No Longer Seeking "Truth, Justice, and the American Way":
Journalists and the Press in Comic Books and Contemporary Film Adaptations

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Introduction

Clark Kent: "The Mild-Mannered Reporter" who got a job at the *Daily Planet*, which "began his dual life as a journalist and crime fighter."[1]

Lois Lane: "Superb investigative journalist with an instinctive 'nose' for a good story; trained in various hand-to-hand combat techniques and an adequate marksman."[2]

Vicky Vale: "No superpowers, but few journo have a better nose of a good story or are more persistent when on the trail of a possible scoop."[3]

Ben Urich: "A skilled and responsible investigative journalist."[4]

Peter Parker: "Occupation: Freelance photographer, science teacher."[5]

J. Jonah Jameson: "Crusading publisher of the *Daily Bugle*."[6]

    Although they are not always portrayed as superheroes, comic narratives often feature reporters, publishers, and editors in prominent enough to be classified in the *DC Comics* and *Marvel Comics Encyclopedias*. Descriptions for Lois Lane, Vicky Vale, Ben Urich, and J. Jonah

Jameson tell of their persistence for "truth." Furthermore, Superman (Clark Kent) and Spider-Man (Peter Parker) serve dual roles as heroes and journalists, thus emphasizing the gallant position of this profession. Journalists fulfill integral roles in the superhero comic books and their film adaptations. Either as the heroes themselves or as extensions of their dedication to improve society, it is the reporters who work to identify, expose, and end local corruption. Created for comic books in earlier eras that heralded the journalists as "watchdogs for the people," dominant journalist archetypes in these stories reflect the idealistic, ethical, truth-seekers of an earlier time.[7] Indeed, even as late as the early 2000s, film adaptations of comic books preserved and perpetuated the positive stereotypes conveyed in the original works.[8]

Despite the celebration of journalism in comic books and their adaptations, public confidence in the profession has been steadily declining since the heyday of journalism in the 1970s. Gallup Poll results measuring public "confidence in institutions" demonstrates this shift over time. Participants were asked to respond to the question "How much confidence do you, yourself, have in each [institution]—a great deal, quite a lot, some or very little?"[9] At the all-time high in 1979, 59 percent of respondents reported "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the media.[10] Overall, this figure has declined significantly. Indeed, 2017 Gallup Poll results showed that 27 percent of those surveyed indicated that they had a "great deal," or "quite a lot" of confidence in newspapers and 24 percent in television news.[11] Ten other institutions ranked higher than newspapers in the 2017 survey, including the military, small business, police, and the medical system.[12] Only Congress, big business, and Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) received lower percentages of "a great deal" or "a quite a lot" of confidence from the public.[13]

A 2013 Pew Research survey found that people ranked journalists among the lowest occupation in terms of their positive contributions to society, with only 28 percent of participants

saying that journalists contribute "a lot" to society.[14] In comparison, 78 percent of respondents

stated that the military contributes "a lot."[15] Teachers, medical doctors, scientists, engineers,

clergy, and artists were all ranked as stronger contributors than journalists, with only business

executives and lawyers receiving lower numbers.[16] Of all occupations noted in the survey, public

perception of journalists had the steepest decline, dropping 10 percent from 2009, when 38

percent of participants indicated that journalists contributed "a lot."[17]

Considering that remakes continue to be produced, how do these adaptations of comic

books of the past negotiate changing constructions of the contemporary journalist? The constant

recycling of these immensely popular narratives provides a rich opportunity to explore shifting

constructions of journalism and the press. At the same time, as cultural products, these texts also

have the potential to positively influence public perceptions of journalists, especially in an era in

which confidence is low. Specifically, this study explores the roles of journalists and the press in

three eras:

1. The original comic books *Superman* (1938), *Batman* (1940), *Captain America* (1941),

Amazing Spider-Man (1963), *Daredevil* (1964), and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1984).

2. Initial film adaptations of the comic books made from 1978 through 2003 (drawing

from previous research by the author).

3. Contemporary film and television remakes of the adaptations produced from 2006

through 2015.

Literature Review

Journalism in the Digital Age

Journalism's digital transformation over the last few decades may help explain recent

issues with credibility, particularly the increasingly vague definition of what constitutes

journalism and who is a journalist. The ease of online publication, through social media,

blogging, personal websites, and other channels, has significantly expanded participatory and

citizen journalism as alternatives to recognized professional media outlets. Conflicting research

demonstrates that the lines are blurring between traditional and citizen journalism. A survey of

citizen journalists suggested that they may see themselves in roles akin to professionals.[18] Other

research confirms that at least some people continue to perceive traditional journalists as more

credible than citizen journalists.[19] However, in an experiment measuring source credibility, Jasun

D. Carr, Matthew Barnidge, Byung Gu Lee, and Stephanie Jean Tsang found that participants did

not regard a news program produced by professional journalists as more credible than a program

supposedly created by citizen journalists.[20] These perceptions have been linked to personal

preference for traditional or citizen news. People who regularly consume citizen journalism

generally hold more positive attitudes toward citizen journalism.[21] That said, the same survey

indicated that general news consumption correlated with beliefs in professional journalism

values.[22]

Public perceptions have also been correlated with individual media habits. As

demonstrated by Thomas J. Johnson and Barbara K. Kaye, those active on Twitter and other

social media sites indicated greater confidence in government and news media after controlling

for political affiliation and other factors.[23] Fans of CNN, MSNBC, broadcast news, and

newspapers also yielded confidence in news media.[24] Conversely, dependency on blogs,

YouTube, and Fox News broadcasts resulted in lower levels of confidence in government and

news media.[25]

A news organization and/or journalist's online presence may also influence perceptions of

credibility. M. Rosie Jahng and Jeremy Littau found that journalists who are highly interactive on

social media (Twitter) are perceived as more credible than those with little or no social media

interactivity.[26] As Ulrika Olausson outlined, social media are redefining the journalist role,

combining a contemporary around-the-clock presence, yet continuing to reinforce some

traditional characteristics like the "watchdog role."[27] These recent studies all demonstrate the

shifting definition of journalists and journalism as news has moved largely online.

Representations of Journalists and the Press

Representations of journalists, the press, and media as a whole have also shifted. This

profession has been extensively depicted in books, films, television, and other products, as

exemplified in The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) Database, run by the

Norman Lear Center, which contains over 87,700 entries (see http://www.ijpc.org/).[28] Depictions

of journalists and other media roles have also been heavily studied.[29] While they focus on

different eras, aspects, and roles within the media, these studies demonstrate that reporter

archetypes have varied, encompassing positive ones (e.g., "the crime-buster"), as well as negative

portrayals ("the journalist as hounds or scoundrel") and that these representations have generally

become more cynical in recent years.

Scholars have also showcased the role of journalists specifically in comic books and their

adaptations. Matthew C. Ehrlich conducted an extensive study on Superman as a journalist

across time and media products, including comic books, radio serials, animated and live-action

programs, and film adaptations.[30] Ehrlich highlighted how Superman as Clark Kent deceives the

public with his secret identity and its impact on his journalistic endeavors.[31] He shows how

Superman's role and persona as Clark Kent has varied over the years, from the hard-hitting

reporter of the radio series, to Christopher Reeve playing Kent as a more humanized "bumbling

type." Moreover, appearances of journalist (and Superman's romantic partner) Lois Lane have

furthered depictions of female journalists, with Lane often shown as a skilled reporter and

feminist.[32] While portrayals of individual journalists have been generally positive, *Superman*

narratives have critiqued news media, pointing out potential problems with unscrupulous

publishers who favor profit over accuracy.[33]

Paulette Kilmer examined the journalist-as-superhero role in the *Superman*, *Spider-Man,*

and *The Fox* comic storylines, suggesting that superhero qualities mirror the ideal characteristics

of the investigative reporter.[34] Bill Knight discussed the creative decisions to write superheroes

as journalists.[35] Interviews from writers and comics creators propose three explanations for the

staple role of the superhero journalist: access to crime scenes and drama, convenient flexibility,

and the mark of the underdog hero—all which combine to make "the reporter" an ideal alter-

ego.[36] Richard J. Stevens studied the portrayal of war correspondents in Marvel Comics' *Civil*

War: Front Line comic book series, finding that the fictional war correspondents in a time of

unrest both reinforce and break archetypes of the journalist character.[37] Furthermore, as individual

journalists, these characters serve as America's social conscience.[38]

The film adaptations of comic books are addressed peripherally in the rich history of

journalists in popular culture in *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular*

Culture by Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman.[39] Katherine A. Beck Foss examined portrayals

in 15 comic book films from 1978 through 2003, concluding that journalists often played

significant roles that exemplified older archetypes of the crime-buster, crusader of "truth," and

the "damsel in distress," paired with the more negative archetype of the hounding journalist

and a faceless press.[40] More research is needed to explicate this role. The current study builds

on this research as a bridge from the original comic books to the more recent cinematic remakes.

Why Study Comic Books and Their Adaptations?

Since superhero comic books first emerged in the late 1930s, this genre has been widely popular. These storylines were adapted for the screen relatively soon. For example, the comic book *Superman* began in 1938. By the 1950s, a radio series, two films, and a television program around the character already existed.[41] To date, Superman has been featured in four films with Christopher Reeve, a 1990s animated series, the *Lois & Clark* TV show, and 10 seasons of the teen drama *Smallville* in the 2000s, along with *Superman Returns* (2006), *Man of Steel* (2013), and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Likewise, the story of Batman, debuting in 1941, has been produced as numerous animated and live-action TV series, as well as films and video games. New issues of these old comic book stories are still being released.

Comic book film adaptations have massive appeal, as demonstrated by their grossing power. Four of the 10 highest grossing films of all time are comic book superhero movies: *The Avengers* (2012), *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012).[42] These films also do well internationally, with five comic book films in the top 25 grossing films internationally of all time, earning more than one billion dollars: *The Avengers* (2012), *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Iron Man 3* (2012), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016).[43] Not surprisingly then, these stories continue to be produced. In 2006, a remake of the *Batman* films was released as *Batman Begins*. As opposed to sequels, which continue storylines, and sometimes actors, this film starred a new Batman, Alfred, Commissioner Gordon, and other characters, and showed the evolution of Bruce Wayne into Batman. This film marked the beginning of a new wave of these film adaptations. Remakes of other film adaptations followed, including updated versions of *Captain America*, *Spider-Man*, *Superman* (as *Man of Steel*), and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. In addition, the streaming

enterprise Netflix released the first season of the *Daredevil* remake in 2015. Other comic book

films outside of this study were also remade, including *X-Men*, *The Phantom*, *The Flash*, and

Supergirl. Overall, then, longevity, immense domestic and international appeal, constant cultural

recycling, and journalist characters suggest that this genre deserves further study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the social construction of reality theory—the notion that our world

is shaped by institutions that include the mass media.[44] Media representations convey ideologies

and help to shape the meaningful world, introducing and shaping social roles, including public

perceptions of different facets of society.[45] Media producers, then, have profound impact. As

film scholar Graeme Turner said, "To gain control of the representational agenda for the nation

is to gain considerable power over individuals' view of themselves and each other."[46] This is

particularly important with perceptions of journalists and the press/media, which was established

in Colonial America to serve a specific role in maintaining democracy: informing the public

in a "watchdog" role that can keep check on the government and big business and serving as

communication liaison between the people and the government.[47] Without public trust in

journalists and media, it would be difficult, if not impossible to fulfill these functions.

Representations help influence press credibility.

Furthermore, cultivation theory highlights the implications of viewing comic book films.

Developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross to explain high television viewers' exaggerated

fear of crime, this theory has been applied for correlations between media consumption and public

confidence.[48] For example, George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli

found that in the 1970s, when physicians were portrayed as omnipotent heroes who almost never

lost a patient, high viewers held even higher regard for doctors and the medical profession than

those who watched little television.[49] As representations of doctors shifted over the ensuing

decades, public perception also changed—with a correlation between television viewing and

negative attitudes toward physicians.[50] Here, it is assumed that a cultivation effect also exists

between popular culture depictions of journalism and perception. Therefore, the introduction of

positive journalist portrayals and the press could help salvage low public confidence.

Method

The following research questions guided the study:

1) What is the role of journalists and the press in the original superhero comic books?

2) What is the role of journalists and the press in contemporary comic book film
   adaptations?

3) How do these representations and narrative functions compare to the same stories in
   earlier films and in the comic books?

Methodology

A textual analysis was conducted of comic books and their film adaptations, exploring

the fictional representations of journalists and the press. Archetypes from secondary literature

were used to guide this analysis. In their book *Heroes and Scoundrels,* Ehrlich and Saltzman also

included extensive examples and discussion of the most popular character types (i.e., herds of

"anonymous reporters," villainized "columnists and critics," "cub reporters," the old stereotype of

the female journalist as the "sob sister," and other categories that further clarified the analysis.[51]

With this approach, it is assumed that ideologies manifested in popular culture are derived from

social, political, and economic contexts. At the same time, it is also understood that media

products can be agents of change, challenging dominant ideologies with counter messages.[52]

The Sample

Three groups of texts were explored. To better understand the role of journalists and the press in the creation of the original storylines, first the comic books introducing and featuring these characters were analyzed[53]; these included *Superman* #1 (1938), *Batman* #1 (1940), *Captain America* #1 (1941), *Amazing Spider-Man* (1963), and *Daredevil* #1 (1964).

The second group consisted of earlier research conducted on the framing of journalists and the press in comic book films,[54] examining 15 comic book film adaptations from 1978 through 2003: *Superman* (1978), *Flash Gordon* (1980), *Supergirl* (1984), *Batman* (1989), *The Punisher* (1989), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), *Captain America* (1991), *The Shadow* (1994), *Barb Wire* (1996), *The Phantom* (1996), *Blade* (1998), *X-Men* (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), *Daredevil* (2003), and *Hulk* (2003).

The third text group consisted of eight remade comic book film/television adaptations produced from 2006-2015 that were examined: *Batman Begins* (2006), *Dark Knight* (2008), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014), and the first season of the Netflix series *Daredevil* (2015).[55] All of these texts were remakes of film adaptations that appeared in the earlier time period and were therefore included so that comparative analysis could provide insight into change over time. While the *Daredevil* (2015) program is a television series, this text offered an updated version of the 2003 film. All of these stories featured prominent journalist/press roles in their original films. Sequels for the *Batman* and *Spider-Man* storylines were also included to mirror storylines/villains in the original comic books and film adaptations.[56] Comic book stories that did not feature journalists or the press in

their earlier film adaptations were not included (i.e., *Supergirl*).

Conducting the Study

Using established archetypes of journalists and the press/media as guides, the comic

books and films were examined for clues of journalist characteristics (i.e., working for an

identified editor, interviewing people, printing a story or appearing on camera, or other

indications of working for a media organization or as an independent journalist, including the

photographer). All press/media evidence was also analyzed, including comic frames and

film/televisual shots of newspaper headlines, text and audio from radios, television broadcasts,

blogs, and other news forms. Character interactions and relationships, clothing, dialogue, word

choices, and other aspects of fictional media were also considered. And, of course, the overall

narratives and mise-en-scène were examined to ascertain representations of journalists and the

press/media.

Findings

Earlier research conducted on 15 comic book film adaptations from 1978 through 2003

suggested that journalists and the press played significant roles in seven of the films studied:

Superman (1978), *Batman* (1989), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), *Captain America*

(1991), *The Phantom* (1996), *Spider-Man* (2002), and *Daredevil* (2003).[57] In the years following,

all of these films, except *The Phantom*, were remade into contemporary films or television series.

The current research studied the original comic books from which these characters and story arcs

emerged, as well as the contemporary adaptations: *Batman Begins* (2006), *Dark Knight* (2008),

Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *The Amazing*

Spider-Man 2 (2014), *Man of Steel* (2013), *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014), and the first

season of the Netflix series *Daredevil* (2015). Findings suggest that while the first wave of films

largely mirror the comic books, amplifying the journalist role, this aspect nearly disappears from

the contemporary remakes, leaving only faceless media that occasionally help the villain.

Journalists and the Press in Comic Books

Even in the first issue of these comic books, journalists play significant roles in the

narrative as crusaders and damsels in distress. The duality of the superhero/reporter is

immediately introduced in *Superman* (1938). By page four of the first issue, Superman (as his

alter-ego Clark Kent) has joined the *Daily Bugle* as a reporter. Although in his alter persona he is

described as a "weakling," his position allows him to investigate crime and protect his superhero

identity. Likewise, in *Amazing Spider-Man* (1963), Spider-Man/Peter Parker serves as both a

crime-buster and photographer, selling photos of Spider-Man (himself) to the *Daily Bugle* in

order to counter publisher J. Jonah Jameson's declaration that Spider-Man is a public "menace."

While the roles of both Superman/Clark Kent and Spider-Man/Peter Parker are relatively

underdeveloped as journalists in these early issues, the establishment of these roles sets the

foundation for the integral role of the press in the superhero narratives.

The comics also contain press characters outside of the heroes themselves who would

later prove to be crusaders. In *Superman*, reporter Lois Lane works alongside Clark Kent and

mentions her frustrations of "scribbling out 'sob stories' all day long." Here, Lois represents the

journalist as a damsel in distress, a reporter who needs rescuing after she is kidnapped by a group

of thugs. Superman comes to her aid, freeing her from the mob. While this plot introduces their

romantic connection, it also reinforces her female vulnerability and her role as a "sob sister."

That said, Lois would later become a true crusading journalist. The *DC Comics Encyclopedia*

describes her as a "superb investigative journalist."[58]

Media executive characters also appear in these first issues. Perry White for the *Daily Star* (later the *Daily Planet*) orders cub reporter Clark Kent to get the scoop on Superman, yet reflecting the gender bias of the era, dismisses Lois Lane when she approaches him about Superman. Publisher J. Jonah Jameson (from *Amazing Spider-Man*, 1963) appears in the first issue as an aggressive publishing leader, determined to brand Spider-Man as a "menace." Even after the superhero saves Jameson's son, he continues to print editorials demanding Spider-Man's arrest. Jameson is fiercely perseverant and only mellows a bit on his smear campaign once Peter Parker starts contributing positive images of Spider-Man, countering Jameson's negative perceptions of him. Jameson perpetuates many stereotypes of a typical gruff and hardened editor.

On the other hand, "the press" represents a faceless, sometimes ominous, narrative informant and villain's tool. Newspaper headlines are used to set the stage and pass the time. Early in the first issue of *Captain America* (1941), one frame establishes the superhero's popularity with newspaper headlines reading "Captain America Nabs Spy," "Captain America Prevents Dam Explosion," "Captain America Nation's No. 1 Spy Buster," and more tales of his success. Woven through the first issue, headlines like these inform the general public (and readers) of Captain America's fame and other news. Likewise, in *Daredevil* (1964), newspaper headlines tell of the sudden boxing victories of the father of Matt Murdock (who would later become the superhero Daredevil, a blind lawyer and vigilante). Murdock's father's newfound success results in newspaper coverage of an upcoming fight. Here, this information is conveyed through newspaper headlines, as opposed to dialogue or other narrative devices.

This faceless press also serves as a villain's tool, in which the primary antagonists use media channels to their advantages. In *Captain America* (1941), Nazi mastermind Red Skull manipulates radio broadcasts to frighten civilians with his evil plans and lure Steve

Rogers/Captain America. Through the radio, Captain America and his sidekick, Bucky Barnes,

hear, "Attention! All of you! I want Captain America and the young brat brought to

headquarters—alive! Heh heh." They rush to the headquarters, struggle with Red Skull, and

ultimately save the day.

Similarly, in *Batman* #1 (1940), the press is used as a villain's tool. Batman's nemesis, the

Joker, takes over local radio, foretelling of the murders he will cause. In a comic frame in the first

issue of *Batman*, an older couple is shown listening to the radio, with these words coming from it:

"Tonight. At precisely twelve o'clock midnight, I will kill Henry Claridge and steal the Claridge

diamond! Do not try to stop me! The **Joker** has spoken!" Police soon discover that Claridge (a

wealthy man in Gotham City) is dead and the diamond is missing. This pattern continues

throughout the Joker storyline in this *Batman* issue. With both narratives, the villains easily

overtake local media—in fact, the struggle is never depicted, and their public taunts continue to

be broadcasted until the villains themselves are thwarted by Captain America and Batman.

The first issue of these comic books clearly establishes the press/media as an important

presence in their fictional worlds. Lois Lane would eventually become a crusader of "truth." Perry

White and J. Jonah Jameson serve as powerful editors, and later newspaper owners. Spider-Man

continues as a photographer for the *Daily Bugle*. It is noteworthy that even texts without an

immediate journalist character would eventually write one in, with Vicky Vale in *Batman* and

Ben Urich in *Daredevil*. The newspapers are even linked in this comic world, as Peter

Parker/Spider-Man later works for Urich's newspaper*, Frontline*. Clearly by the time of the film

adaptations, journalists and the press have secure roles in these comic book narratives.

The Intermediate Period: Comic Book Film Adaptations (1978-2003)

Many of the themes identified in the original comic books were carried over in the

cinematic representations—with the journalist roles amplified in the first wave of comic book

film adaptations (1978-2003). Many of the archetypes persist, with the crime-buster, crusading

journalist, gruff editor, and press as a villain's tool. Clark Kent and Peter Parker continue to work

for newspapers in roles that parallel their crime-busting superhero alter-egos. Lois Lane, Vicky

Vale, and April O'Neil (who first becomes a reporter in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle*

animated television series) exemplify both crusading reporters and damsels in distress. As with

the later issues of the *Daredevil* comic book, in the 2003 film, reporter Ben Urich seeks "truth"

and justice for the people of Hell's Kitchen, while protecting the identity of Daredevil, the

benevolent vigilante. In the *Captain America* (1990) film, Sam Kolawetz, a crusading journalist,

is added to the narrative. Gritty J. Jonah Jameson, in the *Spider-Man* (2002) movie, publicly

questions Spider-Man's intent through his newspaper, *The Daily Bugle*. The villains'

manipulation is also carried out on-screen in the *Batman* (1989) film, with the Joker threatening

Gotham City through local television news.

Remaking the Comic Book Film Adaptations (2006-2015)

Seven contemporary films and one television series were studied for the roles of

journalists and media. Of these visual portrayals, journalists only play a significant role in the

Netflix series *Daredevil* (2015). One notable difference in these remakes is the recasting of some

notable characters with people of color. Vondie Curtis-Hall plays journalist Ben Urich in the TV

series *Daredevil* (2015). Laurence Fishburne is Perry White in the Superman film *Man of Steel*

(2013). Whoopi Goldberg briefly appears as an angry editor in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*

(2014). At the same time, Fishburne and Goldberg have little screen time and we do not see

increased diversity in the superhero characters.

In the contemporary film adaptations, overall, journalists do not hold the same prominent

roles of the earlier texts. For example, the reporter characters Vicky Vale and Sam Kolawetz (from the *Captain America* film) have been omitted. Editor Perry White barely appears in *Man of Steel* (2013) and J. Jonah Jameson is reduced to just a name in an email in *Amazing Spider-Man 2*. Even the corrupt editor in the television series *Daredevil* (2015) hardly rates a credit, as he only appears for a few moments on-screen, as does Goldberg's editor character in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014). Characters who are strong, crusading journalists in the earlier narratives now have their journalist roles diminished. Even the superhero journalists are scarcely involved with media, as Clark Kent/Superman does not become a reporter until the final moments of *Man of Steel* (2013) and Peter Parker/Spider-Man only spends a few minutes taking photographs of himself, never entering an office. And yet, as discussed below, the faceless press and villain's tool persist in these film remakes. Three themes emerged from the findings: "No Longer the Journalist," "The Faceless Media," and "Still the Villain's Tool."

No Longer the Journalist

In contrast to the prominent roles of journalists in the original comic books and initial film adaptations, key journalist characters are eliminated from the narratives. Reporter Ben Urich in *Daredevil* (2015) is the only character who remains dedicated to journalism throughout the television series. As with his original comic book character and the *Daredevil* (2003) film, Urich is a lone reporter on a mission—first to identify the real identity of the Daredevil and then to uncover the crime organization run by Wilson Fisk/Kingpin. Urich attempts to use his newspaper to inform the public and works with Daredevil and the other protagonists to build a case against Fisk.

However, Urich's 2015 character differs from the 2003 version. As opposed to the comic book and first film, the Ben Urich of the TV series is not only African American, but also appears

to be the only crusading journalist in the program, as if left over from an earlier era; Urich's editor

calls him a "dinosaur." Fisk/Kingpin tells Urich, "I thought your days of being relevant were

past." Even after Urich's corrupt editor fires him for attempting a story revealing Kingpin's

activities, Urich does not stop trying to inform the public. Urich's dying wife advises him to post

his story on the Internet, saying, "The world needs Ben Urich to tell the truth, any way he can."

With this encouragement, he sits down to write. It is this dedication that gets him killed.

Fisk/Kingpin violently strangles Urich as punishment for interviewing his mother and planning to

go viral with the truth about his past. Contrary to earlier media texts in which the fictional

journalists triumph by serving as watchdogs, Urich never gets the opportunity. Instead, he, as the

lone crusader, is easily eliminated.

   The reporters who remain, namely Lois Lane and April O'Neil, quickly abandon their

journalistic quests. The first *Superman* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* present these characters

as crusaders—hard-hitting seekers of "truth." They are also framed as damsels in distress as they

repeatedly risk their lives for the story and therefore need rescuing by Superman and the Ninja

Turtles. The contemporary films introduce these women as aspiring journalists, but quickly shift

away from these roles. In *Man of Steel* (2013), Lois Lane arrives in the Canadian Arctic in pursuit

of a story about a discovery in the ice. Immediately, she undermines her credibility, asking one of

the first people she encounters, "What if I need to tinkle?" This remark is followed by Lois

venturing into the dark with her camera in search of a story. Lois is attacked and must be rescued

by Superman. When Lois returns to the newsroom, Editor Perry White refuses to run her article,

so Lois has her story published on a blog instead. After she is reprimanded by White, Lois

abandons all journalistic ambitions and spends the remainder of the film needing repeated

rescuing by Superman. Even during an intensely destructive battle between Superman and the

film's villain, Kryptonian General Zod, Lois does not pick up a camera.

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (2014) mirrors this story arc, beginning with April O'Neil complaining about her soft story assignments to her videographer, Vern. He responds, "Look, O'Neil, I get it. You want to be a serious journalist. I see you sniffing around the newsroom for the big stories." Vern's comment prompts April to follow a lead on a story at the "docks." Alone at night, April uses her phone to film the local gang, the Foot Clan, fighting a mysterious martial arts group. After the incident, April boasts to her roommate about the footage, "Now I have my story. There's no more froth and foam for me." Yet nothing comes of April's success. The Turtles delete her video and ultimately April is fired from her large flourishing news organization. Even when she uncovers a massive conspiracy involving the wealthiest person in the city, April does not plead for her reporter job back or publish the story through alternative media sites. In fact, the film ends with the following exchange among April and the Turtles:

> **Leonardo:** We figured we owed you a thanks for keeping our secret.
>
> **Raphael:** You had a lot to gain from telling people about us, but you had our backs.
>
> **April:** Yeah, 'cause that's what family's for, Raph.

In other words, April does not appear concerned about her journalism career and the narrative never returns to the newsroom.

The Faceless Media

Without the prominent journalist characters, the press still has a presence, but it is a faceless, nameless media enterprise, used primarily to signify time passing and update the audience. In *Man of Steel* (2013), a "Breaking News" segment of a generic broadcasting station tells of possible alien activity, foreshadowing the arrival of General Zod and his crew. *Batman Begins* (2006) includes a close-up of a generic newspaper headline that reads "Masked Vigilante

Exposes Drug Ring" with a photo of the drug lord strapped to a light. *Amazing Spider-Man* and

Amazing Spider-Man 2 both include period generic news broadcasts on Spider-Man and crime in

the city, many of which do not even show the reporters, just people watching television. These

films also use old newspaper clippings to inform Peter Parker (and the audience) of his parents'

true identities. A brief shot of newspaper headline indicates the hero's travel plans in *Captain*

America (2011). Finally, numerous generic news broadcasts inform reporter Ben Urich, Matt

Murdock/Daredevil, and their friends, of the latest plans of supervillain Winston Fisk (the

Kingpin).

Tracing back to the comic books, this narrative device is a quick means to keep the

audience informed of the shifting plot. It also occasionally conveys public perception of the

superheroes themselves, framing Spider-Man, Daredevil, and other heroes. In this world, the

media seem to be omnipresent, yet insignificant in that news stories do not reveal superhero

identities, help to catch the criminals, or dramatically impact the major characters or storylines.

Media as the Villain's Tool

Although the crusading journalist scarcely appears, contemporary adaptations of the comic

books do preserve the press (or the updated term, media) as a tool for the villain. As seen with

Red Skull in the 1941 *Captain America* comic book, and the Joker in the 1940 *Batman* comic

book and 1989 film, in *Dark Knight* (2008), the Joker is once again easily able to control the

media. Throughout *Dark Knight*, the Joker holds various reporters hostage as they read his

messages on camera. In one scene, a newscaster is forced to read the Joker's scheming words

from a script, threatening the city. The message ends with: "If you don't want to be in the game,

get out now *["Now," echoes the Joker],* but the bridge and tunnel crowd are sure in for a surprise.

Ha-ha. Ha-ha." These means enable the Joker to communicate with Batman and Commissioner

Gordon, along with the audience, painting the Joker as even more of a supervillain because of his public threats and ability to repeatedly take over the media.

In *Daredevil* (2015), Fisk/Kingpin also manipulates the media to his advantage, paying off local news organizations (including Urich's newspaper). As opposed to threatening the public, however, Fisk uses media to boost his public image, masking his international drug business. Since he easily controls the media and murders the only journalist investigating his past, Fisk's media manipulation makes him appear even more powerful and more sinister.

Discussion

Demise of the Comic Book Journalist

The initial film adaptations continued and expanded the role of the journalist in the original comic books, exalting them as important as the superheroes themselves (or as an extension of the heroism of Superman and Spider-Man). However, this prominent role nearly disappears in the contemporary remakes, as the reporter and editor characters are written out, the narratives diminish the "journalist" part of remaining characters, or the sole crusading reporter dies. Considering that other elements strongly reflect the original stories, with secondary characters, villains, other occupations, and superpowers preserved, why are the journalists stripped away? Just as important, why is the faceless press in the originals reshaped as faceless media corporations?

One could argue that changing media technology makes the updated journalism role difficult. For example, the era of smartphones means that uncovering the identity of the superhero or the background of a rising supervillain would take only seconds, eliminating the need for the villain's exposition during the film's climax. That said, recycling of culture means negotiation

with cultural context, with technology, clothing, gadgets, occupations, and plot devices. The

Joker's radio in the comic book becomes a TV news broadcast in *Dark Knight*. April O'Neil's

clunky VHS camcorder in the 1990s film is replaced by a smartphone in the 2014 version. The

current blind vigilante Daredevil is greatly aided by technological devices not possible in the

1960s. Technology alone does not explain the loss of the journalist. Instead, inserting a

contemporary archetype, like a drone or other "nonhuman journalist" might be a more appropriate

or culturally relevant depiction.[59]

A second explanation is that journalists have lost their public credibility. Would

contemporary audiences question the duality of the superhero/reporter role? No longer does

Superman's search for "Truth, justice, and the American way" still apply when he becomes

reporter Clark Kent. Similarly, in both the comic book *Amazing Spider-Man* (1963) and the 2002

film, we trust that editor J. Jonah Jameson will eventually side with Spider-Man, that his gruff

exterior and skepticism is driven by Jameson's adherence to his "watchdog" role. By deleting

Jameson from the narrative, the *Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) removes this opportunity for his

redemption. In other words, a faceless media cannot and will not be redeemed. Yet, the

explanations for the journalist role in the first place (access to crime scenes and drama,

convenient flexibility, and the mark of the underdog hero) still hold true.[60] And if updating is the

reason for the demise, another route would be to reconfigure the reporter roles as citizen

journalists, as Ben Urich almost does with a blog before he is murdered.

A third discussion point is the preservation of the gendered damsel in distress role. The

contemporary Lois Lane and April O'Neil's need for rescue seems almost comical after Third

Wave Feminism helped give us *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* and other

programs.[61] In short, it seems outdated to continue presenting female journalists as needing to be

rescued and quickly forgetting the story; it is easier to eliminate their crusader role. Similarly, the

lack of diversity in these contemporary remakes is not reflective of the era and is inaccurate in the

history of journalist portrayals.[62] While we see more characters played by people of color, most

have minimal screen-time. The journalist of color featured in a narrative, Ben Urich, is murdered

before the completion of the first season. If April O'Neil can get a smartphone, surely we can

expand who can play heroes, victims, villains, and journalists.

We should also consider critical and audience reception. As with any genre, these films

have not been universally well-received. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (2014) was panned by

critics. For example, Bruce Ingram of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, called the film a "basically

brainless but intermittently adrenalizing, mostly just-for-kids reboot."[63] Likewise, *New York Daily

News* film critic Joe Neumaier wrote, "The cloddish, confusing action scenes make no sense."[64]

Fan reviews, on the other hand, ranged from "This movie is horrible" to "Great movie, loved the

animation of the turtles and excellent storyline."[65] Furthermore, why critics and fans like or

dislike a film franchise is unclear. Audiences have applauded producers of the contemporary

Batman series for its dark approach and morally ambiguous hero in a post 9/11 era. And yet, *Man

of Steel* and *The Amazing Spider-Man* were criticized for adopting a cynical tone. While these

critic and fan reviews do not explicitly mourn the loss of the superhero-as-journalist, it may be

inferred that the perceived lack of "heart" may be linked to the missing media alter-egos of

Superman and Spider-Man.

We, as an audience, may also be longing for the women of these films to be the feminist,

strong, and aggressive reporters and photographers of earlier narratives. Where is the jumpsuit-

clad eager-beaver April O'Neil, who never gives up in pursuit of a story, as depicted in the 1990s

cartoon and film series? Why does Amy Adams's Lois Lane in *Man of Steel* quickly abandon her

journalistic inclinations to get the "truth?" Here, the absence of the empowered female journalists is felt as much as their superhero counterparts. Additionally, we need to realize that fans may not care if cinematic depictions diverge from the original comic books. As Liam Burke pointed out in his audience study of two comic book films, most people who watch comic book film adaptations do not identify as fans of the original stories.[66] Regardless of audience opinions, these films have still done well and continue to do well at the box office, thus disseminating their storylines of the faceless media, without the individual crusader.

Limitations and Further Research

Obviously this research only explores part of the changing ideologies and attitudes toward journalism. It is acknowledged here that narratives somewhat vary in their individual media channels, from comic books to films, to television, and that these are products of different time periods. Moreover, while cultivation research suggests that these popular culture products shape public perception of journalists and the media, it is unclear the extent to which audiences recognize changing messages in the comic book adaptations. Further study could explore audience reception of these texts, particularly focusing on shifting journalist representations.

Implications and Conclusion

Why does the demise of the comic book journalist matter—that editors and reporter characters were written out, had their roles minimalized, or faced a tragic ending before the public could be informed? Why is there almost no online presence or citizen journalism? Where are all the journalists? Superhero characters signify their origins, cultural moments from decades ago that still resonate today. It is this preservation that perpetuates longevity, not dramatic

transformation or updating. More importantly, by removing the crime-buster and crusader, the

duality of the superhero/reporter underdog is stripped away. Without getting to play Clark Kent

the reporter, Superman is only Superman in *Man of Steel* (2013), missing his vulnerable "human"

side. Likewise, the relationship between Peter Parker/Spider-Man and publisher Jameson in both

the comic book and 2002 *Spider-Man* film keeps Peter in a fragile position: revealing his true

identity to Jameson could save Spider-Man's reputation, but puts Parker (and his income) at

risk—a subplot lost when Peter never interacts with Jameson on camera in *Amazing Spider-Man 2*

(2014).

   Even more important than preservation, however, is the missed opportunity to positively

portray journalists, as crusaders, crime-busters, and public watchdogs. As indicated by other

cultivation studies, negative representations will only continue to hinder credibility with the

public, thus undermining the democratic function of the press. With so many of these adaptations

(and more to come), these popular media texts have the potential to change public opinion and

help favorably redefine journalists, demonstrating their significant roles in shaping society.

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