A theoretical model for understanding journalism in film

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Introduction

The journalism industry remains an immensely prevalent source of inspiration for both screenwriters and television writers, as journalists "have been ubiquitous characters in popular culture" for decades upon decades (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015, p. 1). This trend shows no overt signs of slowing down despite an increasingly shrinking journalism industry, one where "layoffs have become a fact of life" (Hare, 2020). It seems, according to scholars, obvious that purveyors of popular culture see journalism as a field interesting enough to base whole productions around, while also historically utilizing journalist characters as a modern-day version of a Shakespearian chorus (Painter & Wilkins, 2021). However, while writers may find journalism a convenient plot device, these depictions "are likely to shape people's impressions of the news media at least as much if not more than the actual press does" (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015, p. 1). Evidence that popular culture shapes our world view goes back decades, with arguably the prominence of cultivation theory the most salient example. Results from studies applying cultivation illustrate how those people "who say they are exposed to greater amounts of television are predicted to be more likely to exhibit perceptions and beliefs that reflect the television world messages" (Potter, 1994, p. 1). While the use of cultivation theory in communication research dramatically decreased over the last several years due to potential methodological concerns, there are many scholars who argue that in today's overly mediated society, the potential for cultivation effects increases significantly (Morgan et al., 2014). In effect, in the United States specifically, but also across most areas of the world, people are consuming more popular culture artifacts than ever

before. With online viewing increasing dramatically each year, people view more programming today than at any other point in the history of the United States (Roberts, 2019). Furthermore, in the years leading up to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the United States and global box office results set records, with 2018 as the biggest year in the history of the United States box office, and 2019 the third biggest (Mojo, 2022).

In American popular culture, journalists have played a starring role since the early days of Hollywood with classic films such as *Gentlemen of the Press* (1929), *The Front Page* (1931), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Ace in the Hole* (1951). This continues into recent years with well-received fare such as *State of Play* (2009), *Spotlight* (2015), *The Post* (2017), *Richard Jewell* (2019) and *The French Dispatch* (2021). Recent scholarship analyzing how journalists are depicted in popular culture often points to a heroes or villains (or scoundrels) dichotomy, with journalists typically presented as either democracy-protecting protagonists who put personal desires aside, or as adulation-chasing rogues who consistently display low morals (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; McNair, 2010). However, this binary more than likely overlooks a more nuanced depiction of journalists (Ferrucci, 2018; Painter & Wilkins, 2021). But, as previously noted, these depictions, particularly over time, undoubtedly shape the public's perceptions of journalism, and considering popular culture more often depicts journalism in a negative manner (McNair, 2014), and that people are consuming more popular culture than ever before, it should come as no surprise that trust in media in the United States is at an all-time low (Salmon, 2021). Unquestionably, there are numerous factors influencing the American public's current view on the media, but popular culture assuredly plays a role (Gitlin, 1983), and the percentage of Americans who say they have "some trust" in national news has gone from 76% in 2016, to 58% in 2021 (Gottfried & Liedke, 2021).

Journalism as an institution is socially constructed, a discursively defined profession with norms, ethics and perceptions shaped by those inside and outside the field (Carlson, 2016). Zelizer (1993) labeled the profession an interpretative community, a field in a constant state of flux as actors ostensibly attempt to wield power to have their attitudes and beliefs become the prevailing thought within the field. Summarily, popular culture depictions not only shape how the public views journalism, but also how those within field view it, and, perhaps more importantly, affect the very definitions and normative belief systems existent across the industry (Ferrucci, 2018; Helskens, 2025). And within any socially constructed discipline, "any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can then be reproduced" across the field (Berger & Luckmann, 1990, p. 53). This current study attempts to unearth a more nuanced understanding of how journalism is depicted in film by creating a theoretical model of depiction. Through this theoretical model that goes far beyond a simplistic binary of hero or villain, a more refined understanding of how journalism is depicted can be understood, which can then provide valuable insight into how the public understands the field of journalism, and how these depictions could be influencing the profession.

Depiction in Popular Culture

Scholars from across multiple fields and disciplines often look to depictions in popular culture to understand societal views. Both humanities fields such as history, media studies and cultural studies and disciplines often considered social sciences such as anthropology, sociology and mass communication consistently publish scholarship concerning popular culture, as the fertile area went "from an academic backwater to a swift intellectual river where expansive currents from different disciplines meet" (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991, p. 1). Empirical work across multiple fields provides ample evidence of how the effects of popular culture, and

specifically depictions of various attributes, can impact how society interprets and views a topic or field. For example, an important body of work overwhelmingly illustrates how popular culture depictions of both gender and race, often stereotypical depictions, "play a role in the expectations" of society (Dagaz & Harger, 2011, p. 286). King (2000) tested how elements of humor in action sequences within programming can impact audiences' reactions to violence. She found that when action films such as *Die Hard* and the like utilize humor in the midst of overwhelming and sometimes cartoonish violence, it can make people number to violence in real life, noting that "even short-term effects may have notable societal implications" (King, 2000, p. 22). A large body of work also illustrates how popular culture can impact behavior, specifically due to advertising (e.g., Perry et al., 1997).

More theoretical work across cultural studies often sees the connection between depictions in popular culture and societal views and behaviors. In a seminal work, Gitlin (1980) contended that depictions of the radical left in a post 1960s world negatively affected how audiences viewed the left's ideology, effectively arguing that popular culture can significantly impact politics in America. Taking that notion even further, scholars reason that popular culture depictions of politics are an explicit form of political communication (Van Zoonen, 2000). More saliently, Van Zoonen (2007) argued that the viewing of fictional political programming such as films based around the presidency can impact how people then present themselves politically. Others maintain that the country's views on numerous societal issues such as, for example, abortion or poverty can often be traced back to depictions within pop culture (Klein, 2011). This contention mirrors that of numerous scholars that claim the United States' stereotypical views on gender not coincidentally align with popular culture depictions of women historically (e.g., Dow, 1996; Durham & Kellner, 2012). Schudson (1992) even maintains that popular culture impacts

the way society views history, noting that when thinking about Watergate, citizens' collective memory often supports the film *All the President's Men's* recounting of the subject rather than actual reality. Many have argued the same for the journalism industry, that depictions in popular culture of journalistic practice prodigiously influence how people see the field (Ferrucci, 2018; Painter & Wilkins, 2021).

The Image of Journalism in Popular Culture

The 1931 film adaptation of the screwball comedy play *The Front Page* hit American movie theaters only four years after the first film with sound, a detail that illustrates how engrained journalism is with American movie history (Ehrlich, 1997; McNair, 2010). The film's success with both critics (multiple Oscar nominations) and audiences (relatively impressive box office returns) catalyzed a consistent release schedule for films about journalism (Ehrlich, 2006). But, of course, popular culture representations of journalists not only happen in film. Reporters and editors play a prominent role in novels and television (Brennen, 2000; Peters, 2015). This popularity within popular culture "underscores journalism's preeminence in American life even (as it) highlights tensions at the profession's core" (Ehrlich, 1997, p. 6). These tensions, as previously noted, often come in the form of villainess portrayals of journalists, depictions that habitually show unethical journalists not serving the good of democracy but attempting to attain personal gain through moral failures (Ehrlich, 2005; Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; Good, 2007). However, even when portrayals feature morally suspect journalists, they often draw "lessons from them in a way that typically maintains the status quo" of journalism's place in a democracy, ostensibly ridiculing and highlighting the ethical misdeed while celebrating the potential power of journalism to undergird civil democracy (Ehrlich, 1997, p. 9).

Many journalism studies scholars have looked to popular culture to understand how it depicts journalistic practice and, therefore, to pontificate on how audiences might imagine journalistic work. Overwhelmingly this work contends depictions demonstrate an industry prone to moral lapses and short cuts, despite some heroic successes. For example, while both television and film alike have recently provided audiences with examples of journalists selflessly putting their communities before their own personal lives and apparently strengthening civic goals (e.g., Painter, 2017; Painter & Scherb, 2021), in many cases, these very same depictions also portray journalists as stenographers happily disseminating unverified proclamations from corrupt powerful people (Ferrucci & Painter, 2014; Ferrucci & Painter, 2018), or attempting to succeed despite devastatingly negative influence from corporate ownership only interested in economic success (Ferrucci & Painter, 2016; Peters, 2015). And while negative depictions of journalism often do celebrate the profession overall, the amount of unethical behavior of journalists onscreen vastly overstates the known frequency of these behaviors in real life (Ehrlich, 2005; McNair, 2010, 2014).

The Depiction of Gender within Journalism in Popular Culture

While the vast majority of scholarship concerning the depictions of journalism in popular culture treat portrayals as a relatively binary proposition, as journalists as either heroes or villains (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; McNair, 2010), there are more gradated analyses of how gender remains of substantive import within these depictions. This is not something unique to journalistic portrayals, as "popular culture stories about women are usually markedly different from popular stories about men" (Van Zoonen, 2000, p. 8).

In an early example of this sentiment, Dow (1990), analyzing *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, contended that while the television program often earned deserved plaudits for its

relatively progressive depiction of a single woman journalist navigating a successful occupational life, a more critical reading of the show highlights a less obvious articulation of a hegemonic view of womanhood. This significantly parallels the findings of Painter and Ferrucci (2012) who, through an investigation of the television comedy *Sports Night*, found that while female journalists held leadership positions in this fictional newsroom, they still unfailingly relied on subordinate males to make important journalistic decisions, and dependably allowed their personal lives to negatively impact their professional responsibilities, something absent in the depictions of male journalists. In fact, across multiple studies, the same scholars found that when compared to male counterparts, female journalists on fictionalized television consistently come across more negatively, endure more ethical lapses and often rely on men for professional success (Painter & Ferrucci, 2015, 2017, 2019). Most specifically, concerning how these gendered portrayals potentially impact audiences, Waddell (2021) hypothesized that the more people view female journalists in popular culture unethically sleeping with sources – a common occurrence, especially in film – the more likely they would perceive these behaviors as realistic. Unsurprisingly, this survey found that, among audiences, stereotypes concerning female journalists, stereotypes often cemented in popular culture, were the largest predictor of perceived realism (Waddell, 2021). Likewise, more recent research showed significant effects in terms of the impact of television's stereotypical depictions of journalists (De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven & Dhaenens, 2024).

This current study, therefore, attempts to move past the binaries often cited when discussing journalistic depiction in popular culture. Through the creation of a theoretical model, the paper allows scholars to more fully appreciate the nuanced – albeit still relatively inflexible – manner with which popular culture depicts journalists. To conceptualize this model, this study

utilizes a grounded theory approach toward an analysis of 27 iconic films about journalism, as decided by the influential journalism think thank Poynter (Jones, 2021).

Method

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a grounded theory approach to the analysis of data. As a reaction to the almost ubiquitous functionalist theoretical frameworks of the time, Glaser and Strauss (1967) conceptualized grounded theory as a qualitative approach standing in stark opposition to the predominance of research attempting to find or test grand theories or verify empirical data. Instead of purely applying theory and then testing data, grounded theory allows scholars the ability to "build theory 'from the ground up' through systematic conceptualization and constant comparisons with similar and distinct research areas" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 245). Grounded theory studies emerged from sociology due to a necessity, scholars argued, for emergent non-grand theories emanating from unambiguous and clear coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In effect, grounded theory allows researchers the ability to build theory through a constant and consistent exposure to the data, slowly building a cohesive and transparent framework through "iterative rounds of coding and memo writing (that) facilitate theory construction through processes of revisiting, defamiliarizing, and alternative casing" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 169).

Data

To best understand how popular culture depicts journalists and, subsequently, create a theoretical model of depiction, the researcher sought a sample of popular and influential depictions. Since very few television programs revolve primarily around journalism (Good, 2007; Painter & Wilkins, 2021), the researcher utilized a representative sample from film. In

2021, the Poynter Institute published a list of the 25 "best" movies about journalism, a list featuring films that "perfectly capture the journalistic experience" (Jones, 2021, para. 4). This list was then compared to other ones published by both organizations on the inside of journalism such as the *Columbia Journalism Review* (Croatto, 2018), and from more mainstream sources such as *USA Today* (Truitt, 2018). While no differences between the films on each of the lists occurred, the researcher did add two films released after the original publication of the Poynter list: *Bombshell* and *Richard Jewell*. Analyzing recognized popular and acclaimed films allows the researcher to create a sample that optimally represents the general public's perceptions of the journalism industry.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Data Analysis

To apply a grounded theory approach, this study employed a textual analysis of the 27 films chosen for the sample. A textual analysis of popular culture allows the researchers to "unearth the meaning of individual programs and links them to broader social formations and problems" (Miller, 2010, p. 23). Saliently, this type of analysis allows for an understanding of all the films individually, but then for a more holistic understanding of how the data set collectively articulates a worldview to the public (Fairclough, 2003). Because meaning-making is a fundamental stage in the social production of knowledge, textual analysis serves as a way researchers seek to elucidate all possible meanings from textual artifacts and then collectively attempt to hypothesize how these meanings translate to the viewers (Lester-Roushanzamir & Raman, 1999). This meaning-making process thus unearths potential readings of the data that assume "that behavioral patterns, values, and attitudes found in this material reflect and affect the behaviors, attitudes and values" of both the producers and consumers (Berger, 1998, p. 23). In

short, a combination of grounded theory and textual analysis allows for the building of a theoretical model that is desired for this study (Fursich, 2009; Phillipov, 2013). The researcher analyzed the data using the process outlined by Emerson et al. (1995), which required an iterative three-step process. First, the researcher viewed all the films, making notes throughout. Second, the researcher viewed all the films again, this time considering patterns or themes that emerged. Finally, the researcher then went through all the notes and themes and patterns and began assembling the model. This process occurred over an eight-month period between May 2021 and January 2022.

A Theoretical Model for Depiction of Journalism in Popular Culture

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Market Forces

While the theoretical model developed here includes distinct differences when comparing male and female journalists, a clear finding not discussed in prior research on popular depictions of journalism practice concerns the impact of market forces. In virtually every film analyzed for this study, journalists, both good and bad and both female and male, attempt to conduct their work in a manner that best shields them from market forces. In both a macro sense where market influence comes from unseen forces outside the newsroom, and in a micro sense where market influence comes from within the newsroom, journalists consistently practice their profession amidst an, at times, overbearing presence from market forces. The most seminal example of this comes in the 1976 film *Network*, which depicts the way network executives successfully, for a while, take advantage of the emotionally volatile and potentially dangerous behavior of anchor Howard Beale, all for the sake of more robust profits. Throughout *Network*, viewers see executives from the Union Broadcasting System (UBS) attempt to make journalism more

profitable through the flouting of normative ideals. *Network* satirically depicts the conglomeration of news as UBS' corporate parent exhibits a single-minded goal of profits to the detriment of any semblance of journalistic good. Throughout the film, viewers see the head of UBS news, Max Schumacher, struggle to maintain some resemblance of quality journalism, almost always failing due to market forces. While *Network* wholly satirizes the impact of economics on news, in other films this impact comes in less obvious forms.

Macro forces impacting journalism. In many of the films analyzed, market forces are often discussed as emanating outside the newsroom, coming from faceless business executives uncaring of journalistic goals. In these cases, journalists consistently struggle to do their best work by shielding themselves as much as possible. In some cases, this works, and in others, it does not. In *Broadcast News* (1987), network news producer Jane Craig is the first main character depicted in present day. In the film's first scene with adult main characters, Craig is shown delivering a speech at a conference for journalists; she laments the industry's increasing focus on entertaining news at the expense of hard news in an operational pivot blatantly aimed at increasing profits. Throughout the film, we see the impact of journalism's economic decline through both layoffs and executives openly discussing economics. All the while, the journalists in the film attempt to do quality work despite the circumstances. In *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), viewers experience the CBS News team, led by the legendary Edward R. Murrow, practice textbook watchdog journalism, all under threat of an advertising boycott. While Murrow and the rest of the journalists eventually publish one of the most important journalistic stories in the history of the United States, they accomplish this with the threat of job losses hanging in the air. In effect, while CBS corporate backs Murrow, the effect of advertisers threatening to boycott due to the story's subject matter absolutely impacts practice. In the end, viewers see Murrow lose

stature at CBS because, as implicitly told, advertising is held more sacred than quality journalism. Based in the same newsroom, only decades later, *The Insider* (1999) tells the story of how CBS corporate blocks the airing of an important piece of watchdog journalism due to its potential negative impact on the company's stock prices. In this particular film, corporate interests win out and the quality work of CBS journalists receives publication first in other news outlets. In films such as *State of Play* (2009) or *The China Syndrome* (1979), the influence of the market is less explicit, but in both cases, and others, journalists deal with unseen corporate bosses attempting to stop publication or the process of investigating a story all due to the potential for negative financial implications.

Micro forces impacting journalism. While less prevalent, some films analyzed depict journalists putting financial pressures on themselves. Occasionally, these journalists can be seen as mere middlemen for corporate overlords, but, unlike the macro forces identified earlier, in these cases journalists are not resisting market forces. In *The Paper* (1994), filmmakers depict managing editor Alicia Clark as almost enthusiastically imposing economically based decisions on her newsroom. In fact, in the film, business executives at the newspaper are basically never shown in any capacity regarding news practices, but Clark still consistently attempts to keep costs down, even when in disagreement with her newsroom boss, editor Bernie White. The *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee, as depicted in *The Post* (2017), very clearly puts journalistic success above economic success, but still engages in numerous conversations with newsroom co-workers about the potential negative financial implications of publishing the Pentagon Papers. Even in films undoubtedly not about economic forces in journalism, this subject still receives some screen time. For example, in *Shattered Glass* (2003), a film about the fabulist Stephen Glass, journalists are shown discussing the sub-optimal financial situation the

field of journalism finds itself in, and the decisions these journalists must make to achieve a form of success. Essentially, the film tells viewers that journalists themselves sometimes decide to make compromises in a quest for more economic stability.

While this study's model illustrates clear distinctions between male and female journalists, market forces encircle the entirety of the journalistic profession. For viewers watching films concerning journalism, it would be virtually impossible not to note how financial implications – perceived or otherwise – influences journalistic practice consistently and in a variety of manners.

Male Journalists

In all but a very limited amount of examples, male journalists in the films analyzed are faced with a clear initial choice: Pursue or not pursue a story with significant benefit to democracy and society, but with potential negative ramifications for the journalist himself. These stories vary in overt importance from presidential malfeasance (*All the President's Men*, 1976) to a story about a local crime (*The Paper*, 1994). And the potential negative ramifications vary from personal safety (*The Parallax View*, 1974) to public shunning (*Spotlight*, 2009). Regardless of the importance of the story or potential severity of the consequences though, in these cases the choice the male journalist must make is oftentimes both explicitly discussed by characters in the film and a key dramatic point in the plot. In *The Parallax View* (1974), reporter Joseph Frady must decide whether to pursue a story about violent corruption even though many connected to the potential story, including an ex-girlfriend, have mysteriously died or disappeared. British journalist David Frost knows he can produce an explosive and important broadcast story through a series of interviews with former United States president Richard Nixon, but without any network's financial backing, he must choose whether to fund the project himself at the risk of

great personal financial peril in *Frost/Nixon* (2008). In almost every based-on-real life film about legendary watchdog journalism, the reporters and editors all must choose whether to risk their careers to pursue important stories. In each of *All the President's Men* (1976), *Spotlight* (2009) and *The Post* (2017), scenes depict journalists telling each other or news executives informing journalists that, essentially, if they pursue the story and it turns out incorrect, they will lose their reputations and, therefore, careers.

In each and every instance analyzed, male journalists choose to pursue the journalistic good, the story. The result shown to viewers is a binary one: either significant professional success or personal tragedy. In the aforementioned *The Parallax View* (1974), reporter Frady, while chasing the story, never completely succeeds and ends up murdered by the very corrupt corporation he investigates. Investigative reporter Gary Webb succeeds in publishing a story linking the CIA to the drug trade, but the based-on-a-true-story film *Kill the Messenger* (2014) heavily implies, without any real-life evidence to back up the claim, that Webb is murdered for pursuing the story despite warnings. Viewers can also witness less-permanent tragedy through other films. For example, *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) shows that despite Edward R. Murrow's arguably heroic pursuit of reporting on McCarthyism, this very pursuit results in a severe diminishment of his power at both CBS and within journalism. Furthermore, cartoonist/journalist Robert Graysmith pursues the story of the Zodiac killer in *Zodiac* (2007), never lands the story and ultimately destroys his personal life in the process. In most cases, when a male journalist pursues a potentially dangerous story, though, the result is journalistic success without any negative consequences. In the aforementioned tales of legendary watchdogging, the journalists in *All the President's Men* (1976), Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, earn major awards and career-spanning success. In *The Post* (2017), editor Ben Bradlee and his newsroom is

overtly celebrated as defenders of democracy for persevering and publishing the Pentagon Papers. The reporters in *Spotlight* (2009) win career-defining awards and subsequently catalyze a reckoning within the Catholic church based on their reporting. *The Killing Fields* (1984) depicts both American journalist Sydney Schanberg and Cambodian journalist Dith Pran risking their lives to expose corruption and violence at the heart of the Khmer Rouge communist revolution in Cambodia. Both survive and experience great professional success in the aftermath. Henry Hackett, the protagonist in *The Paper* (1994), risks professional and personal losses in pursuit of his journalistic hunch and, in the end, is rewarded with a significantly important story that frees two wrongfully arrested teenager murder suspects. Over and over again in the films analyzed, male journalists must risk something meaningful to pursue a major story and the result is ternary: unqualified professional success (i.e., *All the President's Men*, *Spotlight*, *Live from Baghdad*, *Frost/Nixon*, *The Paper*, *Network*); monumental tragedy (i.e., *Reds*, *The Parallax View*, *Kill the Messenger*) or some combination of partial success and negative consequences (i.e., *The Killing Fields*, *Almost Famous*, The *Insider*, *Salvador*).

In it is important to note, when male journalists originally make a choice between professional good (the story) and personal safety (bodily or financial), their relationships do not even warrant a consideration. Male journalists are depicted as either so wholly dedicated to their profession that they have no time at all for romantic relationships (e.g., *All the President's Men*, *State of Play*), or have no qualms about habitually neglecting their significant others. These journalists are proverbially married to their jobs and show little if any empathy toward their significant others (e.g., *The Paper*, *The Insider*, *Reds*, *Zodiac*). In a sense, male journalists never have to make a decision between career and personal primarily because they are not expected to,

or when they do, viewers are told that male journalists will always bypass happiness in their personal lives for a chance at producing important journalism.

Female Journalists

While all female journalists analyzed also work within an environment featuring consistently circulating market forces, the situations encountered by female journalists are far different than their male counterparts. It must be noted, however, that in two particular movies, female journalists work within a team structure and this model therefore does not account for them. Ironically, Canadian actress Rachel McAdams plays characters working closely with male journalists in both *State of Play* (2009) and *Spotlight* (2015). In each of these circumstances, while slight differences in depictions absolutely identify male counterparts as superior practitioners – especially in *State of Play* (2009) – these characters do not face the same choices as women journalists in other films analyzed.

In the films analyzed featuring lead female journalists, each are presented as failing, in some way, to balance both their career and personal lives. They try to succeed in both areas, but fail and, subsequently, must attempt to succeed in only one area. For example, in *Absence of Malice* (1981), reporter Megan Carter is presented with a choice to truly investigate a story of potential import or focus on her personal life by dating one of the main stakeholders in the aforementioned story. Instead of choosing one or the other, Carter attempts to do both, ends up violating a myriad of normative journalistic ethics and, inadvertently, significantly contributes to the death of innocent woman. The implication is clear: Carter cannot succeed both personally and professionally and when she tries, the collateral damage to both her professional reputation (she ends up losing her job) and others involved is maximized. Another example of a character that attempts to balance the personal and professional is Jane Craig of *Broadcast News* (1987).

Filmmakers initially depict Craig as an ambitious and incredibly talented news producer with significant potential, but she soon gets romantically involved with a coworker, anchor Tom Grunick, while also becoming the unrequited love interest of another coworker, reporter Aaron Altman. Unlike her male counterparts in the film who also must balance the personal and professional, Craig is seen making unethical decisions that attempt to prioritize her personal life at the expense of the betterment of her newsroom. In other instances, while the male journalists can go to their jobs and succeed in many ways without letting their personal lives inhibit them, Craig cannot to do this. Besides making decisions to, for example, transfer a subordinate only because she's a competitor for Grunick's affection, Craig also consistently acts unprofessionally emotional at work, something the men never do. Only when Craig finally chooses to value her occupation and not her personal life does she unequivocally succeed, a compromise her male counterparts never make. That is similar to the outcome for the aforementioned Megan Carter also, who only is depicted as successful once she leaves journalism entirely to focus on her personal life.

In *The China Syndrome* (1979), television reporter Kimberly Wells and her colleague journalist Richard Adams tour a nuclear power plant and witness an event they believe to be important. At the onset, Adams implores the television station to air the story while Wells demurs, at one point saying, "I am not going to be ashamed for having a good job." In effect, viewers are shown two people with significantly contrasting behavior: a male reporter willing to sacrifice his own job to stand up to superiors in an effort to run a story about a potentially catastrophic event of significant public consequence versus a female reporter who also knows this is a big story, but attempts to balance her journalism career with her desire for personal success (finances). At one point in the film, Wells changes her mind, but it's only after pushing

her bosses for a more lucrative job (personal success) and Adams' consistent pressure. In effect, when she chooses only professional success, she can succeed. While many films depict women journalists at best subpar at their jobs but ethical (*The China Syndrome*) and, at worst, horrifically unethical (i.e., *Absence of Malice*, *Richard Jewell*), even when depicted as quality journalists, women let their personal lives get in the way of professional success. Similar to *Broadcast News* (1987), in *His Girl Friday* (1940), reporter Hildy Johnson is depicted as a quality muckraker, a former star reporter for her newspaper. Based on the theatrical slapstick play *The Front Page*, *His Girl Friday* (1940) turns the main character of Hildy from a male to female. But unlike in the original source material where Johnson is a hardboiled reporter who simply cannot leave the profession because it is so engrained in his identity, the Johnson of *His Girl Friday* (1940) clearly pines more for success in her personal life rather than her professional one. In effect, while still a great reporter, Hildy Johnson chooses love over journalism in *His Girl Friday* (1940). In *The Paper* (1994), managing editor Alicia Clark is forced into a binary decision: either act in a way benefitting her personal life, or one for the good of journalism. In the film, she is depicted as trying to do both (and failing at both), whereas her counterpart Henry Hacket is overtly shown choosing the normative goals of journalism, of getting the story right, over personal financial gain. Therefore, throughout the movie, Clark, the only main female character, is the only journalist actively trying to get the newsroom to do the wrong thing.

Discussion

In the past, while scholarship specifically examined the intersection of gender and depictions of journalism in popular culture (i.e., Dow, 1990; Painter & Ferrucci, 2012; Waddell, 2021), it typically did so without contrasting it with male depictions or considering the depictions within the context of all journalists in popular culture. And when researchers studied

the depiction of journalists overall, findings consistently noted, even when more nuanced analysis occurred, the existence of a binary: journalist as hero or journalist as villain (i.e., Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; McNair, 2010). These works and many others illustrate the importance of understanding how journalists operate on film and television, as these depictions are conduits for real life to the majority of viewers; in effect, these depictions serve as the basis for how regular non-journalists understand the profession itself (Ehrlich, 1997; Painter & Wilkins, 2021). This presented theoretical model allows for a much fuller understanding of how journalists operate in film.

The majority of extent scholarship on this subject focuses on the individual actions of journalists but does not often examine the context within which journalism practice occurs. The model presented here demonstrates why this is a significant oversight. A recent report from the respected Pew Research Center finds that many members of the public do not trust journalism due to economic factors (Gottfied et al., 2020). In fact, respondents essentially imply that journalism is not transparent about how it's funded, and respondents do not trust that decisions are made for the good of journalism versus the economic benefit of an organization. If researchers or journalists paid attention to how the profession is depicted in popular culture, this should come as no surprise. Regardless of an analyzed film's subject matter, including something as specific as the ethical lapses of Stephen Glass in *Shattered Glass* (2003) or the rampant sexual harassment omnipresent at Fox News in *Bombshell* (2019), market forces are discussed and unfailingly have impacts. Therefore, if this is all people consistently see of the profession, again, regardless of the circumstances, why would they trust journalists to deliver news without financial motivations at the forefront? In popular culture, journalists practice their profession wholly enveloped by the market forces existent due to journalism in the United States

having, historically, a decidedly for-profit model. While in colleges and universities and within newsrooms journalists are told of an impervious boundary between newsmaking and business operations in a news organization (Coddington, 2015), this figurative – or sometimes literal – wall simply does not exist in popular culture. It stands to reason, then, that audiences would not trust journalism to act as a public good first, but rather a business first and a public good second.

It is also important to note that with one clear exception in *Shattered Glass* (2003), there is no binary concerning male journalists in the film's analyzed: Male journalists are always heroes, despite whatever professional norms they flout while pursuing important stories, and regardless of how they treat people in their personal lives. In reality, the only villainess portrayals of journalists come in the form of women, with films such as *Absence of Malice* (1981), *The Paper* (1994), *Richard Jewell* (2019), *The China Syndrome* (1979), and *Reds* (1981) depicting female journalists at best as obstacles for male journalists to overcome on the way to publishing important work and, at worst, unethical scoundrels uncaring about journalistic standards. In two particular cases – *Absence of Malice* and *Richard Jewell* – the audacity with which seemingly experienced women journalists violate the very basic tenets of journalism ethics consistently stretches credulity; but these depictions no doubt contribute to some members of the public who believe that women journalists consistently sleep with their sources and lack the professionalism of their male counterparts (Waddell, 2021).

In a macro sense, female journalists in popular culture tend to encounter what many feminist scholars have called the double-bind. When writing about women in senior management positions in businesses, Jamieson (1995) defined a double-bind as when a woman views "two supposedly desirable states as mutually exclusive, the woman is invited to believe that she is incapable of attaining success" (p. 14). In effect, a double-bind presents women with options that

are all incomplete, something men rarely face (Senda-Cook, 2009). In journalism films, this double-bind position forces women to choose between attaining personal or professional success; they simply cannot have both. In each of these films, though, the women do want both. By comparison, whenever men want both, they can attain it and, sometimes, they just want professional success. For women journalists in movies, though, their decision on which type of success to desire "is potentially double-binding since it defines a professional woman in ways that ensure that accepting one aspect of her identity necessitates rejecting another aspect" (Wood & Conrad, 1983, p. 308). Unsurprisingly, then, journalism films reinforce hegemonic rules of patriarchy but in a way arguably far more insidious as not only can women not have success in both their private and personal lives at the same time – unlike men – but they are also consistently lacking in ethics and morals.

Another important thing to consider when thinking about depictions of journalists in films: This study analyzed films across eight decades. At no point do the conditions within which journalists operate significantly change. The journalists in movies from the 1940s face roughly similar situations and potentially nefarious influences and decisions as the ones in the 2010s. This is especially true of female journalists who must overcome the double-bind regardless of what decade or century they are working. While much research across journalism studies acknowledges significant changes within the journalism industry across time, these films do not reflect those changes. In popular culture, American journalism is essentially the same in the 1940s as the 1970s as the 2010s, and journalists are succeeding or failing in much of the same ways. This clearly could impact the public's perceptions of the field as they are not privy to depictions illustrating the seismic disruptions to the field caused by both economic and technological changes.

This newly presented theoretical model for journalistic depiction in popular culture provides future researchers with a framework to apply, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in both humanistic and social science research. It illustrates a more nuanced and clear understanding of how the creators of popular culture depict journalists, but a potentially more complete manner for understanding how the public views the field. In the future, this model can be used by scholars in a multitude of ways. First, future work could quantitively test the model and see if it can be predictive in some way. More likely, though, scholars can continue analyzing new film and television depictions of journalism to understand whether there any depictions that do not fit the model. This might show a move toward a concurrent shift in public perceptions of journalism. Effectively, if scholars use the model to guide future investigations, they could not only uncover any normative changes in depiction of the field, but also if and how this might be impacting public perceptions of the field. While academics have long contended that a binary depiction pattern exists, journalistic depictions are far more complicated and clearly, in popular culture, exist within a system facing constant financial pressures. This may very well help explain, partially, why the public views journalism the way it does (Gottfied et al., 2020).

While this study presents a useful and significant theoretical addition to the body of extant literature on the subject of journalistic depictions in popular culture, it does also have obvious limitations. First, this model emerged from the viewing of only 27 films where journalism practice is central to the plot; while these films have all had various levels of impact on American movie audiences, far more depictions of journalism exist, especially in television. It should be noted, also, that this study only examined two films from before 1950, though many consider the early days of films to be the heyday for journalism in popular culture. While this may be accurate, it is important to understand, we believe, that the vast majority of the public are

not rewatching films from the 1920s, but are seeing film depictions of journalism in newer, and more recently celebrated works such as the ones identified by Poynter. Second, while this model is predictive in the vast, vast majority of films analyzed, there are a couple – primarily *Shattered Glass* (2003) and *Bombshell* (2019) – that remain outliers. However, most saliently for this study, if journalism as a field and practice remains an interpretative community as contended by scholars such as Zelizer (1993) and Carlson (2016), and this community is shaped by those inside and outside the field, including the audience (Brennen, 2000), it is imperative to remember, as argued in a slightly different manner by Schudson (1992), that the depictions analyzed here could have a more significant impact on how the public views journalism than journalism itself does.

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Table 1. Films Analyzed By Name

Film Title	Director	Year Released
Absence of Malice	Sydney Pollack	1981
All the President's Men	Alan J. Pakula	1976
Almost Famous	Cameron Crowe	2000
Bombshell	Jay Roach	2019
Broadcast News	James L. Brooks	1987
The China Syndrome	James Bridges	1979
Citizen Kane	Orson Welles	1941
Frost/Nixon	Ron Howard	2008
Good Night and Good Luck	George Clooney	2005
His Girl Friday	Howard Hawkes	1940
The Insider	Michael Mann	1999
Kill the Messenger	Michael Cuesta	2014
The Killing Fields	Roland Joffe	1984
Live from Baghdad	Mick Jackson	2002
Network	Sydney Lumet	1976
The Paper	Ron Howard	1994
The Parallax View	Alan J. Pakula	1974
The Post	Stephen Spielberg	2017
Reds	Warren Beatty	1981
Richard Jewell	Clint Eastwood	2019
Salvador	Oliver Stone	1986
Shattered Glass	Billy Ray	2003
Spotlight	Tom McCarthy	2009
State of Play	Kevin Macdonald	2009
Under Fire	Roger Spottiswoode	1983
The Year of Living Dangerously	Peter Weir	1982
Zodiac	David Fincher	2007
Total		**27**

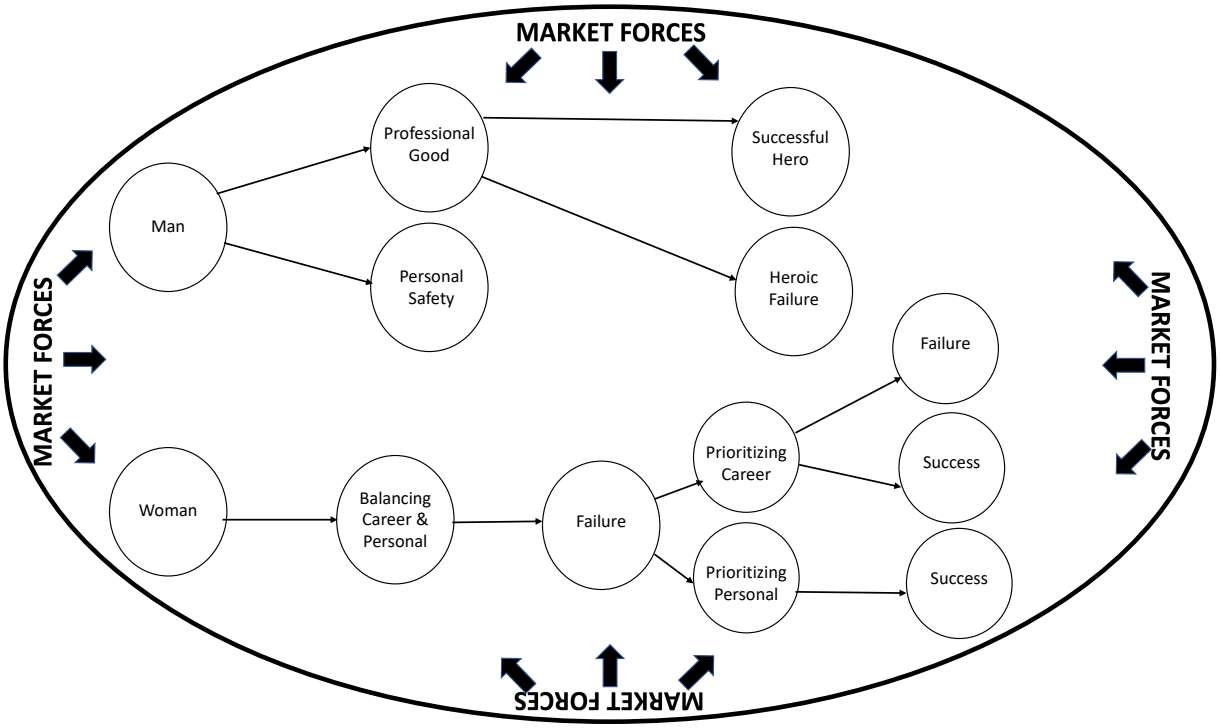

Figure 1. A theoretical model for predicting depiction of journalists in popular culture