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# Popular images of journalists have changed little over a century, says a new book

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. -- If you think reporters are scoundrels, you might point to popular culture. If you think they're heroes, you might do the same.

For more than a century, both depictions have been plentiful and constant, whether in films, books and comics; on TV and radio; or more recently in video games, says a book by two experts on the subject.

And those depictions, in all their variety, "are likely to shape people's impressions of the news media at least as much if not more than the actual press does," according to Matthew Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, in "Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture," published in April.

After all, the authors write, few people ever visit a newsroom or any place where journalists work, and research has shown that popular culture influences public perceptions of various professions, whether it's doctors, lawyers, cops or reporters. So depictions of journalism in everything from "Superman" to "House of Cards" likely influence our views of the news business.

The subject is not a new one for either author. Ehrlich is a University of Illinois journalism professor and previously wrote "Journalism in the Movies." Saltzman is a journalism professor at the University of Southern California and the author of "Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film."

Saltzman also directs the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project in The Norman Lear Center at USC, overseeing its database of more than 85,000 items. Ehrlich is an associate director of the project.

In writing "Heroes and Scoundrels," the authors did not confine their study to just the obvious and prominent examples. They don't just focus on journalism-centered films such as "All the President's Men," "The Killing Fields" or "Anchorman"; or on TV series like "The Newsroom," "Lou Grant" or "Murphy Brown."

They take in depictions of journalism in all manner of movies and television shows, in books going back to the 1800s, and in cartoon series, graphic novels, short stories, plays, video games, poetry and music. They reference "The Daily Show," the news on "Saturday Night Live," and even the puppet reporters on "Sesame Street."



**IMAGE:** OUR IMAGES OF JOURNALISTS, BOTH GOOD AND BAD, LIKELY COME FROM PORTRAYALS IN POPULAR CULTURE AS MUCH AS FROM WHAT JOURNALISTS ACTUALLY DO, SAYS UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS JOURNALISM PROFESSOR MATTHEW... [view more >](#)

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The book is not chronological, but structured around themes, among them how popular culture has portrayed journalism history, how it has explored professional ethics and objectivity, and issues of race, gender and sexual orientation. Other chapters look at issues of power, image, war and the future of journalism.

A lot has changed over more than a century of mass media and popular culture, Ehrlich said, but in portrayals of journalism and journalists, "it's astounding how many things have remained consistent," one of those being the stereotypes. Among them are the naive cub reporter; the tough, sarcastic female journalist trying to hold her own in a male-dominated profession; the power-hungry gossip columnist; the gruff but often soft-hearted editor; and the ruthless media tycoon.

TV journalists have often gotten the worst treatment; female TV journalists even more so, with them often portrayed as lacking brains and news experience. War correspondents have consistently been shown as leading glamorous, dangerous and exciting lives.

"For years, journalists have complained about how popular culture has portrayed them," Ehrlich said, going back at least to The New York Times' complaints in the 1920s about the play (and later the movie) "The Front Page," which established many of the themes and stereotypes still in use today.

"But the truth is that popular culture always has portrayed a noble side of the press, as well," he said.

Even when journalists are portrayed in a negative light, whether in fiction or in coverage of real-life events, "it's a sign that the ideals of journalism matter," Ehrlich said. Since journalism ideally gives us the information and ideas we need to govern ourselves, "that's hardly a bad thing," he said.

"Popular culture rarely gets it right in terms of presenting a realistic image of what the typical journalist does on a typical day, because what the typical journalist does on a typical day is typical," Ehrlich said. The same could be said about the portrayals of doctors, lawyers and cops, he said.

As a result, popular culture can exaggerate both the best of what journalists do, as well as the worst, Ehrlich said. But in doing so, "popular culture heightens how it matters, and I think that's part of the reason why it's important that we study popular culture and the stories that it tells about journalism," he said.

Popular culture can be "a really good, entertaining and provocative means of thinking about what journalism is, what it should be, what it should not be," Ehrlich said, "and how the debates over these questions have played out over the years."

The book, "Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture," is published by the University of Illinois Press.

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**Media Contact**

Craig Chamberlain  
cdchambe@illinois.edu  
217-621-6721

 @NewsAtIllinois

<http://www.illinois.edu> 

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