

Why the tired trope of the sexualized female journalist persists in movies such as 'Richard Jewell'

By [Deanna Pan](#) Globe Staff, Updated December 12, 2019, 2:44 p.m.



The portrayal of reporter Kathy Scruggs in director Clint Eastwood's "Richard Jewell" has drawn widespread condemnation. DEREK WHITE/GETTY

Hollywood loves female journalists as long as they are sleeping with someone.

On television and in movies, they are often portrayed as ruthlessly ambitious or wildly incompetent, trading sex for scoops. In the Netflix series "House of Cards," fictional political reporter Zoe Barnes agrees to an affair with Congressman Frank Underwood as

a means of furthering both of their careers, while a newspaperwoman in the 1981 drama "Absence of Malice" behaves so unethically that her decision to have sex with the subject of her investigation is hardly her gravest journalistic sin.

The latest iteration of this tired trope appears in Clint Eastwood's new film, "Richard Jewell," in theaters Friday, which is based on the true story of the 1996 bombing at Centennial Olympic Park in Atlanta. Jewell, the security guard who discovered the bomb, was lauded as a hero before the FBI and the media wrongly accused him of being the perpetrator. In the film, Olivia Wilde plays Kathy Scruggs, the real-life Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter who broke the news that the FBI had initially identified Jewell as its primary suspect. The film suggests that Scruggs had sex with an FBI agent in order to land her big story.

Jewell was eventually cleared of wrongdoing, and he sued several media outlets, including the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, for defamation. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution never settled, and its bombing coverage was [later vindicated](#) by the Georgia Court of Appeals, which found that the "articles in their entirety were substantially true at the time they were published."

There's [no evidence](#) that the real Scruggs, who died in 2001, ever slept with any of her sources. As such, her portrayal in "Richard Jewell" has triggered widespread condemnation from journalists, including her former employer, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, which is [demanding](#) that the filmmakers release a public statement acknowledging their use of dramatic license in their "defamatory" depiction of Scruggs. (In [response](#), Warner Bros., the movie's distributor, called the newspaper's claims "baseless.")

"It's so crass and base that it's just offensive," said Kelly McBride, the senior vice president at the nonprofit Poynter Institute in Florida, regarding Scruggs' portrayal. Before she joined Poynter, where she teaches media ethics to journalists from across the country, McBride worked as a local newspaper reporter for 15 years.

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“I have known of one journalist who slept with her sources. One. Out of thousands,” she said. “It’s so rare, it’s nonexistent.”

And yet this lazy cliché persists. Even when they are depicted as protagonists, woman reporters in pop culture routinely cross ethical boundaries with sources. In the the movie “Trainwreck,” comedian Amy Schumer plays a writer who starts dating the man she’s supposed to be profiling for a magazine. As an undercover journalist in “Never Been Kissed,” Drew Barrymore’s character abandons an investigative feature about a local high school for the teacher she falls in love with while posing as student. In the HBO miniseries “Sharp Objects,” based on the novel of the same name by Gillian Flynn, Amy Adams stars as a deeply troubled reporter covering a series of child murders in her hometown, where she not only hooks up with the case’s lead detective, but the 18-year-old boy at the center of the police investigation.

It wasn’t always this bad, according to Matthew Ehrlich, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who studies journalism in popular culture. In earlier films, such as the 1936 romantic comedy “Mr. Deeds Goes to Town,” female journalists were often portrayed as having to choose between their careers and their love lives.

“Female journalists have been depicted from the very beginning in popular culture ... as being very aggressive, being very talented, being as good if not better than their male counterparts,” Ehrlich said. “Quite frequently you would see them giving up their jobs willingly for romances in movies.”

According to Ehrlich, the stereotype of the sexualized female journalist gained traction in the 1970s, with the movie “Network,” in which Faye Dunaway plays a corrupt TV executive who orgasms while discussing ratings. The trope, he said, reflects a broader sexist stereotype of women in the professional world — namely, that for a woman to achieve any kind of power or prestige, she must rely on something other than her own hard work and talent.

Male journalists, by contrast, are typically depicted as highly flawed but heroic characters whose ethical missteps and personal foibles are forgiven in their pursuit for the truth, Ehrlich said. Clint Eastwood starred in such a role 20 years ago in the movie “True Crime,” playing a womanizing, alcoholic newspaper reporter who stops an innocent man’s execution and becomes a Pulitzer contender.

“Sometimes they do sleep with their sources ... or they have romantic entanglements with their sources,” Ehrlich said. “But you don’t see the male characters’ sexuality portrayed in quite so stereotypical and negative a way.”

Elisa Lees Muñoz, executive director of the International Women’s Media Foundation, said the ubiquity of these sexist and sexualized stereotypes about women in media has real consequences for female reporters, who regularly face gender-based harassment and abuse while doing their jobs.

In a [2018 IWMF survey](#) of nearly 600 women media workers around the world, almost two-thirds of respondents said they had been harassed or threatened online, while more than half said they had been threatened or harassed in person. More than a quarter indicated that they had been physically attacked.

“Female journalists fight this kind of perception around the world all the time,” Lees Muñoz said. “It is one of the things that is driving women journalists out of the profession.”

Bethany Barnes, 30, an investigative reporter at the Tampa Bay Times, knows how demeaning and harmful this perception is from personal experience. She recalled a skin-crawling incident at a Starbucks, where she was meeting with a source for a story. As she waited in line to make her coffee order, the source walked up behind her and whispered in her ear: “Miss Barnes, I’m Frank Underwood,” an allusion to the Netflix series. After their interview, he asked her out on a date. She declined.

“I think the general public sometimes thinks that that’s how it works,” Barnes said. “And it’s frustrating because the result is women in newsrooms are dealing with this all the time.”

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