

Response from Bonnie Brennen

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Howard Good's intriguing article on the crisis facing the image of the journalist in popular culture provides us with an opportunity to address the role of popular culture in American society. In this essay I will discuss the issue of conflating the image of journalists with the profession of journalism. I will also address the practice of idealizing journalism as a profession and will suggest why we should view elements of popular culture as cultural practices rather than as reflections of a successful genre.

On a basic level, I think Professor Good has not properly differentiated the study of the depictions of journalists in popular culture with the field of journalism as a career. For me, concerns about the future viability of the profession of journalism do not necessarily signal the demise of representations of journalism in popular culture. While the profession may be flailing, it does not mean that the practice of journalism will disappear, or that the lives and actions of journalists will not continue to be a staple of popular culture. Journalism will continue to exist and examples of great reporting abound. I have read excellent journalistic accounts informing the American people about the undemocratic actions of the Trump administration. There has also been exceptional coverage of the challenges reporters on the front line are facing covering the COVID-19 pandemic along with insightful commentary about the future of journalism in the U.S. and the rest of the world. While many of these reports represent excellence in journalism, they also represent great resources for future popular culture depictions of journalists.

Many types of popular culture routinely draw on historical experiences, cases and events that offer continued relevance to the current era. And frequently, elements of popular culture use historical examples to explore contemporary issues, particularly when it is not possible to openly debate those issues. For example, Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, which was a semi-fictionalized account of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692-93, was written as an allegory of McCarthyism, a time when criticizing the communist witch hunts quickly brought accusations of having Communist sympathies. These baseless accusations also resulted in the persecution of many writers and journalists.

If the profession of traditional journalism fails in the U.S. amid the current environment, that does not mean that all journalism will cease to exist or that it will no longer be represented in popular culture. At its best journalism is an idealistic calling, and even in a time of blatant lies, propaganda, disinformation and a hostility to science and information, many news workers still seek to accurately report the news. Many reporters continue to hold with the dictum that journalists should "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." There is insightful, investigative work that continues to be done by reporters, news teams and columnists on legacy press outlets, online news sites, and non-profit newsrooms and in newly focused public interest magazines. This is not the first time that journalists have faced threats from politicians, business leaders, law enforcement or the public. For example: abolitionists were routinely attacked and their presses were destroyed by those who supported slavery; newspaper editors on the American frontier were threatened and run out of town by business leaders and local citizens who took issue with their coverage; and hundreds of reporters who worked on underground newspapers during the 1960s were harassed, beaten and intimidated by law enforcement officials.

Professor Good's comments also seem to idealize the profession of journalism. While efforts to destroy the legitimacy of the press undermine our democracy and must be called out, most legacy news organizations have a history of anti-labor policies, which has reinforced class privilege and resulted in low wages and poor working conditions for news workers.

Traditionally, mainstream news organizations have supported the status quo and have been extremely slow to report on key social and political issues like civil rights, gender equality, homelessness, or environmental reform.

However, American journalism history provides us with important examples of news workers and media professionals who stood up to repressive actions from those in power. The actions of these journalists continue to be depicted in popular culture many years after they occurred. Many of these stories focus less on the professionalism of journalism or on members of the elite mainstream press but instead often address the determination and actions of individual reporters and a few brave editors and publishers who were committed to speaking truth to power. Some of these journalists worked for traditional news organizations while others worked independently on alternative or progressive publications. The Watergate coverage is often mentioned as a key moment for the profession of journalism, and popular culture representations have elevated Woodward and Bernstein to mythic status for bringing down a president and inspiring future generations of journalists. Yet I think it is important to remember that for the first nine-months of the Watergate investigation, the *Washington Post* took the lead and incurred the wrath of the Nixon administration and many other traditional news organizations that did not cover the story.

The following are three other historical examples of journalistic excellence apart from the traditional journalism which continue to be addressed in popular culture: At the end of the

nineteenth century, when mainstream newspapers did not report on civil rights issues or on the daily lives of women and minorities, a young African-American reporter and editor, Ida B. Wells, began an investigation into the practice of lynching. In response to her reportage, Wells' office was destroyed; she was harassed with death threats and run out of town. She was also warned never to return to her home in Memphis, Tennessee. Wells' investigations of lynching were published in the Black press, in international newspapers and in book form. While traditional newspapers did not run her investigations, Wells' examinations of lynching ultimately led to international awareness of the issue and the eventual condemnation of the practice.

During the muckraking era at the turn of the twentieth century, many investigative reporters and writers worked outside of mainstream newspapers. Their muckraking articles, based on careful fact-driven assessments of political and governmental institutions, were published in mass-circulation magazines and in fiction and non-fiction books while being serialized in some newspapers. Yet most daily newspapers did not publish their reports for fear of reprisals from local and regional business leaders. The muckrakers used words and images to educate and activate the public about the concentration of wealth, the corruption of the political process and the growing inequities in American society. Ultimately, the impact of their investigations led to a variety of legislative reforms at the local, state and national levels.

In the early 1950s, Joseph R. McCarthy stirred up hatred and prejudice by accusing thousands of innocent people of communist sympathies. His baseless charges destroyed many careers and humiliated thousands of others who were asked to name names or face charges themselves. The mainstream press faithfully reported each of his charges. Worse, the elite Washington press corps publicized and helped McCarthy with his bogus witch hunts. They did not challenge McCarthy but instead served as his accomplices, chronicling each of his spurious

charges without fact-checking or follow up. Some daily journalists also did research, wrote drafts of McCarthy's speeches and provided him with names of "suspected" communist sympathizers.

While most journalists did not challenge McCarthy, there were a few reporters, like Miles McMillin, a columnist and editorial writer on the Madison, Wisconsin *Capital Times*, who stood up to McCarthy and asked him to provide evidence for his charges, which of course he never did.

On a fundamental level, Professor Good suggests that the images of journalists that appear in popular culture constitute a "successful genre." However, he is concerned that with the contemporary decline of journalism, the "compelling cultural icon" of the journalist is in jeopardy. I would like to suggest that elements of popular culture contain more than successful genres and may be seen as cultural practices that are created at a particular historic time and influenced by specific social, economic and political forces. Popular culture is a type of practical communication that articulates the experiences of people at a specific place and time. An exploration of popular culture adds a richness to traditional historical evidence which enhances our understandings of the historical process.

When we evaluate depictions of journalists in popular culture, those representations help us to understand specific cultural and ideological practices that influence the field of journalism as well as the value and role that journalists have played in society. Popular culture provides us with material evidence of journalists and their lived experiences – that is, their working conditions, their daily routines, and the stories they cover, as well as the responses to their work by business leaders, politicians and the public. Offerings of popular culture provide us with narrations, which are the explanations, understandings and meanings that help us to contextualize specific events and characters within the economic, political and social factors in society.

Novels, movies, cartoons, songs and other types of popular culture are particularly adept at incorporating the actively lived and felt meanings and values of individuals and groups within society. We can see that popular culture is developed at a particular historical time and within a specific cultural environment, which influences its creators in a variety of ways. The result may be referred to as a “structure of feeling” that permeates the narration that they create.

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams developed the concept “structure of feeling” to distinguish practical, evolving and lived experiences of individuals from the more fixed and formal beliefs that exist in society. Structure of feeling may be seen to reside in the imagination. It is an active type of recognition of something that is knowable but which is not yet known and which provides us with a deeper understanding of an event, place or issue. A structure of feeling may be seen within popular culture representations, which not only conveys ideological perspectives but also provides us with a deeper, more nuanced understanding of societal norms, values and priorities, work routines, traditions and events.

Adopting a cultural approach, media researchers have used newspaper novels, cartoons, photographs, television programs, Hollywood films and other elements of popular culture as historical evidence to help understand the working conditions and the lived experiences of journalists. While elements of popular culture may offer a compelling genre, they also provide insights and evidence into specific news practices, analyze and critique journalism norms, and help us to consider the meanings and motives of such practices.

Cultural assessments of depictions of journalists in popular culture include an understanding of the material conditions and context under which elements of popular culture are produced. They also include an evaluation of the popular materials’ relevance, the creators’ intent, and the public’s response to and use of those materials. Along with considering the

political, economic and cultural influences on popular culture offerings about news workers, these evaluations also consider motivations, expectations and human relationships and how they influenced the depictions of journalists in popular culture.

Ultimately, whether daily traditional journalism thrives or fails, representations of journalists in popular culture will continue to elicit a rich understanding of the experiences of news workers at historically specific moments in society and will provide us with a valuable resource with which to construct a cultural history of journalists.