

Tag Archives: Joe Saltzman

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GENDER, JOURNALISM EDUCATION, RESOURCES

From sob sisters to girl bloggers



[/his girl friday 4.jpeg](http://megheckman.files.wordpress.com/2013/02)

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Rosalind Russell plays reporter Hildy Johnson in the 1940 film 'His Girl Friday.' Souce: Wikimedia Commons

Hildy Johnson chased down stories for a newspaper. Murphy Brown worked out of a cable station. And, as Poynter's Mallery Jean Tenore [wrote in this piece, \(http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/202378/how-bloggers-became-the-new-chick-lit-heroines/\)](http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/202378/how-bloggers-became-the-new-chick-lit-heroines/) today's fictional, writerly heroines tend to toil away on blogs.

Tenore's story reminded me of [The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture \(http://ijpc.org/\)](http://ijpc.org/), a project by USC Annenberg to document fictional journalists through the ages. The backbone of the project is a [searchable database \(http://ijpc.org/database/searchform\)](http://ijpc.org/database/searchform) full of fun tidbits, but it also makes for an interesting study in how technology and evolving gender standards are changing perceptions of female journalists.

One of the first female characters in the database is [a woman who dresses as a man \(http://www.ijpc.org/database/item/Fettered for Life or Lord and Master A Story of To-Day\)](http://www.ijpc.org/database/item/Fettered%20for%20Life%20or%20Lord%20and%20Master%20A%20Story%20of%20To-Day) to work as a reporter in a 1874 novel. It wasn't long, though, before women were working openly as journalists in books, movies and TV shows. As USC journalism professor [Joe Saltzman writes \(http://ijpc.org/uploads/files/sobsessay.pdf\)](http://ijpc.org/uploads/files/sobsessay.pdf), fictional female reporters were more socially acceptable than the real thing during the first half of the 20th Century:

Practically every major actress of the period showed up in tailored coat and pants to fight the males in the newsroom, to assert her individualism and independence... and to become one of the few positive role models working outside the home.

Saltzman goes on to describe the origins of the term “sob sister” — a label given to female reporters because they were often handed tearjerker assignments as opposed to hard news. The sob sister concept, he says, has persevered over the decades:

The 21st-century images aren't all that different from the images of the sob sisters of the past – if a woman is successful, it means she has assumed many of the characteristics of the newsman, losing her femininity in the process. Or, in most cases, she stays tantalizingly female and uses her womanliness to get to the top. It's still mostly a no-win situation. For every positive image of a successful female journalist in film, TV, novels and short stories, there are a dozen stereotypical clichés.

Tagged [Hildy Johnson](#), [Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture](#), [Joe Saltzman](#), [Murphy Brown](#), [Poynter](#)

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