

USC News

Contact tel (213) 740-2215 fax (213) 740-7600
3620 S. Vermont Ave. KAP-246 Los Angeles, CA 90089-2538

E-mail USC News

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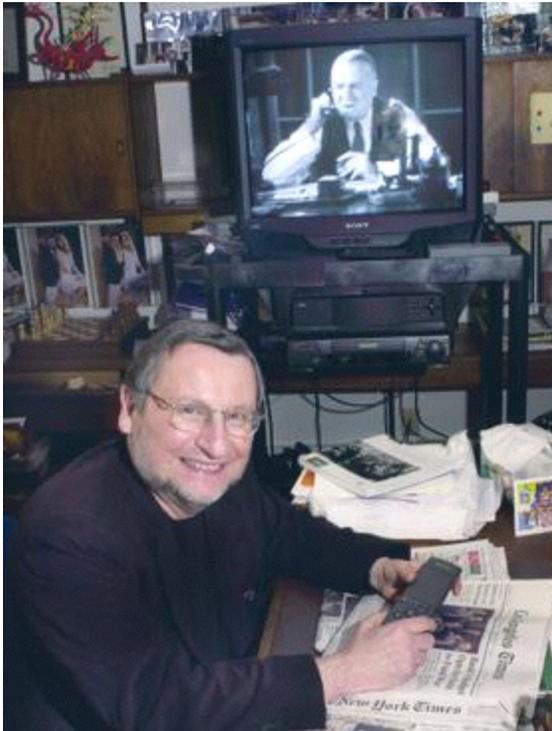


Photo by Irene Fertik

Broadcast journalist Joe Saltzman at his desk, with a still shot of the 1934 Frank Capra film "It Happened One Night" on the TV screen. The editor on the screen, said Saltzman, is "New York Mail" City Editor Joe Gordon (Charles C. Wilson), who is firing a drunken reporter, Peter Warne (Clark Gable), over the phone. "Gordon then hangs up, leaving Warne on the phone alone. Since his drunken reporter pals are listening, Warne continues talking to the dead phone, telling Gordon off," Saltzman said.

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From Sob Sister to Mary Richards – the Changing Image of Journalists

Joe Saltzman's new book shows how the stereotypes in Frank Capra's popular movies influenced the portrayal of the news media for years to come.

by Usha Sutliff

A casual conversation with his mother years ago started Joe Saltzman thinking about how journalists are depicted in the media and how those portrayals –

true to life or not – shape what the public thinks of the profession.

"She knew more about Mary Richards, Murphy Brown and Lou Grant than she knew about her own family and friends because she watched the shows over and over," said Saltzman, associate dean and professor of journalism at the Annenberg School for Communication. "Everything she knew about the media she got through television and films."

Saltzman, an award-winning broadcast journalist, spent the next 15 years researching and meticulously cataloging how newshounds are portrayed in films, television and radio shows, commercials, cartoons and popular literature. His vast collection includes thousands of hours of TV shows and old radio programs. "I have a whole routine I go through every week to find what's on television that I should record," he said.

Now Saltzman is making his private passion available for public consumption through a project of Annenberg's Norman Lear Center called "The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture."

"Images of the journalist in early movies were all done by newsmen and women who based all of their images on real-life examples. ... They had an affection for journalists. Many of the people making movies today really hate the press, the media, and this comes through in nearly every film they do."

– Joe Saltzman

Saltzman and his colleagues – at USC and elsewhere – plan to take an intense look at the conflicting images of journalists through the ages and how they've affected the American public's perception.

They have at their disposal an immense collection of materials – much of it donated by Saltzman – that will be shared with the public and researchers through a Web site (<http://www.ijpc.org/>). They will also start a journal and organize symposia, exhibits, conferences and classes on the topic.

Saltzman – who teaches a course called The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture – is leading the charge with the project's first publication,

"Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film." In the 218-page book, he takes a close look at nine Capra films, made from the late 1920s through the early 1950s, that capture images of journalists of the era.

Film critic and historian Leonard Maltin said he was hooked from the very first page.

"Here is real scholarship and original research presented in a wonderfully readable style," Maltin said. "Joe Saltzman's book will be consulted for many years to come by film buffs and media scholars alike."

Capra's films were a natural starting point for Saltzman because they depicted a wide range of journalistic archetypes, were enormously popular and influenced how future generations of filmmakers would portray the news media.

In films such as "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," "It Happened One Night" and "The Power of the Press," Capra crafted enduring stereotypes of journalists, Saltzman said.

There was the opportunistic reporter who would do anything to get the scoop; the cub reporter, who was ridiculed by the more seasoned journalists until he or she learned the ropes; the angry, cynical newspaper editor whose main concern was getting the story first; the "sob sister," a female reporter assigned to get the emotional angle of a story; and the greedy, ruthless media baron who used the power of the press to forward his own agenda.

"I think the fictional images are not that off the mark," Saltzman said.

But, he added, "To me, it doesn't matter if it's true to life because this is the image [the public] bases its decisions on."

Saltzman also noticed common themes in many of Capra's films. The reporter or editor could get away with anything if he or she did it in the name of public interest. But journalists were vilified if they did something for their own personal, political or financial gain, he said.

Capra, who delivered the Los Angeles Times as a boy, collaborated with veteran journalists to create realistic characters in his films. Those fictional journalists, even the villains, were played by popular actors of the day such as Clark Gable and Barbara Stanwyck.

That is a major difference between Capra's films and modern-day movies, which are made by people whose main contact with the media is through unsavory tabloid journalists, Saltzman said.

"Images of the journalist in early movies were all done by newsmen and

women who based all of their images on real-life examples. No matter how horribly they painted the editor or the journalist or the publisher, they still had an affection for journalists," he said. "Many of the people making movies today really hate the press, the media, and this comes through in nearly every film they do."

Modern-day filmmakers gravitate toward villainous portrayals of journalists, showing packs of anonymous, obnoxious reporters who chase after the hero and have no respect for privacy, Saltzman said.

"That probably is the worst image of the journalist in modern times," he said.

Capra's films were a springboard for Saltzman, who is working on his next book about memorable newsroom families in film and television. Future books by Saltzman and others working on the project will focus on topics including sob sisters, war correspondents and gossip columnists.



The first publication of Annenberg's Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project is "Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film." In the book, Joe Saltzman examines nine Capra films, made from the late 1920s through the early 1950s, that capture images of journalists of the era.

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3620 South Vermont Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90089-2538
Tel: 213 740 2215 Fax: 213 740 7600
Email: USCNews@usc.edu
<http://uscnews.usc.edu/>

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