*, 2nd ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2003).

³ Numerous film scholars have pointed out themes and images developed in *The Front Page* that set the standard for subsequent films featuring journalists. See, for example, Alex Barris, *Stop the Press! The Newspaperman in American Films* (Cranbury, NJ: A.S. Barnes,

1976); Howard Good, *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989); Joe Saltzman, *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film* (Los Angeles: Norman Lear Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, 2002); Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Loren Ghiglione and Joe Saltzman, "Fact or Fiction: Hollywood Looks at the News" (essay with exhibit at Newseum, Washington, DC, 2005, online at <http://www.ijpc.org/uploads/files/hollywoodlooksathenews2.pdf>); and Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* (Champaign, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2015).

⁴ "The Image of the Female Journalist in Popular Culture, 1929-2007, IJPC Video Two, Image of the Journalism in Popular Culture (IJPC), Project of Norman Lear Center, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁵ Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).

⁶ Marie Colvin, "Our Mission Is to Report," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2012 (text of speech given at St. Bride's Church, Fleet Street, London, on November 10, 2010), online at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/feb/22/marie-colvin-our-mission-is-to-speak-truth>.

⁷ Roy Greenslade, "Marie Colvin Obituary," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2012, online at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2012/feb/22/marie-colvin>. See also Marie Brenner, "Marie Colvin's Private War," *Vanity Fair*, August 2012, online at <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/politics/2012/08/marie-colvin-private-war>.

⁸ "The New Pictures," *Time*, February 16, 1942, 82.

⁹ Margaret A. Blanchard, "The Hutchins Commission, The Press and the Responsibility Concept," *Journalism Monographs* 49 (May 1977).

¹⁰ "The Movie TV Hates and Loves," *Time*, December 13, 1976, 78-79.

¹¹ "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015," Women's Media Center, 2015 (womensmediacenter.com), online at http://wmc.3cdn.net/83bf6082a319460eb1_hsr680x2.pdf. See also "State of the News Media 2015: Overview," Pew Research Center 2015 (www.pewresearch.org), online at <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/state-of-the-news-media-2015/>.

¹² "The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2015."

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See for example, Ruth La Ferla, "Can A New Pouf an Anchor Make?," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2003, online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/16/style/can-a-new->

pouf-an-anchor-make.html; Ava Thompson Greenwell, "Power to the People: Hair Texture and Gender Matter to TV News Audiences," *Huffington Post*, December 12, 2012, online at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ava-thompson-greenwell/power-to-the-people-hair_b_2375965.html; Libby Copeland, "The Sheath: A Particular Brand of Female-Anchor Sexy," *Slate*, April 29, 2013, online at http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/04/female_tv_newscasters_and_the_sleeveless_sheath_dress.html; Cristina Rouvalis, "Female News Broadcasters Criticize Double Standard," *Pittsburg Post-Gazette*, September 5, 2006, online at <http://www.post-gazette.com/tv/2006/09/05/Female-news-broadcasters-criticize-double-standard/stories/200609050189>; and Peter Kerr, *The New York Times*, January 14, 1984, "Jury Awards Christine Craft \$325,000," online at <http://www.nytimes.com/1984/01/14/arts/jury-awards-christine-craft-325000.html>.

¹⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* (New York: Random House, 1979).

¹⁶ "Press Widely Criticized, But Trusted More Than Other Information Sources: Views of the NewsMedia 1985-2011," Pew Research Center (September 22, 2011), online at <http://www.people-press.org/2011/09/22/press-widely-criticized-but-trusted-more-than-other-institutions/>.

¹⁷ Thomas Barrabi, "Photos of Germanwings Flight 9525 Crash Victims' Grieving Friends, Family Raise Journalism Ethics Questions," *International Business Times*, March 24, 2015, online at <http://www.ibtimes.com/photos-germanwings-flight-9525-crash-victims-grieving-friends-family-raise-journalism-1857556>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Roger Ebert, "Review: *Absence of Malice*," January 1, 1981, online at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/absence-of-malice>.