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# Journalists in film: heroes and villains

Brian McNair

In November 2010, the world watched as 33 Chilean miners were rescued from the depths of the earth where they had been stranded since July. We were able to watch because the world's news media were there, drawn by the human drama, the suspense, the spectacle. It was a great news story, ideally suited for the 24-hour news culture we live in today, and the globalised audience that consumes it. Nothing much happened for 68 of those 69 days, until that final 24 hours when the miners emerged. But we were transfixed, engrossed, immersed in the story.

The story had a happy ending, for which we should be thankful, but the sight of all those cameras and crews and correspondents covering every moment of the unfolding drama reminded this observer of one of the greatest films about journalism ever made – Billy Wilder's *Ace in the hole*, starring Kirk Douglas and released in 1951. Douglas plays a journalist down on his luck who talks his way onto the staff of the *Albuquerque Sun-Bulletin*. Just when he is despairing of ever finding a decent story, Chuck comes across a minor accident in the desert, a man trapped in a cave. Instead of rescuing him there and then, as he could, he manufactures a media spectacle that goes tragically wrong, dragging out the rescue for every ounce of human interest he can squeeze from it. The American media gather *en masse*, the public queue for hot dogs and souvenirs – in the US the film was released with the title *The big carnival*. Chuck gets his headlines and another shot at the big time back East.

But the man dies, and so in the end does the journalist. Not for the first time, or the last, the movie industry portrayed journalism and those who practise it as dark, corrupting forces, willing to sacrifice honesty, truth, even life itself for the sake of a good story. Here, as often in movie history, the journalist is one of the archetypal movie villains.

But film makers have also portrayed journalists as heroes. Ed Murrow in *Good night, and good luck* (George Clooney, 2005); Daniel and Marianne Pearl in *A mighty heart* (Michael Winterbottom, 2007); Russell Crowe in *State of play* (Ron Howard, 2008). And, of course, the daddy of all journalism movies: Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President's men* (Alan Pakula, 1976).

Movie makers love journalists at one moment, hate them the next; but above all they are fascinated by them. Journalists have been featured in thousands of movies since the invention of cinema nearly a century ago, including some of the very best films ever made, such as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1940) and *Sweet smell of success* (Alexander MacKendrick, 1957).

My book on *Journalists in film* (McNair, 2010) focuses on the period 1997-2008, during which I identified around 70 films featuring journalists as major characters, in a variety of genres including comedy (*Anchorman*, Adam MacKay, 2004), drama (*A mighty heart*) and horror (*REC*, Jaume Balaguero, Paco Plaza, 2007). Since the publication of the book there have been many more films featuring journalism and journalists in the mainstream multiplex – *The girl with the dragon tattoo* (Nils Arden Oplev, 2009) and *Monsters* (Gareth Edwards, 2010).

Which leads to the question – why have journalists been such a source of inspiration for writers, directors and actors? After all, films haven't been made in such numbers about accountants, or teachers, or indeed university professors. Few other professional groups have so fascinated movie makers, so consistently. Why is this? First, let's not forget that film makers are people too,

and understand, like the rest of us, that journalism is important. It is indeed our window on the world, and what it reports matters for all kinds of reasons.

Journalism doesn't just report the world, though; it can be a powerful tool for changing it, for making it a better place. Change provokes resistance, and resistance fuels drama. The journalist's Fourth Estate watchdog role often takes her into the exciting, sometimes dangerous world of investigation and expose. The journalist is like a detective, licensed to find out things which people want to remain hidden. When it does that, as the Wikileaks affair has shown, journalism often involves confrontation with power and authority. Journalists go places and do things the rest of us rarely experience. Their work is exciting, sometimes, and glamorous. That makes them inherently interesting for narrative cinema.

Journalism is great thriller material, then, as well as the stuff of moral and ethical dilemmas. Because if journalists are public servants (and I'd argue that they are), they're also manufacturers of a commercial product. The resulting tension makes for great satire, as in 1976's *Network* (Sydney Lumet) where Peter Finch's old-school news anchor is ground down and eventually destroyed by the pressure to boost ratings. Or the aforementioned *Ace in the hole*. See too Stephen Fear's *Accidental hero* (1994), or Costa Gavras' *Mad city* (1998), in which the clash of commercial demands and journalistic integrity drive the narrative. The difficulty of reconciling public and private interests in the journalist's work is a recurring theme of movie makers down the years, from *His girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) to *State of play*.

So much for the movie makers' motivation. What about mine? Why did I write a book about journalism movies? I am a media sociologist and a journalism educator. I'm also a movie lover. So this subject, for me, is both business and pleasure.

Movies are a way into understanding what a society thinks of its journalists, what expectations it has of them, what concerns and anxieties. From *Citizen Kane* to *Capote*, the movies form a cultural history of liberal journalism. They are a valuable resource for anyone who wants to understand the place of journalism in our society, and that includes students of journalism.

They also reflect the challenges our journalists face at any given time. Cinema is one of the key cultural spaces where a society rehearses its anxieties and fears, holds up a mirror to itself and talks about its problems. That it does so with the help of A-list stars such as Cate, Angelina, George, Russell and Nicole means that film is a very engaging vehicle for holding this conversation.

Movies aren't just a catalyst for critical self-reflection by students of journalism in the classroom, though; from a sociological perspective they are *the* central myth-making medium of our societies. Films are regularly accessed by more citizens on average than read even the most successful novel or watch a top-rated TV drama. Films about journalism, by extension, are where societies articulate their agreed journalistic values, explore and interrogate them, and critique the application of these values both by the journalistic media themselves (as in Billy Ray's *Shattered glass* [2003]), and by the powerful in their relationship to the news media (*Good night, and good luck* [George Clooney, 2005]). Some films, such as Michael Mann's *The insider* (1998), critique both journalism and power. The cinema may be viewed in this context as a Fifth Estate, watching over the Fourth.

Let me summarise the movie-maker's cultural role under four headings:

- ▶ *educational* (and normative, imparting public knowledge about what journalism is expected to do in a democracy) – this may not be an intentional role, but even the fluffiest of romantic comedies, such as *Runaway bride* (Rob Marshall, 1998), reflects deep-rooted cultural assumptions about how a journalist should operate – in that film, that he should not lie or invent stories, for example.

- ▶ *mythological* and *celebratory* (bringing public attention to, and soliciting praise for, the achievements of journalism at its best – Pakula’s *All the President’s men* is the exemplar here);
- ▶ *regulatory* (undertaking critical scrutiny of the scrutineers, acting as watchdogs of the watchdogs);
- ▶ *defensive*, against those who would suppress the critical and dissenting tendencies in liberal journalism. (Clooney’s *Good night, and good luck*, about the role of American TV journalism in resisting the McCarthy witch hunts, illustrates this role).

## So what do the movies tell us about journalism?

Movies, like the public who watch them, are ambivalent about the Fourth Estate. On the one hand, journalism is perceived by many (not least the thousands of young people who apply to study it universities all over the world), as glamorous and exciting. On the other hand, opinion polls regularly show journalists as high on the list of the most despised professional groups. A 2006 MORI poll found that journalists were the least trusted of 16 professions.

So we both love and loathe our journalists, often at the same time. The mystique and glamour of their profession, alongside their capacity to menace and harass, is a large part of what makes them so interesting to film-makers and writers, as well as to cinema audiences. Movies about journalism reflect this cultural duality, which is why I sub-titled my book “heroes & villains”.

Journalists in film, as in real life, are noble heroes at one moment, ignoble hacks at another. For every Ed Murrow in *Good night, and good luck*, there’s a Wayne Gale (played by Robert Downey Jr. in *Natural born killers* [Oliver Stone, 1994]). In reality, of course, most journalists stand somewhere between these extremes of heroism and villainy. And the ability to capture that complexity is, I’d argue, a feature of many of the best movies about journalism.

## Some villains

In *His girl Friday*, for example, adapted by Howard Hawks from Ben Hecht’s 1922 stage play *The front page*, Gary Grant (the George Clooney of his day) as tabloid editor Walter Burns is both hero and villain – a rogue whom we can’t help but like, even as we disapprove of his ruthless determination to get the story. Like the caricature of the hard-bitten hack down the years, Walter smokes and drinks more or less constantly, albeit with great style. He’s glamorous, and sexy, but definitely not to be trusted. He’s a bit of a cad, but he’s also charming. In this film Grant defines the stereotype of the journalist as romantic, but usually flawed, hero (think, too, of Richard Gere in *Runaway bride* and George Clooney in *One fine day*). A bad boy, but sexy with it.

Then there are the true villains, with few if any redeeming features: Kirk Douglas as Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the hole*, a passionate critique of the excesses of journalism in America, more than 60 years old but still relevant. Wilder’s is a film about the capacity of journalism to manufacture reality, to manipulate and mould events for the purpose not of enlightening or informing citizens, but to sell newspapers, without regard to the interests of the people involved. The script lacerates a distorted and corrupt set of news values which remain very much in place today, and explicitly contrasts the professional dominance of these values with the theoretical ideals promoted by journalism schools.

Chuck Tatum stands for the arrogance and amorality of popular journalism at its worst, as novice Herbie has his beliefs in the nobility of his profession gradually undermined. The contemporary student who wishes to understand the values which drive popular journalism in the 21st

century may begin right here, in the New Mexico desert of the early 1950s.

My own personal favourite amongst villainous representations of journalism is *Sweet smell of success* (a preference which has nothing to do with the fact that the director was Glaswegian). The film now sits in the US Library of Congress, recognised as an American classic. MacKendrick's study of a brutal newspaper columnist was a commercial flop in 1957. The film has grown in stature ever since. Inspired by the *modus operandi* of real-life journalist Walter Winchell, it examines the abuse of media power in terms which still resonate today. Hunsecker's bullying, including that of a US senator whom he confronts in his favourite New York night club, highlights what happens when the Fourth Estate becomes over-powerful.

## Heroes

What about the heroes of journalism? The good news for journalists is that there are quite a few in the movies. They tend to be those characters engaged in the normatively approved sub-sectors of the professions: watchdogs, such as investigative journalists Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President's men*; and witnesses, such as James Wood's foreign correspondent in *Salvador* (Oliver Stone, 1984). They do what journalists in a liberal democracy are supposed to do – scrutinise, tell truth to power, make authority accountable. The films in which they appear represent a celebration of journalism at its best – courageous, honest, self-sacrificing.

If one is to look for patterns or trends in the films of 1997-2008, it is notable that journalists are represented mainly as heroic figures. Of 70-plus films about journalism released in that decade, in 80 per cent of them the main journalist character is portrayed at least positively, often heroically. This surprised me, because the tendency in recent journalistic writing about journalism movies is to accuse them of lazy and negative stereotyping, of crude caricature. Stereotypes there are, of course, because that's in the nature of narrative fiction. But, I would argue, there are not very many negative stereotypes of journalism in this period.

Why so positive? Perhaps journalists in these films are celebrated because much of the 1997-2008 period was spent in a state of "war against terror". These were wars in which journalists became, to an unusual extent, targets. Journalists in these circumstances *were* heroes, in every sense, and a number of films portrayed them as courageous, sometimes foolhardy figures, prepared to risk professional suicide and even death to get the truth. The emblematic film of this type is *A mighty heart*, made by British director Michael Winterbottom. This is the story of Daniel Pearl and his brutal execution in Pakistan in 2002. And of his wife, Marianne, also a journalist, played by Angelina Jolie, who bore witness to his disappearance and death while heavily pregnant.

*A mighty heart* highlights the bravery – the reckless bravery, it should be said – of a journalist who believes his quest for objectivity and truth will protect him from becoming a casualty of war. And why shouldn't he? Why wouldn't al-Qaeda want their point of view to be reported fairly, by a man with integrity? He paid for this belief with his life – the first Western journalist to be killed in a manner that was the stuff of nightmares – beheaded, on camera, the video then used as a weapon of further terror and propaganda.

Journalists in this war were fighting not only against Islamists holding contempt for the concept of objectivity, even when it was applied to them by a journalist of integrity and honour; they fought also with their own authorities for the right to report the war freely. Robert Redford's *Lions for lambs* (2005) has Meryl Streep as a political reporter sucked into a misinformation campaign by a pro-war senator (played by Tom Cruise). In the end, we assume she has lost her job by refusing to go along with the plan.

*Good night, and good luck* used the true story of the fight by Ed Murrow and his colleagues

on NBC's flagship current affairs program to report critically on the McCarthy witch hunts. By director George Clooney's own account he was seeking to make a point, and not a very complimentary one, about the contemporary media's relationship with the powerful. Resist the pressure to self-censor, to cover up, to toe the official line, the movie says. There were also heroic investigative reporters like Al Pacino as Lowell Bergman in *The insider* (Michael Mann, 1998), and Cate Blanchett in *Veronica Guerin* (Joel Schumacher, 2003), about the Irish reporter shot dead by gangsters in the 1990s – both true stories.

There were also, in the 1997-2008 period a number of artistic heroes in movies about journalism – two on the life of Truman Capote and his classic work of new journalism, *In cold blood*; two on Hunter S. Thompson, including a documentary and an adaptation of his 1972 classic work of “new journalism”, *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas* – reflecting our late 20<sup>th</sup> century, post-modern appreciation of the fact that journalism is, or can be, an art form, in which the subjectivity of the author is central; that even in journalism, the lines between truth and fiction are blurred.

There were a few notable villains between 1997 and 2008, yes – in stories mainly about the popular end of journalism – the British red-top tabloid newspaper, celebrity journalism and the paparazzi. Where journalists were depicted as liars, blackmailers, illegal drug users, murderers, they tended to be in sectors of the business generally regarded with disdain by liberal critics of an overly commercialised media. And, in the case of *Paparazzi*, produced by Mel Gibson and released straight to DVD in 2004, inspired by his own experience at the hands of the celebrity media. The British-made *Rag tale* (Mary McGuckian, 2004) was better at depicting the brutal cynicism of the worst of popular journalism.

The notable exception to the pattern of “villain = popular” was *Shattered glass* (Billy Ray, 2003), the true story of Stephen Glass's short and controversial career at the *New Republic*, during which he fabricated some 40 feature articles and nearly destroyed the reputation of a leading US print title. This film made only \$3 million at the box office. It belongs with the classics, however, and is notable for two reasons.

First, it documents the moment when authority and influence in the public sphere began to shift from print to the internet. The film focuses in on the *New Republic*'s meticulous editorial process, with a memorable sequence portraying the checking and revising stages through which every article passes. Not only is the sequence an interesting lesson in one dimension of “objectivity” – the importance of checking sources and verifying claims – it raises the question: if such a rigorous process is in place, how on earth could a young novice such as Glass so abuse his employers' trust and get away with it?

The second noteworthy feature of this film is that the lies of Stephen Glass were uncovered by what was then, in 1998, the very new medium of online journalism – *Forbes digital tool*. An online publication, using internet search methods, had exposed the flaw at the heart of America's old media. This may be seen as the moment when power and authority began to shift from old to new media in the US.

## Heroines

A second feature of the films made about journalism between 1997 and 2008 is that so many lead journalistic roles are played by women. I discuss at length in the book the representation of women journalists since the early days of cinema. It is striking, however, that in recent years the number and context of their appearance as movie characters has increased significantly. In the period 1997-2008 women were depicted as war correspondents in *Three kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) and *No man's land* (Danis Tanovich, 2002); as investigative reporters in *Veronica Guerin* and *The life of David Gale* (Alan Parker 2003); as political journalists in *Lions for lambs*. In the

post-1996 films examined for this book, women journalists featured as lead or key supporting characters in more than half.

Women have always been represented as serious journalists, from the sassy intelligence of Rosalind Russell (who so easily outmanoeuvres Cary Grant's Walter in *His girl Friday*) to the reckless courage of Veronica Guerin. Their on-screen visibility has increased, however, at the same time as the content of their representation has changed to reflect an evolving sex-political environment and culture. Lois Lane in *Superman returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) is not the Lois Lane played by Margot Kidder opposite Christopher Reeves. She is a Pulitzer-prize winning single mother, tough and resourceful, no pushover to be whisked away on the night air by a masterful man of steel. She is, in short, the embodiment of a particular kind of feminist, an expression of the positive changes which have affected the lives of real women.

Feminism has meant a re-evaluation and reassertion of femininity, and what used to be dismissively referred to as the journalism of "women's issues" – that is, coverage in magazines and newspapers of domestic matters, fashion and human interest. Recent films about journalism, such as *The devil wears Prada* (David Frankel, 2006) and *Sex and the city* (Michael Patrick King, 2008), have reflected these changes. Such films frequently contain within them debates about the relative worthiness of gossip columns, or fashion spreads, or celebrity interviews, and they are often critical, but such journalism is no longer presented as laughable, even when it is portrayed in late teen comedies such as *13 going on thirty* (Gary Winnick, 2004) and *How to lose a guy in 10 days* (Donald Petrie, 2003). The position of women in late patriarchy has changed, and with it the status of women working within the lifestyle and entertainment spheres of the media.

## Conclusion

Since the publication of *Journalists in film* there has been a steady flow of mainstream releases featuring journalists as lead characters, many of them positive roles, many of them women – *Morning glory* (Roger Michell, 2010); *Crazy heart* (Scott Cooper, 2009); in Australia, *Balibo* (Robert Connolly, 2009). A second edition of the book, should it come to pass, will find many new examples of the genre, evidence that our love-hate relationship with the journalistic profession shows no signs of fizzling out. We await with interest the inevitable movie which will be made about Julian Assange and Wikileaks, or the first to dramatise the role of the citizen journalist in the North African revolts. As the journalism industry evolves, so too the movie business will continue to provide a commentary on its twists and turns.

## Author

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