



Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film
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Foreword

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My view of the journalist, I confess, always has relied as much on fantasy as on fact. In 1969, when my wife, Nancy, and I, still in our 20s, bought the *Southbridge (MA) Evening News*, circulation 5,700, I thought we were going to lead the Hollywood-movie version of the small-town editor's life. Envision a young Will Rogers and wife playing, with Tinseltown panache, Mr. and Mrs. William Allen White of the *Emporia (KS) Gazette*. We would publish stirring editorial screeds against the world's villains. We would report not only on chicken suppers and new-business ribbon cuttings but also skewer corrupt selectmen and business barbarians.

Nancy and I soon learned, however, that even a paper that ran as few as six pages on Saturday and sold for only eight cents had, in addition, to operate as a business. It had to meet its nineteen-employee payroll each week, pay back bank loans, and replace a dying, sixty-one-year-old letterpress. Ads had to be sold, taxes paid, and books balanced. The fact of the small-town newspaper as a business pushed up against the fantasy of the News as a crusading comforter of the afflicted and afflicter of the comfortable.

A generation later, thanks to a grant from the Gannett Foundation, later renamed the Freedom Forum, I found myself working on a 1990 Library of Congress exhibit about the American journalist. I originally had conceived of the exhibit, timed to coincide with my term as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the 300th anniversary of the earliest newspaper in the colonies, as a celebratory history of the U.S. journalist. You know, Ben Franklin, Nellie Bly, Ida B. Wells, Ernie Pyle, and Walter Cronkite.

But the more I interviewed and researched the historical facts, the more journalists of Hollywood

fantasy seemed to deserve a place in the exhibit and my accompanying book, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press*. Respected real-life editors talked about the role of *The Front Page* in luring them into journalism. Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Anna Quindlen, and other women journalists described how, as children, Brenda Starr, reporter in comic strips and Hollywood movies, inspired them.

I found it difficult to mention William Randolph Hearst and his modern-day media-mogul counterparts without noting Hollywood's version of the press potentate, Charles Foster Kane of *Citizen Kane*, the 1941 classic. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the lowly reporters at the *Washington Post* who helped topple a president, brought to mind the bespectacled, bumbling newspaper reporter Clark Kent, who as Superman fought in movies for "truth, justice, and the American way." In the end, virtually half of the book and exhibit about the American journalist was devoted to the fantasy journalist of film, novels, plays, and other forms of fiction.

Early in my second career, as a journalism educator, I had the good fortune in 1999-2001 to head the journalism school at the University of Southern California. A part of that good fortune consisted of working with Prof. Joe Saltzman, associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, who more than shares my fascination with the fictional image of the journalist. Joe teaches one of the school's most popular courses, "The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture."

He brings to that course and this book the soul of an investigative reporter and the heart of a collector. To visit his home office is to be surrounded by walls of videotapes, audiotapes and MP3 files, probably the most complete collection anywhere of Hollywood films and television movies and shows about the journalist. Many scholars of Frank Capra movies have noted the role of his newspaper reporters as common-man heroes. But only Joe has chronicled all seven reels of Capra's 1928 silent film, *The Power of the Press*, thought to have disappeared into the dark recesses of some library attic.

Joe, like one of Capra's determined newshounds, reports on every Capra journalist, from the scoop-happy cub reporter who screams, "Stop the Presses!" to the sob sister who just wants to be one of the guys – a newspaperman. As a result, Joe's book, *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film*, is indispensable to any student of the American journalist, the mythical as well as the real one.

There were times in Annenberg faculty meetings, despite my knowledge of Joe's career as a prize-winning broadcast journalist, when I could swear he was a newspaper reporter from a 1930s' Capra movie. Joe did not drink, wear a press-card-bedecked hat, or wisecrack out of the side of his mouth. But he was the not-so-quiet newshound who pushed for the truth and raised a little hell. Joe, to quote his description of reporter Peter Warne in Capra's *It Happened One Night*, "talks fast, thinks fast, works fast...and won't take any crap from anyone."

That makes Joe an entertaining as well as enlightening compatriot. I once proposed that the Freedom Forum support the creation of an Annenberg center for the study of the fictional journalist. While the proposal failed to gain Freedom Forum funding, the foundation's Newseum invited Joe and me to co-author an essay for an exhibit on Hollywood's image of the journalist.

Never have I had so much fun scribbling.

And, oh yes, where I failed, Joe has succeeded. He has helped establish a project he directs at the Annenberg School's Norman Lear Center entitled The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC). Long live IJPC. May it result in more books as informative and engaging as *Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film*.