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Actress Olivia Wilde plays reporter Kathy Scruggs in 'Richard Jewell.' Invision/AP Images/Jordan Strauss

'Richard Jewell' is only the latest film to depict a female journalist trading sex for scoops

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Critics have lambasted Clint Eastwood's new biographical drama, "Richard Jewell," over its depiction of female reporter Kathy Scruggs, who's played by actress Olivia Wilde.

During the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, security guard Richard Jewell saved countless lives after discovering a backpack filled with pipe bombs and alerting police. The film tells the true story of how Jewell was unjustly vilified by the news media, which falsely reported that he was the terrorist.

But at one point in the movie, Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter Kathy Scruggs trades sex with an FBI agent for confidential information. According to the former colleagues of Scruggs, who died in 2001, this never happened.

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The filmmakers could have easily avoided the controversy by not including this detail. It's not exactly a critical plot point. But to me, their decision to include it – whether it happened or not – comes as no surprise.

For decades, I've been studying the image of the female journalist in popular culture, and I've discovered a clear, troubling trend: When female journalists appear in film and television, they often fall in love with their sources or with their colleagues.

In silent films, the sexual relationship between a female journalist and her source was simply suggested and consummated off-screen. For example, in the 1912 film "The Scoop," a female reporter leverages her sex appeal to get an exclusive interview with a reclusive millionaire.

It would be one thing if this were a relic of the silent film era. But the trope of dogged female reporters seducing sources has persisted through the decades, even as gender norms and dynamics have shifted.

In the 2005 film "Thank You for Smoking," for example, journalist Heather Holloway gets annoyed when one of her sources claims she used "off the record" material.

"You never said anything about off the record," she tells him.

"I presumed anything said while I was inside you was privileged," he answers.

"Sharp Objects," a 2018 HBO miniseries, features an alcoholic newspaper reporter who not only sleeps with a detective on the case, but also with an underage suspect.

And in both the American and British versions of "House of Cards," female reporters sleep with politicians who feed them exclusive stories.

In the British version, reporter Mattie Storin has a torrid affair with the Conservative Party chief, who repays her by leaking her information. In the U.S. version, reporter Zoe Barnes is a young blogger who sleeps with the House majority whip. Both end up murdered by their sources.

Other examples in television dramas abound:

- There's columnist Susan Berg in "Political Animals," who sleeps with her editor and a White House source.
- Sports reporter Noelle Saris in "Necessary Roughness" helps out a source by planting a story after she spends a night with him.
- Reporter Christine Hill in "Dexter" sleeps with a policeman to get the inside information on a serial killer.
- Tabloid editor Lucy Spiller in "Dirt" sleeps with anyone who can give her exclusive gossip on celebrities.

The list goes on.

What sort of effect does this stereotype have?

For one, it suggests that women's investigative reporting skills aren't on par with those of their male counterparts, so they need to resort to flirting and sex. Second, it signals that women are willing to do anything for a scoop.

Female reporters have long faced discrimination in newsrooms; they needed to go the extra mile before being accepted as "real" journalists. With women still facing an uphill battle in the media industry, these sorts of depictions in popular culture do little to help their cause.

There's a key difference, however, in the portrayal of Scruggs in "Richard Jewell." She was a real reporter, but in the film she's shown engaging in unethical and immoral activities.

Because Scruggs died in 2001, she cannot defend herself. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution contends that its reporter is reduced to a "sex-trading object in the film," calling it "false and malicious."

Warner Bros. fell back on the disclaimer used in all docudramas: "The film is based on actual historical events. Dialogue and certain events and characters contained in the film were created for the purposes of dramatization."

And therein lies the problem. While watching a film based on real life, how does the viewer know what is false and what's been altered "for the purposes of dramatization"?

Although there's nothing commendable about depicting female journalists as willing to do anything to get a story, I think it's completely unnecessary when the journalist is based on real reporter.

It's ironic that a film about how the media can destroy innocent people ends up needlessly damaging the reputation of a real-life journalist.

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