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DAVID CARR

Reporters on Film: Drunks and Tarts

IN a few scant weeks, students intent on a career in news will arrive at journalism schools across the country, filled with idealism and starry-eyed at the prospect of becoming a part of the noble Fourth Estate.

They must not have gone to the movies lately.

In “Scoop,” a [Woody Allen](#) movie that opened last month, [Scarlett Johansson](#), playing the ingénue/reporter, reprises the cliché of journalism as a wordier version of the world’s oldest profession. Within the first five minutes of the film, she dons a pair of eyeglasses (to signify serious intent or, possibly, [Diane Keaton](#)) and then promptly sleeps with a source. “If I had used my feminine wiles to get the story,” she muses to a friend, that would have been O.K., but she comes away empty-handed.

Later in the film, when she gets a tip about a series of salacious murders that may have been committed by a young aristocrat, she quickly realizes the error of her ways: this time she not only seduces the intended target, but becomes his girlfriend, as well. In the end, she gets her man and the story to boot.

When Hollywood is shopping for sleaze, it often picks up the daily paper. “Scoop” is littered with other inky tropes, including drunken newsmen toasting their departed colleague. Mr. Allen, who has been bloodied in the press, plays a character who imitates a reporter from The [Washington Post](#) by brandishing wads of cash to elicit information.

At the film’s New York premiere last month, I buttonholed [James Schamus](#) of Focus Features, which distributed the film, and asked him why journalists generally ended up cast in movies as tarts, drunks or crooks. He slowly backed away from me, smiling all the while, saying that the film “had a good heart.”

EASY for him to say. Movie producers are generally cast by their own industry as philistines or cokeheads — usually both — but they are compensated by all that glamour and, well, all that money.

For decades, journalists, whose pay is generally as low as the regard they are held in, have been largely depicted as moral and ethical eunuchs.

This year, “Brothers of the Head,” an indie film about conjoined rock stars, features a vertically challenged reporter who opts for intimacy with half of her subject and “Thank You for Smoking,” in which the female reporter not only hooks up with her source on approach, but then kicks him to the curb in print. This summer, even Lois Lane, the archetypal female journalist, not only beds her source but has his child. She is rewarded not with professional ridicule, but with a Pulitzer.

“The anger and lack of confidence most Americans have in the news media today is partly based on real-life

examples they have seen and heard,” said Joseph Saltzman, director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project at the [University of Southern California](#). “But much of the image of the journalist as a money-grubbing, selfish, arrogant scoundrel is based on images from movies and television.”

Both Ms. Johansson and Mr. Allen make being a reporter look very easy and even fun. As any working journalist will tell you, the job more often resembles telemarketing, including the hang-ups. But there remains something magical about being a working reporter, and both the magic and the drudgery are on display on Bravo’s new series “Tabloid Wars.”

The show, set in the newsroom of The Daily News in New York, is that rare reality series that actually uncovers something fundamental about its subject. For starters, it is hard to imagine anyone being seduced by any of these reporters. And then there is something bracing, almost noble, about their pursuit of the story. More than any popular depiction of newspapering since “The Insider” or perhaps “All the President’s Men,” “Tabloid Wars” explains why many reporters’ enthusiasm for the task remains undiminished despite changes that threaten the future of the business and dent the present.

“We try hard to put across the minutiae and drama of everyday life at the newspaper,” said Lauren Zalaznick, the president of Bravo. “The Daily News is a small-town paper in a very big town.”

The first few episodes lean heavily on Kerry Burke, a go-to street reporter whose fealty to any given story borders on mania. Boston-born with an accent to match, he humps an ugly backpack all over the subways and boroughs in pursuit of stories both profound and silly.

In the first episode, which ran three weeks ago, Mr. Burke is assigned to write about the beating of a black man in Howard Beach, well aware of the historical overhang from a 1986 racial attack there. There are few solid leads, but the possibility of “the wood,” a front-page tabloid story, drives him as he makes seemingly fruitless knock-knocks in the neighborhood.

“We don’t have an address, we don’t know if it’s racial,” he explains to the camera. “We want to see if it was a gang of white youths who rolled up on some black kids and beat them savagely with a bat.” He laughs at himself and the night ahead. “Go ahead, find that out.”

He eventually does, along with the help of a number of equally frantic colleagues, and the paper pulls the trigger on the racial angle, in spite of its explosive implications. Speaking on the phone last week, Mr. Burke, who has caught his share of celebrity stories during the filming of the series, including a bit about [Robert De Niro](#)’s light-fingered maid, said those were not his favorite part of the job.

“Celebrities are not real people,” he said “I hate doing that stuff.”

Might there be a danger that “Tabloid Wars” could, gasp, put him in that category?

“I think that so far, it has not really affected what I do,” he said. “It hurt for a little while, because anonymity is an asset in my end of the game. But it’s like the circus. Eventually it will leave town and I will go back to being nobody.”