

The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture in the 21st Century

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The image of the journalist in popular American culture is, like the institution of journalism itself, in crisis. In fact, the image is in crisis because journalism is.

Journalism, print journalism in particular, has lost the primacy that characterized it for most of the 20th century. This can be demonstrated through a few choice statistics. In recent years, 32,000 newsroom employees have been laid off from their jobs, including 7,200 in 2019 alone. Twenty percent of all metropolitan newspapers have closed since 2004. Today 60 percent of U.S. counties have no daily newspaper.

The most immediate cause of this decline is, of course, the digital revolution. Advertising revenue that sustained print publications now flows to Big Tech: Google, Facebook, Amazon, Twitter, Snapchat, and Microsoft, among others. Erosion in the public's respect for the professionalism of journalists has further contributed to the decline – a decline, I would add, that jeopardizes the image of the journalist as a compelling cultural icon in movies, TV shows, comics, and novels.

Attacks on the press have been around for as long as the press has. Over the past half-decade, though, the attacks have acquired extraordinary salience. President Donald Trump made a national policy of deriding any reporting critical of him or his administration as “fake news.” He went so far as to display during televised news conferences his impatience and disgust with the hardier members of the White House press corps.

Trump's abuse of what he sneeringly referred to as the “lamestream media” was

amplified again and again by his allies on TV and radio and in the blogosphere. The overall goal was to weaken the institutional authority of journalism in the eyes of the public, and given the volume and vehemence of the abuse, it presumably has achieved that goal to some degree. “Fake news” was Collins Dictionary’s word of the year in 2017.

Probably even more damaging to the status of journalists has been the culture-wide loss of trust in professional expertise. No longer do professional credentials, titles, or work experience command deference to one’s judgment. Doctors, scientists, historians, and, yes, journalists have had their authority disputed, if not supplanted, by the riffraff that run free on digital media – anti-vaxxers, climate change deniers, right-wing conspiracy theorists, and plain old nut jobs.

There was a time when journalists were enshrined as the gatekeepers of society. Following well established protocols for verifying the truth, they strived to separate fact from fiction, doing their professional best to guarantee the integrity of the news Americans read, heard, and saw. This order of things was turned upside down with the rise of digital media. Instead of editors safeguarding the channels of information and communication, we now have, in the words of author Antonio Garcia Martinez, “internet-enabled rumor and hearsay arbitrated only by algorithms.” It’s no longer as clear as it once was what value society attaches to journalistic work.

All this has serious implications for the image of the journalist in popular culture. To understand why that is so, we need to look back to the American 1880s and ’90s. It was then that journalism began to emerge as a coherent profession and the journalist, specifically the newspaper reporter, as a distinct social type, available for appropriation by popular culture.

The expanding role of the reporter was an extension of the expanding role of the

newspaper in a period of unprecedented urbanization, immigration, and mechanization. To serve the new urban masses, the newspaper required more reporters, and more kinds of reporters, than ever before. The reporter who would race uptown, downtown, around town in pursuit of hot news became one of the defining figures of the cityscape.

In this bigger, faster, messier America, many responded to the messiness by grasping hold of a professional identity and the social status associated with it. The founding of professional organizations in fields ranging from librarianship to engineering to mortuary science helped fill the void left by the disappearance of traditional cultural reference points. Between 1880 and 1920, journalism as well acquired the outward trappings of a profession. There emerged press clubs, professional journals, a code of ethics, even a scattering of college courses in news writing, the earliest being Rapid Writing at the University of Michigan.

As the sphere of journalistic activity and influence increased, and the professional profile of journalism solidified, journalism became a legitimate subject for plays, novels, and short stories. That is, a genre of journalism fiction developed in tandem with the development of journalism as a profession. Beginning in the 1890s, short story collections – Jesse Lynch Williams' *The Stolen Stories and Other Newspaper Stories*, Elizabeth G. Jordan's *Tales of the City Room*, Richard Harding Davis' *Gallegher and Other Stories* – set the journalist on a path to become the hero (and occasionally the villain) of adventures, mysteries, romances, and melodramas, not only in books, but also later in movies and on TV.

So here is the conundrum: if the image of the journalist in popular culture was inspired by the emergence of journalism as a profession in the late 19th century, and if it was sustained in the 20th century by the authoritativeness of the great metropolitan newspapers, what happens to the image now that classic journalism has largely ceased to matter, has been superseded by digital

media that disdain the old journalistic verities and regard professionalism almost as a negative?

The possibility that the image of the journalist will lose cultural traction may seem far-fetched to some. After all, the image has persisted through the Great Depression, two world wars, newspaper strikes, the growth of monopoly media ownership, suburbanization, and frequent assaults on freedom of the press. And yet it isn't unheard of for a literary, movie, or TV genre to fade into irrelevance.

Take the Western, once the most popular Hollywood genre. From 1910 to 1960, approximately a quarter of all movies were Westerns, and cowboy hats and horses were similarly a staple on TV. But, as any fan of the Western can tell you, Western movies and TV series are currently few and far between. The reason is simple: the genre fell out of touch with the culture. Tropes that were central to the traditional Western – genocidal violence against native Americans, for example, or the demonization of female sexuality in the person of the saloon girl – don't play in this era of Fourth Wave feminism and Indigenous Peoples' Day.

The cultural context has changed just as radically for the image of the journalist. Print journalism is moribund, hooked up to a morphine drip. Is there still journalism being practiced? Of course. We have cable news. We have Facebook's News Feed. We even have (thank God) newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. What we don't have is a journalism with a fixed professional identity. Digital media have shattered that. Anybody who has a rumor to spread and a smart phone can now claim to be doing journalism and, worse, get away with it.

With newspapers shutting down and journalism jobs drying up, and with no agreed-on criteria for who qualifies as a professional journalist, it seems the journalist may have only a limited future as a figure in the panorama of popular culture. The most notable newspaper

movies of recent years, *Spotlight* (2015) and *The Post* (2017), suggest as much. Both are set in the past – *Spotlight* circa 2001, *The Post* circa 1971 – the one place where the traditional characters and iconography of the newspaper movie remain plausible. And, like *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), another prestige movie set in a vanished journalistic world, they serve as critical commentaries on the institutional disarray of contemporary journalism. In other words, these movies remind us just how difficult it would be to tell similarly heroic narratives about the professionally compromised, tech-heavy journalism of today.

If this sounds unduly bleak, it is really no bleaker than the prospects of journalism regaining its former professional glory. Look, it may be that journalism, as an institution and a profession, will somehow find a way to right itself, in which case the image of the journalist will have renewed cultural relevance. But if it doesn't, if journalism continues on a downward spiral, what then?

Here's what: the journalist would cease to be a significant presence on the screen and elsewhere in popular culture. He or she might linger in vestigial form on the periphery of the action, but an entire movie genre devoted to journalistic exploits is unlikely, to say the least, at a time when journalism itself is suffering from a terminal identity crisis. As a matter of fact, even old newspaper movies, portraying work rituals that no longer exist, being performed by characters that no longer have real-life counterparts, may become little more than curiosities, the obscure relics of bygone eras.

Which literary, movie, or TV genres prosper, which die, and which just limp along depend on a multitude of factors, but chief among them is how well a genre keeps up with shifts in the public mood. A successful genre is ideologically attuned to the historical moment. Only then can it work its magic – fulfill through its protagonists, settings, and standard plots an

audience's yearning for escape or reassurance or catharsis.

For decades, the image of the journalist in its various aspects – star reporter, sassy girl reporter, crusading reporter, courageous war correspondent – spoke to audiences in terms audiences wanted, even needed, to hear. But journalism and the world at large have moved beyond the streetwise, wisecracking journalist of movies of the 1930s and the yuppieish, career-conscious journalist of movies of the 1970s and '80s. Their kind have been dragged down by the undertow of history and nothing of equal cultural resonance has yet risen to replace them. The archetypal newspaper movie, the 1931 version of *The Front Page*, opens with a title card that says, "This story is laid in a Mythical Kingdom." Intended in its day as a sly joke, it seems today more like a prophecy.