

USC News

USC Annenberg's Clark Kent, Lois Lane expert reviews *Man of Steel*

By Jeremy Rosenberg

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With the latest Superman film, Man of Steel, raking in ticket sales, Jeremy Rosenberg decided to check in with USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism Professor Joe Saltzman. Saltzman, director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project of the Norman Lear Center, is an expert on all things Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Perry White and Daily Planet-related. The following contains spoilers.

Jeremy Rosenberg: You weren't planning to race out and see the film until we asked for your review. Are you glad you went?

Joe Saltzman: The only good part of the film was the last few minutes when Clark Kent finally shows up at the *Daily Planet* to meet the staff and start work as a journalist. The rest of the film was a disaster — a dark, brooding, confusing, ridiculous action film that comes close to violating the Superman-Daily Planet mythology that has been so successful in the past. The comics, the radio series, the television series, the four Superman movies (1978-1987), *Lois & Clark* and especially *Smallville* and the various cartoon series got it right. *Superman Returns* was a disaster with bad writing and bad acting and a Lois Lane who was nothing like the Lois Lane of old. *Man of Steel* gets the characters right and they look the part — Amy Adams is a wonderful Lois Lane — but the gloomy photography and meaningless, loud action often filmed in confusing close-ups defy logic.

Spoiler Alert: To show how ridiculous parts of the film are, the final confrontation between General Zod and Superman goes on and on with the two responsible for explosions, buildings collapsing, thousands of people dying as they engage in combat. But the battle ends when Superman simply grabs Zod by the neck and in a moment, breaks his neck killing him. The question: Why didn't he do that 30 minutes ago if it were that easy to kill Zod. It would have saved a lot of noise and confusion. An absurd bit of writing.

JR: How are journalists portrayed in *Man of Steel* compared with previous Superman films and the rest of the vast Superman canon?

JS: The one thing I liked about *Man of Steel* was that the characters are true to the journalism presented in the *Daily Planet* mythology since 1939. Lois Lane is still that feisty, tough-minded sob sister who will do anything to get the story. Editor Perry White — now an African-American — is still a tough, fair-minded editor who wants Lois to do what he says when he says to do it. The rest of the *Daily Planet* staff appear to be good newspaper people who are true to the Superman canon when it comes to newspaper journalism. Kent, Lane and the *Daily Planet* staff may be the longest-running heroic image of the journalist in all of popular culture. They are really the journalists of the 1930s and 1940s, and they haven't changed much in 75 years. You can see their prototypes in the films of the 1930s and 1940s, and while the storytellers have added new technology as the decades progress, Kent and company are still the old-fashioned I'll-do-anything-for-a-story reporters and editors of the 20th century.

JR: Lois Lane, hard-charging Pulitzer Prize winner, has the fate of the world in her hands. Should she give up a source to some very angry extraterrestrials?

JS: Like the great reporter she is, she would never give up a source. One of the continuing ideas in countless movies, TV and radio shows, novels, and short stories is that a reporter will do anything to protect his or her source. Popular journalists from Mary Richards to Murphy Brown to Peter Parker (Spiderman) to Lois Lane will not give up a source no matter what the consequences — jail, torture, death. So when Lois Lane refuses to give up a source to the angry aliens, she is simply doing what heroic journalists — and some evil journalists — have done before her in countless films and TV shows.

JR: When Perry White kills Lois' scoop, she leaks details to a blogger. The blogger in turn appears on cable TV news. Is this more of the same in a film featuring journalist characters, or a new, contemporary updating?

JS: Many new films and TV programs have moved from newspaper, magazine and TV reporters to bloggers and people who work for Internet websites. What all of these new journalists have in common with the more traditional legacy journalists is that they all act the same and have the same problems — protecting sources, getting a story at all costs, risking their lives to expose corruption and villainy, fighting to get information from reluctant corporations and government officials. Many also make up the opposite side of the coin — they are villains who use the power of the press or the Internet for their own personal, political or financial gains. They either work in the public interest and are heroes or they work for themselves and are villains. It doesn't really matter whether they work for an old-fashioned newspaper or for a new Internet website.

JR: I don't recall citizen journalists playing much of a role in the film — were people tweeting or Instagramming, etc.? No matter what, this was no [social media-centric episode of] *'Gossip Girl'*; correct?

JS: Another flaw of the film. There is absolutely no concern for civilians — they either fall under crushing buildings or seem to be inanimate objects. No social media. No tweeting. No nod to social media. It makes the film not only unrealistic, but also dated and in keeping with its ridiculous plot structure and disregard for who the characters really are and can be. Someone should have taken notes during the superb *Smallville* series to see how you can reinvent the Daily Planet-Clark Kent-Superman mythology and still be true to its central core.

JR: And finally — when Superman decides he needs to have a cover for his superhero activities, one that allows him access to breaking news, he gets a gig at the *Daily Planet*. Is "journalist" synonymous in Hollywood with being at the center of the action — and being a hero?

JS: Journalists have been used throughout film history (and before that in novels) as the audience's personal eyes and ears. They are great characters because they are

allowed to ask the questions that the audience wants answered, to give blocks of exposition when the plot gets confusing, and to protect the public interest when necessary. No one is surprised when they are at the heart of the action because that is what journalists do to report the news. If the journalist is one of the top stars of a film or TV series, then the image is usually heroic — the journalist works in the public interest and solves a crime, exposes corruption or saves an innocent. If the journalist is played by a lesser-known actor or is simply listed as TV Reporter #1 or some other anonymous title, then that journalist is usually a villain unconcerned about the public interest and only interested in doing what is best for the journalist.

What is bizarre about *Man of Steel* is that Superman shows up at the *Daily Planet* at the end of the film and is hired by Perry White even though he hasn't any experience at all. When he is introduced to Lois Lane at the end of the film, you smile with recognition and wonder why they didn't start the film there. Unlike the other versions of Superman where Kent comes from Smallville with a journalism background, Kent showing up at the *Daily Planet* of Metropolis doesn't make much sense. His scene with his mother where he figures out a reporter is always at the scene of an exciting news event and that would make a great cover for Superman seems to come from another film. It's a shame because the actors look and feel like the real characters, but they are never given a chance to do much of anything as newspaper people. Also having the *Daily Planet* remain a legacy newspaper instead of a multimedia giant using video, audio and text to tell a story seems to make the film even less relevant to a new generation. The lack of social media references in the film speaks to that as well.

All in all *Man of Steel* not only violates the mythology of the Superman-Daily Planet tradition, but it also ignores the future of journalism and misses a grand opportunity to bring the *Daily Planet* staff into the 21st century.



Laurence Fishburne as Perry White and Amy Adams as Lois Lane in *Man of Steel* (Photo/courtesy of Warner Bros.)