

**Response from Maurine Beasley:  
The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture of the Future**

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Who is a journalist today? What is journalism in a society dominated by images and ever-less dependent on words that used to be the stuff of the journalist's trade? Will journalism and journalists survive long enough to have a future? My crystal ball looks quite cloudy – but, yes, I think I see SOMEONE there in the next few decades who might answer all these questions. And this individual, whose color may well not be white, like the majority of journalists today, takes on heroic proportions. Let's say "they" to avoid the trap of he/she/it and see what "they" are up too. In contrast to journalists of the past, "they" may not play a specific gendered role.

"They" does not work for a news organization. Quite possibly "they" used to, but all the changes, consolidations, buyouts, closings, lack of advertising revenue, and social media fixations have plunged "they" right out any door. So "they" now has become a lone wolf, an intrepid cow/boy/girl/person ready to pursue truth and round up facts without the backing of any particular employer.

In short, "they" is a self-employed investigative reporter who ignores lack of financial resources and, quite possibly, educational credentials like a college degree, because "they" are determined to focus intently on wrongdoing. In fact, prototypes of such individuals do exist today. One always can go back to the notable career of I. F. Stone, who contended that "all governments lie," and that mainstream media simply served governmental and corporate interests.

More recently, look at the work of the relatively unknown John S. Adams in Montana. He tracked the use of "dark money" to buy state elections in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the "Citizens United" case that in effect permitted corporations to pour unlimited amounts of money into political campaigns.

Adams figured prominently in the 2018 political thriller *Dark Money*, distributed on DVD by the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). It publicizes the influence of untraceable corporate money on the electoral processes. The film begins with a youthful Adams, working as a reporter for a newspaper in Great Falls, Montana, investigating complaints of misleading advertising directed against candidates for the state legislature. It shows him losing his job when the newspaper chain that employed him decided to close its bureau at the state capital. Rather than trying to stay on with the chain in another capacity, Adams made a bold decision to move out of his house and live mainly in his truck, staying from time to time in friends' cabins and serving as a watchdog on state environmental issues, which were his particular concerns. A dramatic scene pictures him packing up his investigative records as he plans to hit the road to "travel around and find stories, wherever they are."

And find them he does, including detailed accounts of under-the-table election practices that mysteriously turned up in a crack house and were placed in an obscure state office building. Free from the demands of a 9 to 5 job, Adams spent untold hours poring over these documents. He pieced together the story of clandestine operatives with unlimited funds engaged in electing state lawmakers by setting up phony organizations beholden to hidden corporate interests. Adams was convinced they endangered both the political and environmental landscape in Montana.

To air his findings, he launched an electronic newspaper, *MontanaFreePress.org*. His reports were picked up by mainstream media and attracted attention from members of the public, some of whom contributed financially to his journalistic efforts. In the film Adams displays some cash and exclaims that he actually "raised enough money in one week" to cover his reporting expenses for the same period. But, what about other weeks? Adams appears unconcerned, motivated by passion for shedding light on public issues and oblivious to more mundane matters. His reporting yielded results: A key member of the legislature was convicted of illegal campaign practices and defeated for re-election.

In my crystal ball, Adams models what will become the image of the indefatigable journalist in popular culture in the near future. The crystal gives a glimpse of legions of college students today who still are majoring in journalism, often in spite of opposition from their parents who urge them to seek a more lucrative and flourishing field. While some want to cover sports and entertainment news, others are drawn to the image of a lone individual, armed with a notebook, computer and camera, out to right social wrongs.

Young people long have been drawn to investigative reporting. For example, journalism enrollment increased in the 1970s after two youthful reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, were credited with major roles in uncovering the Watergate political scandal that caused the resignation of President Richard M. Nixon. Woodward and Bernstein, however, drew on the resources of a major newspaper, *The Washington Post*, that paid their salaries. Their significance in popular culture has passed into history.

It looks like the image of the investigative journalist in the twenty-first century will lack much relationship to the traditional news structures of the Watergate era. Instead, it will present an entrepreneur more akin to the traveling knights of yore determined to slay dragons of injustice than to denizens of corporate newsrooms. Alas, this entrepreneur will lack monetary reward except that provided by a civic-minded public.

But, wait – my crystal ball has another image of the journalist – one far, far into the future. I cannot see it very plainly; it is decades away from the one I just have described. I dimly perceive a shadowy group of THEMs battling among themselves. Can it be? Yes, the THEMs are robots and the main group is being attacked by a single THEM who seems to be putting up a good fight! It's the War of the Robots.

I can barely hear an announcer give a play-by-play, but I think this is what is happening. Most of the robots have been programmed to carry out orders of the elite robots who seek to control the populace, robotic or not, I'm not sure. But one robot has been programmed differently –

to uphold a tarnished concept from way back before the computer age – a concept called Truth.

This robot even has been given a quaint identity from the distant past – that of being a journalist.

Sadly, at this point my ball totally clouds up and I have no way of telling what the outcome will be. I can only hope that the right THEM – the one called a journalist – will win out in the age of cyberspace.