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MATTHEW EHRLICH, AUTHOR OF 'JOURNALISM IN THE MOVIES'

6/18/2012

Journalism will be getting dramatic treatment starting on June 24 with the premiere of HBO's "The Newsroom," the latest creation of "West Wing" producer/writer Aaron Sorkin. Will viewers like what they see in the portrayal of journalists and the workings of the news media? Journalism professor and former radio reporter Matthew Ehrlich thought that movies about journalism mostly undermined the press. Then he took a critical look to write "Journalism in the Movies." Ehrlich discussed the new series and the public's dramatic perceptions of journalism with **News Bureau social sciences editor Craig Chamberlain**.

IT'S EASY TO THINK THAT MOVIES AND OTHER POPULAR MEDIA HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE PUBLIC'S LOW REGARD FOR THE NEWS MEDIA. REPORTERS, AFTER ALL, ARE OFTEN PORTRAYED AS CYNICAL, SCANDAL-SEEKING AND WORSE. WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE MOVIES THAT CONTRADICTS THAT?



Well, think of a movie like "All the President's Men," which shows Woodward and Bernstein doggedly pursuing the Watergate story with the staunch support of their editor and newspaper. There you clearly have a more idealistic and even heroic portrayal. And it's not that unique or unusual – popular culture has regularly presented stories in which reporters may sometimes do things that we

wouldn't teach them to do in journalism school, but which nevertheless end happily with the public interest being served.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE COMMON THEMES OR STORYLINES IN FILM AND OTHER DRAMATIC PORTRAYALS OF JOURNALISM?

You routinely see journalists confronting pressures to build ratings or circulation, and either succumbing shamefully to those pressures or fighting the good fight against them. You see journalists having to choose between remaining detached and above it all, or else getting involved and taking a stand. You see "old pro" journalists telling young "cub" journalists how news should be done, for better or worse.

You see journalists both young and old being more successful in their professional lives than in their personal lives, and often becoming romantically entangled with their co-workers or forming family-like bonds with them. And, of course, you see journalists talking really, really fast.

The image that emerges is one of journalists being a sort of species apart, but also engaged in high-stakes, important work. Good journalism produced by a free press helps people and serves democracy; bad journalism hurts people and undermines democracy. Either way, the press matters and makes a difference.

BASED ON SORKIN'S PREVIOUS WORK, AND WHAT YOU'VE SEEN IN ADVANCE PUBLICITY, IS HE FOLLOWING IN THAT TRADITION WITH HIS NEW SERIES, OR WRITING A DIFFERENT SCRIPT? IS HE MORE CYNIC OR IDEALIST?

It sounds like he's very much following in that tradition. He seems to be drawing upon his earlier series "Sports Night" in depicting a high-stress television setting and "The West Wing" in showing a group of co-workers trying to maintain their ideals and do the right thing.

Sorkin has said that he thinks that today's news is too concerned with entertainment as opposed to substance and that it's too afraid to call a lie a lie. Those are not new concerns in popular culture's treatments of the press; they extend back at least to the play "The Front Page" and the so-called "jazz journalism" of the 1920s.

It looks as though in "The Newsroom" we'll see journalists trying to fight for substance and truth in the face of significant pressures to do otherwise. That's about as idealistic as you can get, which is not to say that it's completely naive or unrealistic.

WHAT DO WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JOURNALISM THAT WE DON'T USUALLY SEE IN MOVIES OR TELEVISION?

I suspect that it's not that much different from Hollywood's treatments of doctors or lawyers or teachers – real-life journalists do not ordinarily engage in the thrilling and appalling things you see them do in popular culture. More often, they're just going

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about their day-to-day business and doing their jobs the best way they know how. Still, it can be inspirational to see fictional journalists (many based on real-life models) heroically serving the causes of truth and justice, just as it can be instructional to see them as cynics and scandal-seekers who eventually get their comeuppance. At the very least, it can be a whole lot of fun.

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