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## From *Headline Shooter* to *Picture Snatcher*

The construction of photojournalists in American film, 1928–39

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### ABSTRACT

The existing research that addresses the depiction of photojournalists in popular culture focuses primarily on stereotypical characters and assessments of their distorted reflections of 'reality'. In contrast, this article considers elements of popular cultural practices produced under specific social, economic, and political conditions that may provide useful insights into the actual lived experiences of photojournalists. Framed from a cultural materialist perspective, this research suggests that American films are cultural artifacts that offer documentary evidence as to the actual working conditions of photojournalists. Specifically, this research project focuses on the construction of photojournalists in 20 American films, in which photojournalists and cameramen appear as central characters, produced during the late 1920s and 1930s. The insights gained from the films are also evaluated through a lens of scholarly and trade literature about photojournalism written during the beginning of the 20th century.

**KEY WORDS** ■ authenticity of images ■ cultural materialism ■ Hollywood film ■ photographers and cameramen ■ popular culture ■ stereotypical depictions ■ visual culture

Photography does not simply reproduce the real, it recycles it. (Susan Sontag, 1999)

### Film as a cultural practice

The ascendance of visual culture in the United States during the early decades of the 20th century is aligned with tremendous technological changes that encourage the dissemination of communication messages on a scale not previously available. Millions of individuals have access to popular films,

photography, a daily newspaper, telephone, radio, and automobiles. While many of these inventions appear as advancements that enhance the communication process, critics question the impact of these technologies on American society and voice concern about the loss of community and interpersonal communication in a modern mechanized society. During this era, millions of Americans flock to movie houses each week. Offering cheap entertainment to large and diverse audiences, thousands of movie houses open in the USA during the 1920s and by 1930 ninety million people attend the movies each week. Newsreels offering a mix of news, documentary, and propaganda are extremely popular with the public and are frequently shown in movie houses before or in between feature films (Emery and Emery, 1992).

By the late 1920s, technological advances in the half-tone process enhance the reproduction quality of images and newspapers regularly run photographs in their news sections. In 1929, *Editor & Publisher* notes a 533 percent increase in the use of half-tone images in newspapers over the past five years (Thomas, 1929). As images begin to dominate communication, visual culture challenges the established print culture and in newspapers concerns over the relevance of photographs as appropriate news venues are debated. As Hardt (2000: 63) explains, photographs encourage a reliance on facts, 'reinforcing the professional ideology of objectivity and becoming the site of reality'. Initially hostile to photojournalism, by the late 1920s journalists envision photographs as objective representations that provide credible and reliable evidence and they begin 'a period of professional adjustment to a new interdependence between words and images in the reporting of events' (Brennen and Hardt, 1999: 2).

Cognizant of the growing dominance of the visual image in United States society during the late 1920s and 1930s, this article explores the image of photojournalists constructed in American films between 1928 and 1939. Framed from a cultural materialist perspective, this research sees all cultural practices as part of an ongoing social process, produced by a specific society, at a particular historical time, under distinct political and economic conditions. From this perspective, distinctions between creative and factual modes of communication are blurred because all cultural products are considered to have meaning and value. Williams (1981), who views all cultural practices as creative communication, finds it 'reactionary and exclusivist' (p. 325) to elevate some cultural practices and devalue others. Rather than judging some cultural practices as superior or inferior as historical evidence, cultural materialists follow Williams's position and focus on the relationship between the cultural text and its specific conditions of production.

Cultural materialists see films as explicit forms of practical communication that articulate an observation of lived experience and can actively shape

that experience, along with connections between individuals and the social, political, and economic structures of history. Specifically, this research considers popular films as valuable cultural artifacts that may provide useful insights into the work experiences of photojournalists. It uses American films about photojournalists as primary sources of historical evidence to help understand the construction of photographers and newsreel cameramen between 1928 and 1939. In this study, films are addressed critically: a consideration of the potential insights found in the films is compared with scholarly and trade material regarding photojournalism published during the same period. Employing critical literary methods of analysis, this research confronts the complexity of language and connotation, as well as the latent meanings and incongruities found in the films.

### **Journalists in popular culture**

Existing research on journalists in popular culture focuses primarily on thematic issues, artistic concerns, and stereotypical characters, often judging elements of popular culture as distorted reflectors of society. According to Ghiglione (1990), fictional portrayals of journalists offer a 'fun-house mirror reflection of reality' (p. 97) that explores societal myths about journalists and produces partial truths and exaggerations. Zynda (1979) suggests that because the media rarely present the public with a detailed understanding of the working conditions of journalists, for most people the main source of information about journalists is found in films. For Zynda, this situation accords Hollywood 'a virtual monopoly on the public's image of the press' (p. 17).

Research on journalists in popular culture categorizes them by occupational groups (Harrison, 1945), job functions (Ghiglione, 1990), sociological and psychological designations (Good, 1989; Langner-Burns, 1989), and ethical behavior (Muench, 1988). Scholars connect literary value and authenticity (Berry, 1970; Good, 1986a) and maintain that the value of novels as literature directly affects its significance as a 'truthful' and 'reliable' reflector of social conditions.

Stereotypical depictions of journalists contrast with what researchers perceive as the 'real' image of journalists in several scholarly studies (see, for example, Harrison, 1945; Zynda 1979; Good, 1986b, 1989; Langner-Burns, 1989; Ghiglione, 1990; Bridger, 1997). Although women journalists are often represented as competent, ambitious, intelligent, and independent, Born (1981) maintains that these traits reflect stereotypical male depictions that when appropriated by women tend to destroy the feminine image and cause discomfort. Good (1989) suggests that although the image of journalists may

be distorted, it is through popular culture that the public learns about how the institution of journalism operates.

More recent work on journalists in popular culture suggests that nearly a century of media images updated over the years has had a lasting impression on the public. For Ghiglione and Saltzman (2002), it may be less relevant if the depictions of journalists in popular culture are true or false, because, for millions of Americans, 'the images define the journalists and the media as the public believes them to be' (pp. 3–4). Suggesting that the images may influence individuals to become journalists, Ghiglione and Saltzman note that as journalists, image often becomes reality when they base their own behavior on these lasting popular culture images. Brennen (1995) uses novels as historical evidence to consider the relationship between literature, history, and theory. Evaluating newspaper novels written between 1919 and 1938, she demonstrates the richness of evidence available in novels to elucidate the working conditions of rank-and-file newswriters.

An emphasis on photographers and cameramen emerges as a subgenre of popular culture about journalists during the late 1920s and 1930s. Ness (1997) finds that films about photojournalists utilize themes and plots similar to journalism films often showcasing rival cameramen united to defeat an outside foe. Saltzman (2002) suggests that photographers appear in films as heroic characters willing to risk their lives to get the picture. Newsreel photographers are depicted as particularly daring and corrupt, willing to 'lie, cheat, deceive a friend, take advantage of a loved one' (p. 185) or even fake news coverage in order to get a scoop.

Photographers and cameramen populate the journalistic environment but are rarely the sole topic of study by researchers evaluating journalists in popular culture. One exception is Bridger's (1997) assessment of stereotypes of photojournalists in 16 American films produced between 1915 and 1995. During the 1930s, he finds that press photographers are portrayed as second-class citizens and that these negative stereotypes of photojournalists have been responsible for 'irritation, annoyance and lack of professional respect' (p. 11). While Bridger showcases negative stereotypical depictions, due to his lack of access to films from the first part of the 20th century, much of his evidence comes from film indexes and catalogs. While indexes and catalogs are useful in identifying relevant films, their brief plot synopses do not allow for the richness of interpretation that may be gathered from actually viewing the films.

In contrast, this article assesses 20 films<sup>1</sup> about cameramen and photographers produced in the United States from 1928 through 1939, a pivotal time in the development of photojournalism. Ten films concerning newsreel cameramen are included in this study. They are: *Anything for a Thrill*, 1937;

*Burn 'em Up Barnes*, 1934; *Cameraman*, 1928; *Chasing Danger*, 1939; *Exiled to Shanghai*, 1937; *Headline Shooter*, 1933; *I Cover the War*, 1937; *Ladies Crave Excitement*, 1935; *Mr Moto Takes a Chance*, 1938; and *Too Hot to Handle*, 1938. Ten films with photographers as central characters are also addressed in this research. They are: *A Face in the Fog*, 1936; *Bank Alarm*, 1937; *Final Edition*, 1932; *Here's Flash Casey*, 1937; *Murder with Pictures*, 1936; *Page Miss Glory*, 1935; *Picture Snatcher*, 1933; *They Wanted to Marry*, 1937; *Time Out for Murder*, 1938; and *Too Tough to Kill*, 1935.

In the film industry of the late 1920s and 1930s, many of the screenwriters, directors, and producers were previously journalists (Ness, 1997), and the past experiences they had with photojournalists certainly influence their constructions of cameramen. Like most journalism movies, films about photojournalists are primarily low budget 'B' movies that run the gamut of genres: screwball comedies, dramas, detective thrillers, and musicals. While most of these films have been forgotten over the years and are rarely referenced as cultural products, they may be seen to offer a variety of relevant insights about the actual work experiences of cameramen and photographers during the 1920s and 1930s.

### **Heroic newsreel cameramen**

A blurring of the distinction between cameramen and photographers occurs in early scholarly and trade literature on photojournalism. Both types of photojournalists are expected to understand the concept of newsworthiness and anticipate the news. In *The Camera Man*, Collins (1916) considers news photographers and newsreel cameramen in addition to feature film cameramen, commercial photographers, deep-sea photographers, and medical research photographers all as cameramen willing to go anywhere, at anytime to capture the news. In 1927, the Associated Press News Service began providing about 100 member newspapers with glossy photographs created from enlargements of newsreel clips (*Editor & Publisher*, 1927). This wirephoto arrangement between the Associated Press and the Paramount News Service may be seen to reinforce a more inclusive understanding of the field of photojournalism than is the contemporary norm.

Researchers and trade publications continue to use the term cameraman interchangeably to refer to both photographers and newsreel cameramen throughout the 1930s. However, by the late 1920s, a process of differentiation begins to emerge, and researchers and trade publications address differences between newsreel cameramen and newspaper photographers. Discussions center on the work expectations, technical problems, and rules of conduct for

these photojournalists, yet throughout this era, both cameramen and photographers are expected to combine news sense with photographic technique. Researchers suggest each photojournalist should be considered both photographer and reporter, 'sensing news in his surroundings, analyzing the commonplace incidents of daily life, inquiring into the who, why and wherefore of happenings and then taking pictures of what he believes to be the news' (Price, 1937: 26).

While researchers consider newsreel cameramen and photographers both photojournalists with similar professional responsibilities, films produced during this era differentiate between the two, according newsreel cameramen superior status and prestige. The hierarchy of professions is nicely illustrated in *Cameraman*, in which Buster Keaton plays a tintype photographer who decides to become a cameraman after the girl he is interested in rejects him for a newsreel cameraman. As a photographer, Keaton is a comic character, bumbling, distracted, and unable to create good images. While this film is a comedy with lots of physical humor, and a monkey as a sidekick, as Keaton begins his apprenticeship as a cameraman his technical competence grows and his news sense improves. At the end of the film, a newsreel company hires him as a journeyman cameraman and, not surprisingly, he also gets the girl.

In most of the films about photojournalists produced in the late 1920s and 1930s, cameramen are portrayed as heroes who risk their lives to bring images of news and information to the public. For example, in *Headline Shooter*, cameramen work straight through an earthquake and its aftershocks to get dramatic shots of the destruction, while in *Too Hot to Handle*, Clark Gable daringly climbs onto the wing of an airplane to shoot images of a burning ship that is about to explode. As a cameraman in *Anything for a Thrill* explains, the newsreel business is a 'tough grind'. The pun in this remark is illuminating: not only does grind refer to difficult, repetitious, and tedious labor, but during this era cameramen manually turned the crank of a movie camera and the process is known as 'grinding'. Newsreel cameramen are expected to be resourceful and daring and 'must always expect the unexpected' (Peden, 1932: 2). In these films, newsreel editors and owners expect nothing less than heroism from their cameramen who frequently work around the clock for days at a time. Failure to obtain images of just one breaking news story is cause for dismissal. In *Ladies Crave Excitement* when a cameraman calls in to report that a bridge has washed out and he is unable to get to work, his editor tells him unsympathetically to 'start swimming'.

In these films, newsreel cameramen routinely capture kidnappers, confront gangsters, solve mysteries, prevent crimes, and discover murderers. In *Cameraman*, Keaton rescues his love interest from a boating accident after her cowardly date abandons her to save himself, while in *Chasing Danger* the star

newsreel photographer rescues a French officer and shoots a jewel thief who is the instigator of a native uprising. Although heroism is a fundamental quality of these cameramen, in *I Cover the War*, John Wayne takes daring to a new level as he and his partner uncover a villainous Arab leader, stop a native revolt, and rescue a company of British soldiers, in addition to shooting fabulous newsreel film of a native rebellion. In some cases, actual newsreel film is used to help solve crimes and capture criminals. For example, in *Burn 'em Up Barnes*, newsreel film is used to solve a murder while in *Ladies Crave Excitement* newsreel footage proves that a racehorse was drugged. Gable, in *Too Hot to Handle*, pretends to be a medicine man and projects newsreel footage throughout a native village to rescue his girlfriend's brother from a Voodoo ritual sacrifice.

That heroism is a requisite quality of cameramen in these films is not surprising given the popular acclaim that newsreel cameramen received during the late 1920s and 1930s. The trade publication *Editor & Publisher* routinely reported on death-defying risks, such as climbing down cave shafts, dodging rockets and planes, and dealing with the flying rock and hot lava of volcanic eruptions, that cameramen took on assignment in order to bring spectacular images to the public. The experiences of a Paramount News and Associated Press cameraman who filmed a dog-sled rescue party in the Arctic were lauded not only for the dramatic images but also for his struggle to get the pictures and deliver them to the newsreel company (*Editor & Publisher*, 1928: 1). In 1929, *Editor & Publisher* determines that the public expects to see visual evidence of all breaking news stories. 'The picture is the thing and an army of alert, danger-defying photographers is constantly in action, risking the foaming onrush of floods, chancing perilous heights, daring the anger of vicious gangsters or skirting boiling streams of volcanic lava to "shoot" news for inquisitive millions' (Roche, 1929: 1).

Some of the plot lines in American films of this era come directly from actual experiences of newsreel cameramen. For example, a veteran cameraman was killed while filming a Daytona Beach car race when a racing car veered off course and ran over him. The 12-part serial *Burn 'em Up Barnes* recreates this accident, down to the ironic detail of the cameraman leaping aside to avoid the car, yet being struck down while his camera remained untouched. Newspaper reporter turned screenwriter, Allen Rivkin drew on his own interactions with newsreel cameramen, particularly what he saw as their deceptive behavior, for the films *Headline Shooter* and *Picture Snatcher*. In addition, the 'March of Time' newsreel series which emphasized human interest aspects of news is recreated as the 'March of Events' in *Ladies Crave Excitement*.

While these films showcase the heroism of newsreel cameramen, they also depict cameramen as ruthless, unethical, and corrupt, willing to do anything

including faking news coverage to get a scoop. A cameraman in *Anything for a Thrill* sneaks onto a gated estate in an attempt to obtain film of a reclusive heiress. At the same time, his partner misrepresents himself as a portrait photographer sent to take campaign photographs of her father and secretly films the heiress with a movie camera hidden inside a large format still camera. A cameraman orders his assistant to move a competitor's car onto the railroad tracks so that he can get exclusive film of a sweepstakes winner in *Exiled to Shanghai* while, in *Headline Shooter*, a newsreel cameraman films a flood that was caused by the faulty construction of a dam. When authorities ask him to destroy the film because it wrongly implicates a respected judge, the newsreel cameraman pretends to burn the footage but actually switches film canisters. When the film is shown in movie theaters, the judge commits suicide. The cameraman shows little remorse over the judge's death, firmly believing his mission is to get all newsworthy images to the public, no matter what the consequences. When questioned about his deceptive behavior by a female reporter, he says: 'I suppose you think I'm a guy with a wide open lens instead of a heart'. Obviously, for these cameramen, the image is the ultimate justification for all ethical lapses.

In some films about newsreel cameramen, the coverage of news tends to blur the line between fantasy and reality suggesting that the authenticity of images is not a fundamental concern. A cameraman in *Headline Shooter* fakes film footage of an earthquake and later splices together two separate newsreel clips to entrap a gangster, while Gable portrays a newsreel cameraman with a penchant for faking footage in *Too Hot to Handle*. Unable to shoot authentic images of a war in China, Gable stages an enemy invasion using toy airplanes, firecrackers, and local children. He defends his actions by comparing himself to Rembrandt suggesting 'Back of the camera there must be an artist . . . I didn't distort the truth. I merely heightened the composition.' In *Exiled to Shanghai*, a newsreel cameraman uses stock footage of a dirigible flight and safe landing to deceive investors. The emphasis on faked newsreel coverage in these films may initially seem like a stereotypical slam against cameramen. However, re-enactments and staged footage have been a staple of the newsreel business since its inception and over the years journalists repeatedly voiced concerns about these practices (Saltzman, 2002).

Interestingly, film-makers routinely use stock newsreel footage to enhance the realism of the films, a technique successfully recycled in the 2003 film *Seabiscuit*. In *Headline Shooter*, actual newsreel footage of an earthquake, a bathing beauty contest, a huge fire, and a major flood is showcased. *Burn 'em Up Barnes* interweaves stock newsreel footage of auto races and boat races into its story line, while *Chasing Danger* includes actual footage of an aerial bombing of a desert fort to support a story centering around an Arab uprising.

Not only does *Ladies Crave Excitement* include actual film of a mine explosion and a hurricane, it introduces the film through the lens of a newsreel camera, illustrating cameramen filming the action from a moving truck. The inclusion of existing newsreel footage offers viewers additional visual evidence of breaking news and allows film companies to freely use existing footage and, therefore, cut the costs of producing these films. Just like the cameramen they depict, these film-makers blur the actual news with their creative visions to construct a specific image of photojournalists in US society.

### **Photographers provide comic relief**

While newsreel cameramen are constructed in films as ethically challenged heroes, photographers in contrast are often depicted as second-class workers, trying hard to get their pictures but never quite as good as their newsreel colleagues. Regularly paired with aggressive and competent reporters, photographers are routinely included as comic relief, falling out of cabs, knocking over their cameras, making a mess, and generally failing to get the picture. For example, as bumbling photographer Bulb is introduced to audience members in his first onscreen scene in *Bank Alarm*, his camera is knocked to the floor three times, while throughout *Time Out for Murder*, the photographer laughs, tells jokes, and consistently participates in juvenile pranks such as taking great joy in handing his subject a hot flashbulb after he shoots a picture and then watching the person squirm. In *A Face in the Fog*, the photographer is portrayed as clumsy, effeminate, and emotional; he forgets his camera at crucial times and is routinely berated by his editor as inept. While photographers may not be as qualified as their newsreel colleagues, in these films they are depicted as likeable, down to earth individuals. They are frequently identified by nicknames such as Bulb, Click, Flash, or Snapper: these names highlight the technical aspects of their chosen profession and reinforce the comic aspect of their presence in the films. In contrast, newsreel films limit nicknames to the cameraman's sidekick. For example, in *I Cover the War*, it is the cameraman's pet monkey who is called Wide Angle.

Even when photographers are portrayed as strong competent characters, other photographers are routinely included in the film as comic relief. In *Murder with Pictures*, Lew Ayres plays an ace newspaper photographer who spends most of his time solving a murder mystery. Predating Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* by four years, the murders are actually committed with a gun concealed inside an empty camera case. The film showcases Ayres's talents as a photographer and explores job tensions between reporters and photographers particularly as they try to scoop each other. *Murder with Pictures*

illustrates reporters' initial hostility toward the incorporation of photography and the debates over the value. Yet, apart from Ayers, the other photographers in the film appear as misguided and clumsy, repeatedly falling down while attempting to take pictures.

As is the case with the representation of newsreel cameramen, when photographers are portrayed as strong central characters, deception is generally a major component of the story line. The title character in *Here's Flash Casey* is an aspiring photographer who blackmails a newspaper publisher with a compromising picture of his son in order to get hired on his paper. The lead newspaper photographer in *They Wanted to Marry* is frequently in jail following altercations stemming from compromising photos that he takes surreptitiously, while in *Picture Snatcher* James Cagney plays a racketeer who becomes an unscrupulous photographer for a New York tabloid. Willing to do anything to get a picture, Cagney steals photographs from unsuspecting people and photographs an execution with a hidden miniature camera. While Bridger (1997) showcases *Picture Snatcher* as a prominent example of Hollywood stereotyping photographers as 'non-caring, pushy, overbearing thugs' (p. 6), this film, in its exploration of the misappropriation of images, offers a pointed critique of actual journalistic practices during this era. Two central plot lines of the film, Cagney's theft of a picture from a mentally unstable fireman and his use of a hidden camera to photograph a prison execution, are both based on actual incidents. On 14 January 1928, the *New York Daily News* published a full-page photograph of the execution of Ruth Snyder. Staff photographer Tom Howard took the picture with a camera smuggled into Sing Sing prison.

Howard wore the miniature camera strapped to his ankle for four hours. He was first in line and therefore obtained a front seat in the death chamber. He was 12 feet away from the electric chair. The room was lighted with an indirect system which furnished the photographer with excellent illumination.

Just as the executioner threw on the switch which sent the current through the woman's body, throwing it forward and upward in the chair, Howard thrust his leg out, pulled up his wide-bottomed trouser, and pressed a bulb which was hidden in his pocket and connected by a rubber hose to the camera. He allowed a six seconds exposure. The camera had been focused beforehand for from 15 to 20 feet by guess. (Schuyler, 1928: 1)

While this description of Howard's efforts to obtain the execution picture reads like a film script, it is actually *Editor & Publisher's* account of how Howard obtained 'the most sensational news picture ever seen in America's press' (p. 1). Howard's experiences at Sing Sing prison, as well as the newspaper's reaction, are faithfully reproduced in *Picture Snatcher*. In the film, Cagney's editor is thrilled with the execution photograph as was *New York Daily News* managing editor Frank Hause, who maintained that the Snyder photograph

was 'without parallel as an example of factual reporting, the most modern development of today's journalism' (p. 1). While the acquisition of an execution photo is framed as cutting-edge journalism, the public's disdain with what they see as deplorable journalistic practices is also addressed in *Picture Snatcher*.

Littered desks, ringing telephones, crumpled newspapers, and grumpy news editors barking orders to reporters and photographers populate the newsroom environment of films about photographers. Care is taken to accurately depict photojournalists' working conditions and job routines, giving films about photographers a greater sense of authenticity than the films about newsreel cameramen. While it is not as fundamental an issue as it is in films about newsreel cameramen, the problem of altering and faking photos is raised in two films about photographers. In *Page Miss Glory*, an unemployed newspaper photographer creates a composite photograph to win a beauty contest, while, in *Here's Flash Casey*, a crooked photographer alters photographs of influential citizens, obtained from film left for developing at a camera shop, to blackmail them. In both cases, the practice is exposed as deceptive and shown as an aberration from journalistic norms. The realism of newspaper journalism is reinforced in an emphasis on the rivalry between newspapers and pictorial magazines. Fearful of the growing dominance of this new form of visual communication, newspaper editors in these films use a variety of strategies to keep strong images out of the magazines, including stealing photographs and giving photographers bonuses if they are willing to save their best pictures for the newspapers.

A realistic journalistic environment is, at first glance, challenged in two of the films about photographers. However, after additional research, these seemingly offbeat approaches are actually representations of authentic journalistic practices from the late 1920s and 1930s. In *They Wanted to Marry*, the lead photographer sends negatives to his newspaper via a carrier pigeon named Emily. On one level, the use of a carrier pigeon serves as a convenient comic plot device in this film. However, during this era, newspapers routinely used carrier pigeons for transporting news pictures quickly and safely, within about a 30-mile range. Carrier pigeons traveled at an average speed of two miles per minute. Photographers shooting  $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$  film negatives would use a changing bag to unload their film into a tube that was loaded onto a pigeon's back. In an emergency, supplemental information was attached to the bird's leg (Price, 1937). The use of a carrier pigeon in *They Wanted to Marry* is an amusing and lighthearted aspect of the film that also faithfully reproduces all aspects of this historically specific transportation procedure.

A ban on cameras in the courtroom is challenged in *Murder with Pictures* in a variety of different ways. One photographer brings a camera into the

courtroom and is evicted when he drops a flashbulb. Another photographer is knocked over as he tries to get a picture when a defendant leaves the courtroom, and a third photographer climbs into an elevator and takes pictures of a lawyer, a defendant, and another witness as they leave the courtroom. Such aggressive behavior initially seems out of character given a long-standing policy against cameras in the courtroom. However, cameras were not uniformly banned during this era, and individual judges decided on their admissibility on a case-by-case basis. During cases where judges banned cameras, a photographer could be held in contempt if caught, as was the case of a *Chicago Herald and Examiner* photographer who took a photograph in the courtroom while a mobster was being tried for evasion of federal income tax (*Editor & Publisher*, 1930). Kinkaid (1936) outlines two different strategies to obtain photographs in a courtroom when the judge has banned cameras. The first one is for the photographer to sit in the back of the courtroom and attract as little attention as possible by using a time exposure rather than a flash. The other method involves concealing a camera or hiding in unexpected areas of the courthouse. Clearly, the approaches used in *Murder with Pictures* illustrate both of Kinkaid's strategies.

### **Constructing cameramen**

While an emphasis on deceptive practices is addressed in films about both newsreel cameramen and news photographers, it may be shortsighted to dismiss the films as merely constructing demeaning stereotypical depictions of journalists. Interestingly, during this era the most demeaning stereotypical image of photojournalists does not come from a film about newsreel cameramen or photographers but is found in an *Editor & Publisher* article from 1931 by a Gannett executive. Reacting to the speed of delivery and excellent photographic quality of newsreels, M. V. Atwood warns newspaper editors and publishers that they must respond with quality photographs. According to Atwood (1931: 9), it is wrong for editors to assume that cameramen can work independently to produce meaningful images: 'A good picture does not begin with the photographer, but with the editor who sends him out to get the picture. Some excellent photographers have little news sense and need to be told pretty definitely what they are to get.' Atwood's commentary shows little understanding of the role of photographers as interpreters of society and makes them seem like automatons that merely click the shutters on their cameras rather than interpreters of news events whose pictures tell stories and offer historically and culturally situated meanings.

Ultimately, films about photojournalists offer insights into tensions in the field of journalism as well as contradictory news practices of this era. During the first part of the 20th century, cameramen would go anywhere and do anything to get a picture. In his biography, war photographer James Henry Hare explains that the first and greatest commandment of news photography is: 'Thou shall get the picture! and the second was like unto it: Thou shalt get another better than the first!' (Carnes, 1940: 71). Photography books written during the late 1920s and 1930s routinely warn aspiring photojournalists that employers will not accept any excuses for failing to get the picture. Price (1937: 10) notes that cameramen are on call 24 hours a day and if they wish to keep their jobs they must consistently produce useable images because 'the acceptable excuse for not covering an assignment has yet to be invented'.

Photojournalists during this era quickly learn the value of images in the construction of news. Mason and Pope (1933) find that there are physical and tactical difficulties obtaining good images that challenge photographers to cross the line from enterprise to deception. Wars, natural disasters, and breaking news often involve physical challenges that require photojournalists to possess courage, determination, and ingenuity. Yet, photographers also encounter problems of access to people and events that require finesse and persuasiveness. In an environment with intense pressure to always get the picture, on occasion, 'lying, theft, burglary, bribery, or other forms of skullduggery' (p. 102) are necessary. The pressures that Mason and Pope describe are all nicely illustrated in these films about photojournalists. Rather than resorting to stock stereotypes and creative license, these films showcase contradictory impulses of daily journalism that often encourage photojournalists to resort to deception in order to complete their assignments.

In addition to issues of access, researchers suggest that during this era competition among cameramen could be savage. During this era, photography in the United States is not a collective endeavor and each cameraman must individually search out all breaking news. In pursuit of the picture, photojournalists may be seen to dominate the environment, blocking rival cameramen, spoiling the scene with their flash bulbs, and ordering people about. Although scholarly and trade literature of this period maintain that newsreel cameramen and photographers are both photojournalists, films produced from 1928 to 1939 clearly differentiate between the two types of cameramen. Perhaps the depictions accorded to both groups may, in some way, relate to different perceptions based on the equipment that each group uses. Newsreel cameras are large and impossible to miss while during this era many photographers begin to favor the smaller format hand-held cameras that are easily hidden from the subjects. Jay (1984) suggests that during the initial development of photography in the 19th century, the profession was considered

honorable and was well received by the public. However, with the development of the hand-held camera that image of respectability is destroyed. Jay finds that initially the hand-held camera is rejected by serious photographers and is 'almost universally criticized by every intelligent nonphotographer as a major social nuisance' (p. 8). The fundamental objection to the hand-held camera is that people can be photographed without their knowledge and consent.

With the introduction of smaller, easily concealed cameras with wide-aperture lenses that permitted photographs to be made in situations with low light levels, modern indiscreet photojournalism was born. Newspapers and magazines, with an insatiable appetite for pictures, both reflected and reinforced the photographers' attitude – the picture at any cost. As any impartial observer will admit, no aspect of a life was too private, no tragedy too harrowing, no sorrow too personal, no event too intimate to be witnessed and recorded by the ubiquitous photographer. (p. 15)

The deceptive potential of hand-held cameras used by early 20th-century photographers resulted in public distrust of the news technology as well as of their operators and certainly may have contributed to the hierarchical depictions of photojournalists in 1920s and 1930s films.

Photojournalists must aggressively pursue the image and, in these films, they also solve mysteries, capture criminals, and perform a variety of other heroic acts. The public's conflicted relationship with the new medium of photojournalism is nicely reinforced in *Murder with Pictures* when a photographer questions the police's rough treatment of one of his colleagues. He remarks: 'Cops aren't supposed to shoot newspapermen'. And the police officer responds, 'I know, son, I know, we're hampered with a lot of senseless regulations'. On one level, the exchange situates cameramen within the realm of newspapermen and yet it illustrates their distrust and dislike by the public during this era.

In addition to journalistic rivalry, the long hours, difficult working conditions, personal hardships, and the ultimate expendability of photojournalists are addressed in films about both newsreel cameramen and photographers. Underlying the plots of comedies, dramas, and murder mysteries, photojournalists are shown as expendable workers. Even the most heroic of the newsreel cameramen are repeatedly informed that they are only as good as their last scoop. And, finally, a critique of cameramen as intruders and voyeurs, observing rather than participating in life, emerges as a subtext of these films.

By the late 1920s and 1930s, film is a dominant cultural form that addresses a variety of issues and concerns within American society. From a cultural materialist approach, films about photojournalists may be seen to

provide historical evidence of how photographers and newsreel cameramen were constructed during this era. The initial hostility of print journalists to photography, their attempts to protect their turf, and their eventual acceptance of the image as an integral part of the acquisition of news are showcased in these films about photojournalism. In an era of jazz journalism, photographic images soon become authentic evidence of an objective journalism and literal representations of a larger reality. If these films include standard stereotypical images of photojournalists, they also critique and analyze journalistic practices and offer commentary on the motives and meanings of such practices.

## Note

- 1 Utilizing a variety of finding aids including film indexes and catalogs, approximately 30 films were identified as having photojournalists as main characters. Joe Saltzman, director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) was instrumental in obtaining and copying all of the films that were currently available. This author thanks him for all of his help and encouragement with this project.

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