



Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture

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Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture

By Matthew C. Erlich and Joe Saltzman

Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015, 241 pp.

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Imagine how often doctors, lawyers, and police officers cringe when they see their professions represented in movies and television shows. Sure, sometimes they'll cheer, but, for the most part, they cringe: "That's not quite how it really is." Yet imagine how media depictions—both accurate and inaccurate—of doctors, lawyers, and cops become "sticky" as archetypes, stereotypes, woven into a pop culture "understanding" of those professions. Ditto for journalists.

A new book that should be greeted warmly by those who work in, teach, research, or aspire to journalism presents a thorough and profound explication of how journalists are presented in non-news mass media entities. *Heroes and Scoundrels* explores portrayals of journalists in novels, movies, plays, and television shows—and even in cartoons, comic books, and video games.

In a nutshell, the journalist, as seen through the lens of pop culture, is "delightful and despicable, public servant and public menace" (p. 154). On the bright side of these depictions, journalists pursue the truth while "displaying heroic determination, courage, and self-sacrifice" (p. 44). On the dark side, "journalists do clear harm to others while serving no one else's ends but their own" (p. 82). On the maddening side, a recurring theme in pop culture is that "women reporters exchange sex for stories" (p. 87). Furthermore, journalists, as commonly portrayed, are seen by themselves and others as outsiders, simply different from other people, "a species apart" (p. 78).

Such broad explanations are supported by a stunning number of examples of both well-known and obscure feature films, sitcoms, and short stories. (You cannot help thinking, "Great job finding that graphic novel, digging up that old radio show.") What's more, the text is enriched by insights gleaned from broader contextual and cultural perspectives, calling on, for example, the myth studies of Joseph Campbell, portrayals in India's "Bollywood" film industry, and even the SPJ code of ethics.

The authors also cite an extensive number of studies from a variety of scholarly approaches. Thankfully, this impressive academic analysis is

an easy read, as the authors stay serious and scholarly without slipping into the unreadable “academese” of peer-reviewed journals. The writing should be accessible to most undergraduate students. Scholarly interest aside, the book is an enjoyable cover-to-cover read for any news geek. It is a delight to come across a discussion, analysis, or reference to news-character portrayals you know well (say, the voyeuristic photojournalist in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*) and to those that are more obscure (such as the novel *Sad Desk Salad*, about an ethical dilemma faced by a writer for a soft-news website).

One area to which, perhaps, the authors could have devoted more attention is the all-too-common media depiction of journalists as part of a rude, aggressive mob, trailing, stalking, or surrounding a reluctant news source who must push through a barrage of camera flashes, swirling microphones, shouted questions, and in-your-face video lenses. The authors do deal with this image, in at least two places in the text, but do so too briefly for how amazingly frequent the marauding journalistic mob image appears in movies and television shows.

A key flaw with the structure of the text lies in its introduction. Introductions (even though textbook editors and publishers do not seem to realize this) are skipped by most readers (certainly by student readers unless under the threat of a quiz) or, at best, given a quick skim. The problem with this book’s intro is that it is too good, too packed with vital information that should not be ignored or given short shrift by a reader. For example, the *Heroes and Scoundrels* introduction contains insightful paragraphs highlighting a typology of common media depictions of, to name some, cub reporters, investigative reporters, columnists, editors, publishers, photojournalists, and sports journalists. It is great stuff, and the typology deserves a big, bold chapter of its own.

The book is a strong choice for graduate or undergraduate student use in customized topics courses in film studies, journalism history, mass communication, popular culture or sociology-based studies of the news media. It is also a keeper for a professor’s personal bookshelf as a handy reference guide when one is searching for multimedia examples to illustrate issues discussed in class. At the very least, *Heroes and Scoundrels* would be an important addition to campus or departmental libraries, as the book can help generate ideas for papers, theses, or creative projects.

An energetic and innovative instructor can even use the text in an introductory, 100-level journalism course to provide vivid examples and cultural context when introducing issues such as ethics, newsroom culture, interviewing, relationships with sources, relationships with co-workers/bosses, news values, myths, media law, and, sometimes, reminders that journalism is indeed a crucial, vibrant, and exciting profession.