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It Pays to Be a Print Journalist -- in Films

'Scoop' Continues Long-Standing Trend of the Noble Newspaper Reporter

By Paul Farhi
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In "Scoop," Woody Allen's latest film, Scarlett Johansson plays a cub newspaper reporter who teams with a bumbling magician (Allen) and the ghost of a dead journalist (Ian McShane) to catch a serial murderer.

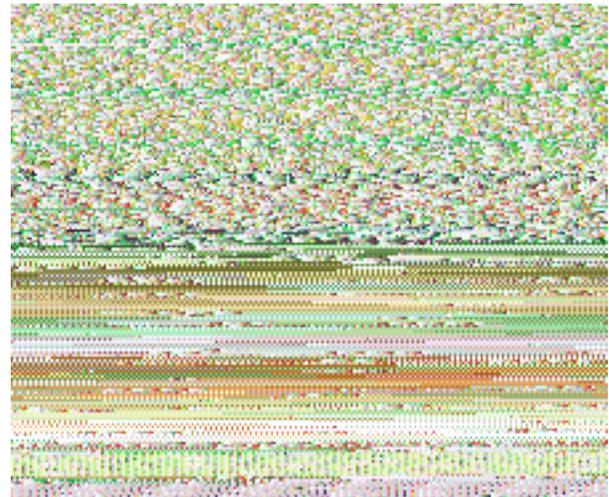
Although we can't vouch for the realism of this setup -- in our experience, dead people rarely provide good news tips -- newspaper journalists will certainly appreciate Allen's take on their profession. "Scoop" isn't exactly "All the President's Men," but as a reporter, Johansson embodies many of the noblest qualities of the news trade. She's a Nancy Drew knockoff -- curious, creative and courageous in chasing an important story.

That portrayal is consistent with a long line of cinematic print reporters. With occasional exceptions, newspaper people usually get the hero treatment in movies and TV shows. This is in sharp contrast to TV reporters, who are just as likely to be trashed. TV journalists might be prettier and better paid in real life than their ink-stained brethren and sistren, but on screen there's no contest about who comes off better.

You want dogged pursuit of the truth? That's Woodward and Bernstein (Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) in "All the President's Men" (1976), or Denzel Washington in "The Pelican Brief" (1993). You want reporters risking their lives to learn the facts? That's "The Killing Fields" (1984) and "The Year of Living Dangerously" (1982). You want editors who won't quit in the face of corruption? That's Humphrey Bogart in "Deadline USA" (1952) or Jack Webb and William Conrad in "-30-" (1959). You want journalists whose integrity can't be compromised? Look no further than Michael Keaton's tabloid-editor character in "The Paper" (1994). Even Superman's alter ego is a newspaper reporter.

Sure, newspaper reporters in the movies can be a cynical, tough-talking, hard-drinking bunch who aren't above cutting a few corners to get the story (Johansson's character, for example, sleeps with two of her sources in "Scoop." But all is forgiven when they expose the truth.) The reporters in "The Front

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Page" (1931) and its remake, "His Girl Friday" (1940), might have ethical standards they frown on in journalism school, but in the end, they free a man wrongly accused of murder and get the bad guys locked up. And what's wrong with that?

TV reporters? They're not nearly as lucky. Television journalists tend to be depicted as fatuous pretty boys and girls, mostly out for career advancement. The truth? Not only can't they handle it, it's not even very important. Think of William Hurt's character in "Broadcast News" (1987) or Bill Murray's cynical weatherman in "Groundhog Day" (1993), or more recently, "Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy" (2004). The most devastating portrait of all might be the deranged TV newsman Howard Beale (Peter Finch) in the satirical "Network" (released the same year that Woodward and Bernstein were being lionized in "All the President's Men").

TV journalists can't even get a break on TV shows about TV journalists. Ron Burgundy is but a latter-day Ted Baxter, the Olympian nitwit of "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

As a general rule, when a story calls for a journalist to do something serious or important -- solve a murder, expose wrongdoing, spring an innocent man, etc. -- you can count on seeing a print reporter at the center of the story, not a TV journalist, says Joe Saltzman, a professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.

Saltzman, himself a former TV journalist, has done enough reporting to say this with authority. He's director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project at USC, which maintains a database of some 46,000 items (films, TV shows, books, etc.) about fictional journalists.

There are, of course, exceptions to the print-vs.-TV-reporter rule. Most famously, "Citizen Kane" (1941) portrays its title character, a newspaperman, as ruthless and tragic (although Charles Foster Kane is a newspaper publisher, not a reporter). Last year's "Good Night, and Good Luck" practically puts its subject, TV newsman Edward R. Murrow, on Mount Rushmore.

And "Murphy Brown" was a generally affectionate look at one TV news "family."

But Saltzman suggests that the rule holds largely because real print reporters dwell in obscurity, while viewers can see the faults and flubs of TV reporters at just about any hour of the day. This familiarity breeds a certain contempt that translates into negative portrayals on film, according to Saltzman.

"When [a real] anchor or field reporter asks a stupid question or makes a mistake . . . the audience and the filmmakers see all of it," he says. "So the TV reporter becomes an obvious target for ridicule. The race for ratings, the emphasis on looks instead of substance -- all of this is well-documented in real television and exaggerated in movies and on TV."

Perhaps the most damaging image of all, he says, is the familiar scene of an anonymous army of camera-wielding, microphone-thrusting broadcast reporters hounding a newsworthy subject for information.

Forget William Hurt's preening anchorman, or Johansson's spunky news scribe. When people condemn the news media as arrogant and uncaring, says Saltzman, it's usually because they remember this wolf pack from the movies or TV.

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