
Book review

Journalism

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Matthew C Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman

Heroes and scoundrels: The image of the journalist in popular culture

Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 241 pp. ISBN 9780252039027

Reviewed by: David Asa Schwartz, *The University of Iowa, USA*

Early in *Heroes and Scoundrels*, the authors distinguish surface reading of journalism in popular culture from contextualized reading. A surface reading of the television show *The Wire*'s fifth season shows yet another example of culture criticizing journalism. A contextualized reading goes deeper. It takes into account that the show's creator is a former journalist, as well as decades of urban newspapers and their portrayals in popular culture. This is Ehrlich and Saltzman's starting point in a valuable work that keeps its promise to show how the image of journalists reveals as much about journalism as it does ourselves.

The book, which is both strenuous and conversational in the way necessary to blend pop culture with critical scholarship, is steered by two tropes of mythology. First, the hero reflects a culture's deepest hopes. Second, the villain represents a culture's fears. But rather than centering their argument around a single popular-cultural genre during a specific time period, Ehrlich and Saltzman perform contextual analyses of novels, television, film, and other genres, noting, 'Popular culture offers visions of what the press could and should be ... Yet the portrait is always ambiguous. Myth and popular culture can occasionally highlight problems in a culture and challenge the status quo' (p. 16). Although the book is careful to begin by laying a historical foundation, it is not a chronological recounting of journalists in pop culture. Instead, it breaks new ground by focusing on six thematic areas: history, professionalism, difference, power, image, and war. Building upon James Carey (and Chandra Mukerji and Michael Schudson), Ehrlich and Saltzman think alongside the media artifacts they present as evidence.

Infusing questions asked within journalism studies with pop-cultural sensibilities gives Ehrlich and Saltzman access to the complexities of culture's relationship with journalism. Pop culture enables not only an exploration of the myths of journalist as hero or villain but also an investigation into the creation, evolution, and perpetuation of those myths. The image of the journalist, therefore, becomes as fictionalized and drowned in myth as the characters we read about in novels or watch on movie screens. The book argues that journalists themselves become character types. A horde of anonymous reporters, for instance, invades the privacy of a citizen; investigative reporters fight for the

public good; and media publishers and owners crave political power or cut loose journalistic morals to increase revenues. When confronting the latter in the chapter on power, the book ties together examples such as William Dean Howells' 1899 novel, *The Silver Wedding Journey*, a storyline in 1940s Superman comics involving copyright law, and a late 20th century James Bond film. Mapping the image of the journalist across media and over time allows the authors to survey what might otherwise be an overwhelming amount of data. At the same time, mapping coupled with contextual analysis discover contexts in which myths reproduce.

Within these contexts, the six themes emerge to present a logical structure for the book. The chapter 'History' engages the intersection of popular culture and journalism history and the ways in which their union both mythologizes and demythologizes journalistic tropes. The chapter 'Professionalism' takes a critical look at how pop culture challenges and celebrates notions of professional journalism adopted during the 20th century. Its willingness to study various tenets of professionalism, from work habits to ethics, reinforces notions of what is celebrated – responsible journalism – and what is condemned – irresponsible journalism. The chapter 'Difference' approaches boundary work and the ways popular culture portrays journalists as exceptional within the cultures they live. This chapter is at its best when exploring the struggles within journalism rather than journalism's struggles within the broader culture. The chapter 'Power' finds its strength in discussion of press mingled with political influence. Furthermore, it discovers popular culture's optimistic vision for journalism as a force for public renewal. The chapter 'Image' deviates from the use of the word in the book's title to focus mostly on visual journalists (photo and broadcast journalism). Although the authors clearly state why they make this decision, an opportunity to show a more complete struggle between depicting truth and fabricated images may have been missed. Nevertheless, the chapter engages important questions of dehumanization – a topic more important than ever in today's media climate.

The chapter 'War' is a remarkable achievement that will find its way onto undergraduate and graduate syllabi for years to come. I struggle to recall any research into journalism studies and popular culture that better navigates the entanglement of war and the journalists who cover it. It is a cogent, incisive critique of culture's conflicted opinions of war reporters.

Ehrlich and Saltzman succeed in what they set out to do: They provide a nuanced analysis of the impact of pop culture's images of the press, and they contextualize those images. By the conclusion, in which they begin a critique of popular culture's vision for the future of journalism, it is clear that Ehrlich and Saltzman's decision to inject journalism studies with popular culture's critical approach results in a valuable academic resource for both disciplines.