Howard Good’s rich and suggestive essay starts from a provocative premise: “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.” His rhetorical goal is to call attention to the current threats to professionalized and institutionalized journalism by way of discussing how genres lose meaning over time. I come to this task as someone who has spent far more time thinking about how genres work than I have spent focusing on the crisis of journalism or representations of journalists in popular culture. While I question the premise of a post-journalistic society, I want to take the threat that the institutions, norms, and practices that defined journalism throughout the 20th century may soon collapse as a starting point from which to speculate about what such a state might mean for the future representation of the journalist in popular culture. I arrive at somewhat different conclusions than Good does:

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.
In what follows, I am going to outline two alternative scenarios for the future roles of the journalist in popular culture: In the first, I will consider what it might mean for what Good calls “journalism fiction” (stories where the reporter is “the hero and sometimes the villain”) to be a retrospective genre like the American western rather than a genre reflecting contemporary practice, functioning as a last gasp of a declining news culture. Here, we might argue that the “identity crisis” in American journalism will leave a traumatic residue that will needs to be worked through and as such, would give the genre its ongoing relevance. Here, old reporter stories never die, though they may slowly fade away. In the second, I imagine that the emergence of alternative, grassroots, or citizen journalistic practices might reshape journalism fiction for new audiences. In both cases, I anticipate the persistence of some core themes from journalism fiction into the future, even if the journalist as currently understood does not. Such themes are apt to gain even greater pertinence in a post-journalistic society. Throughout, I whole-heartedly agree with another of Good’s core premises: “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.”

**Scenario 1: The era of professional journalism ends, but the journalism fictions persist**

Good draws on the western as an important analogy for the persistence (or lack thereof) of popular representations of the reporter into the post-journalistic age:

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.

Yes and no -- yes, there are significantly fewer westerns made today than in, say, the 1950s, but for that reason, today’s westerns often have a much deeper intentionality in what they have to say about the core conflicts raised by the genre. Westerns today are more apt to be independent productions (*First Cow; Never Grow Old; Damsel; The Rider; Hostiles; The Ballad of Buster Skruggs*) or on streaming services (*Godless*) than Hollywood blockbusters. Yet, as a culture, we still grapple with some of the same issues that have fueled the genre since its beginnings. Many contemporary westerns, for example, reconsider the immigrant experience, using the genre to raise questions about our current understanding of borders. In this section, I want to consider the western’s trajectory as a predictor of what might happen to journalism fiction in a post-journalistic era.

Good suggests that stories with reporter protagonists took shape alongside the professionalization of journalism. He initially describes these fictions as including “adventures, mysteries, romances, and melodramas” across media and later discusses “newspaper movies” such as *The Post* and *Spotlight*, a category he extends to also include *Good Night, and Good Luck*, a story about broadcast news. So, the category of journalism fiction is as elastic or narrow as our definition of what counts as journalism, a core debate that is going to only become more important as we look to the future of both journalism as an institution and journalism fiction as a genre.¹ I am going to treat journalism fiction as a genre (born during the Progressive era) that represents a projective or aspirational perspective and seeks to promote the ideals of this
emerging profession. Sometimes the genre celebrated the successes of institutionalized journalism (as in the recent films Good cites). Sometimes these stories called attention to professional journalism’s failures to embody its ideals or achieve its potential. But either way, the representations helped to educate the public about what journalism -- at its best -- might achieve. The western, by contrast, was always a retrospective (and sometimes nostalgic) genre, looking backwards towards a world which no longer exists, but holding onto a set of debates about the merits of different directions the American nation might have taken. The westerns were never made for cowboys or schoolmarms: they were made for audiences that wanted to “return to yesteryear,” as the opening narration of radio’s *The Lone Ranger* promised.

The stage for the cinematic western was set by Frederic Jackson Turner’s 1893 paper, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner begins with the simple statement:

> Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.²

Turner declares the end of the era of the American frontier, arguing that the remaining free land was so fragmented and so much of the country had been settled that nothing like a frontier culture would persist into the 20th century. His thesis was intended to raise questions about where the energies of this still new nation would be directed in the absence of a frontier that functioned as a safety valve for those with unachieved ambitions and individualistic impulses. As historians of the screen western have noted, the films themselves can be set anywhere from Kentucky or Pennsylvania to Alaska, as long as they are situated at that moment
where the frontier is giving way to civilization, and as long as they speak to our deep
ambivalences about letting go of the values of raw courage, rugged individualism and collective
responsibility that have been associated with the frontiersmen (and now, frontierswomen) as a
social class.³

In a process Richard Slotkin calls “Regeneration Through Violence”, the frontiersman
uses his (in most cases historically, his) skills -- a kind of disciplined savagery -- to clear away
bad actors (savages, brutes, miscreants) and enable a more civilized west in which he has no
remaining role.⁴ He cannot live within the community he created because his violence, however
controlled, has no place inside the better society he has helped to birth, so the good man with a
gun heads off into the sunset, searching for new villainy to confront. The western as a genre is
about social transitions.

Painting with very broad strokes, the first film westerns were made by and for people
who still had memories of a frontier-based America, however faint or secondhand they might
have been. The genre built on conventions established by Buffalo Bill’s traveling Wild West
Shows. The first western stars, like Bronco Billy Anderson or William S. Hart, claimed some
direct lineage to the frontier even if it was largely fabricated by Hollywood press agents.

The second wave of westerns in the 1930s and 1940s (John Ford’s great films with John
Wayne; Michael Curtiz’s westerns with Errol Flynn) were made by and for people who had little
or no direct knowledge of frontier society but who had grown up watching western movies and
wanted to reproduce those thrilling adventures for their children. This was the classical period of
the western, marked by a high degree of mythologization (white hats and black hats, though
Ford’s films always pushed beyond such simplifications). This era can be summed up by the
line from a journalist at the close of John Ford’s The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance: “print the
legend.” These westerns promoted myths of American exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny that seemed -- at the time -- vital to the national interest during the Depression and the Second World War.

The third great era of the American western came in the 1950s in the midst of the Cold War as part of a larger effort to articulate the distinctive qualities of the national character and to defend the roots of democracy against the competing Soviet model. So television westerns proliferated, reproducing something akin to the classical model, but even more stripped down to its most idealistic core. But a second strand of cinematic westerns made by John Ford, William Wyler, Howard Hawks, Fritz Lang, Anthony Mann, Nicholas Ray, Samuel Fuller, and Budd Boetticher -- so-called “adult westerns” -- applied psychoanalytic perspectives to the issue of violence in the American west, in the process blurring moral lines and constructing the anti-hero (or perhaps more accurately, rebooting the figure, since Hart’s silent westerns often depicted “the good bad man” in narratives of personal redemption.)

And from the 1960s forward, we have seen increasingly critical perspectives on the American frontier, starting with Sam Peckinpah’s and Sergio Leone’s ultra-violent westerns made in response to the Vietnam War and later with films that shift perspectives so that the experiences of once marginalized groups -- indigenous peoples, blacks, Mexicans, immigrants, and women -- now are at the center of the genre. Films such as Posse or the most recent version of The Magnificent Seven offer rainbow coalitions of gunfighters appropriate within contemporary struggles over representation and inclusion. At any point along the way, we could find examples of elegiac westerns that suggest the end of the era, the death of the genre, yet the genre persists because it speaks to some core conflicts in American culture -- in particular, those around individualism and community, freedom and social welfare -- which, as current cultural
debates around wearing face masks or staying at home during the pandemic suggest, remain core
to our politics down to the current day. In short, “not dead yet.”

What can we learn from this? While it is significant that journalism fiction took shape at
a key moment in the professionalization and institutionalization of American journalism, the
persistence of the genre, its iconography, and its narrative formulas do not necessarily depend on
the persistence of those institutions as long as those conventions remain attached to core
ideological debates. The representation of the reporter in popular culture might well outlast the
reality of the reporter in American society.

I am sure others have done a much deeper, more systematic analysis of these debates, but
let me offer an old school model of the binary oppositions at play in contemporary journalism
fictions (including those advanced by Donald Trump and his supporters):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional journalism</th>
<th>“Fake News”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>Intrusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Packs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just the facts</td>
<td>Trust your guts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Respect for authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalistic truth</td>
<td>Fake news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance</td>
<td>Sensationalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow the money</td>
<td>Scandal-mongering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public service</td>
<td>Corporate media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skepticism</td>
<td>Cynicism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Partisanship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional process</td>
<td>Bureaucracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Shoe leather”    Stalking
Objectivity    Bias
“The truth will set us free”    Distractions

The first column represents our aspirations, what professional journalism hopes to be, what we celebrate when we document best-case examples, how many reporters imagine themselves, and what educators hope journalism students will internalize. The second column represents conservative (and to some degree, progressive) critiques of the news media and its impact, especially critiques regarding the corporate control, partisan bias, and the growing and more generalized skepticism towards institutions and expertise. These tensions are at the heart of the contemporary American culture war and have extended to other institutions, such as science, the intelligence community or the intelligentsia, aligning with the deep ideological divides in contemporary American politics.

Let’s thus imagine journalism fiction as a retrospective genre (like the western) rather than one which depicts contemporary reality. Let’s imagine that all of the remaining newspapers were to fold, one by one, in the face of the depression predicted to follow the pandemic. Let’s suppose an angry mob of “deplorables” rises up, hunts down all of the remaining professional journalists (AKA “enemies of the people”), and strings them up by their ink-stained thumbs. The trauma of that moment is apt to persist: Much like recollections of the frontier were for silent film viewers, memories of that moment will remain for those who grew up in an era when professional journalism was a dominant institution. Perhaps some old city room editors will escape and perform their legacy much as Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull did in the wild west shows. One group of filmmakers will celebrate the good old days of daily newspapers, while another will still be ranting about East Coast elites, “alternative facts” and deep state
conspiracies. These critiques, framed in different terms, have a long history and helped shape earlier journalism fictions such as *The Front Page, Five Star Final, Scandal Sheet, or Ace in the Hole*. Many contemporary students quickly recognize *Citizen Kane*, say, as engaging with debates regarding “fake news.” Even if it is a minority perspective in this post-journalism society, the celebration of journalistic excellence might persist as a cult or niche genre within an increasingly narrowcast media long after it has left mainstream consciousness. If there’s money to be made, films will be made for news fetishists just like any other kink.

Journalistic fiction as a genre will not follow the precise course of the western. I am not offering an inevitable model of genre evolution and decline, but we can assume that the current debates will persist for some time, that there will be a residual investment in both sides of these divides and that all sides will frame narratives to reflect their perspectives. As memories of actual practice lags, the genre conventions may take over, with new media-makers imitating the narrative tropes built up by earlier works. Keep in mind the higher percentage of detectives on film and television screens today compared to the actual role that private detectives play in most of our everyday lives. Minimally, the reporter will persist for some of the same reasons that the detective does -- because plots structured around investigation create dramatic tensions, allowing us to move deeper into individual psychology or institutions and reveal something of the dark side we all suspect may be lurking there. The reporter, by this point, may be a figure of nostalgic remorse, offering a lost cause mythology, holding onto a forgotten “code.” Yet, soon, a more skeptical generation will question whether professional journalism ever lived up to that heroic mythology, and thus we will usher in the era of “adult” or “revisionist” forms of journalism fiction. And so the cycle continues as we continue to debate what kind of information structure is required to sustain, we hope, American democracy into the future. More on this in a minute.
But let’s draw one further insight from the American western. So far, we have acted as if American popular culture exists in a vacuum, apart from a global cultural economy. Given that these films were widely exported, the American western provided a genre template that took root in a range of production contexts not just in terms of low cost alternatives to Hollywood products (for example, so-called spaghetti westerns), but also films made for local or regional markets that spoke to their own historic experiences -- for example, gaucho stories coming out of Argentina or Samurai stories from Japan. And then consider that while professional journalism may be in decline in the western democracies, these institutions are struggling to be born (or survive) in Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere. In different countries, journalism fictions will operate on a different timeline. And insofar as Hollywood has historically raided talent, adopted or simply stolen plots from foreign films, then Bollywood or Nollywood, Khazakiwood or Somaliwood will keep revitalizing how the popular journalist is represented in American media as well.

**Scenario 2: Institutional/professional journalism is displaced by one or another form of alternative or grassroots journalism**

If my last scenario started with Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 Frontier thesis, let me start this one with another visionary speech -- Clay Shirkey’s 2009 remarks at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy. Shirkey offered a chilling summation of the economic, technological, political, and cultural forces that threatened journalistic institutions. Arguing more or less what Good outlines here, Shirkey warned:

> Newspapers’ ability to produce accountability journalism is shrinking…. I am convinced that those changes are secular, monotonic, and irreversible, rather than being merely cyclic and waiting for the next go around….We are headed into a long trough of decline
in accountability journalism, because the old models are breaking faster than the new models can be put into place. But Shirkey takes his analysis one step beyond Good, suggesting that however rotten the short-term consequences of that collapse, there will emerge a range of alternative models for addressing the information needs of American communities:

There will not be anything that replaces newspapers, because if you could write the list of stuff you needed and organizational characteristics and it looked like newspapers, newspapers would be able to fill that role, right? It is really a shift from one class of institutions to the ecosystem as a whole where I think we have to situate the need of our society for accountability….We should really be transferring our concern to the production of lots and lots of smaller, overlapping models of accountability journalism, knowing that we won’t get it right in the beginning and not knowing which experiments are going to pan out.

Now, consider two other statements about the nature of the information environment as it operates in a state of flux. The first is Chuck D’s 1988 statement about the role that hip-hop culture played within the Black community, which has historically been under-served and under-represented by professional/institutionalized journalism: “Rap serves as the communication that they don’t get for themselves to make them feel good about themselves. Rap is black America’s TV station. It gives a whole perspective of what exists and what black life is about.” Chuck D is often misremembered as calling hip-hop “black America’s CNN,” a phrase evoked often by those of us who see popular culture, especially news comedy, as playing some of the roles once performed by professional journalists.
The second statement comes from the Knight Foundation’s 2011 report *Assessing Community Information Needs*. The goal, the Knight report said, is to create a healthy information environment that will:

enable people to become informed, engage with one another, address the issues they care about and create the community they want....In reality, most change in communities occurs through pockets of activity that emerge and take root over time. These pockets result from individuals, small groups, and various organizations seeing an opportunity for change and seizing it, often through trial and error. Seldom are the collection of such pockets orchestrated through a top-down, linear plan; instead, they happen when people and groups start to engage and interact. In this way, different groups at different times play a crucial catalytic and connecting role—helping to foster the conditions for people to tap their own potential and join together to forge a way forward.⁸

Here, the Knight Foundation sought to shift the debate from what is needed to save newspapers to what is needed to serve communities, seeking to inspire new experimentation in what roles communities might play in meeting their own needs.

Good’s analysis starts from a certain degree of skepticism, even professional distaste, for these new and emerging models of civic or citizen-based journalism: “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 smartphone can now claim to be doing journalism and, worse, get away with it.”

As a blogger, podcaster, and advocate for participatory culture, I adopt a different perspective. A decade or more into the process Shirkey anticipated, I want to make a few observations. First, it is absolutely true that journalists, especially investigative reporters, need
the support of powerful institutions (newspapers and their well-connected and well-financed publishers) if they are going to take on even more powerful institutions (such as Wall Street or the Trump Administration while it was still in power). But there are also rising concerns that corporate control over institutional journalism may constrain what can be said, putting the interests of media conglomerates over what was once perceived as the public interest. It is true that professionalization bestows a set of ethical standards often not followed by “amateur” or grassroots organizations shaped by different protocols, but it is also increasingly clear that citizens need to take ownership over the accuracy of the information they accept as true, and even more so over the information they put into circulation as young people, in particular, receive their information not from the front page of a newspaper but from their social media feeds. It is clear that a shift towards grassroots media-makers comes with its own dangers of misinformation and disinformation, hate speech and information bubbles that can further divide rather than serve these communities. And it is clear that institutionalized journalism has historically failed to meet the information needs of many communities -- not simply the black community that Chuck D referenced, but also many small towns in rural America that have never gotten adequate press coverage.  

As I write here, I am trying to avoid the term “citizen journalism,” because it is a flawed concept on multiple levels. First, I want professional journalists to think of themselves as citizens and to define their mission in the service of civic goals. Second, when I blog or podcast, I am not doing “journalism.” I do so in the service of my own professional mission (as a media scholar), not in aspiring to be a journalist. I now have access to an expanded capacity to produce and circulate media to a previously inaccessible public without going through journalistic gatekeepers who have often been anti-intellectual in their professional biases. And third, I don’t
want these new experiments to be held back by modeling themselves on what journalism has been rather than finding the best tools for meeting the information needs of their communities. But, nevertheless, I am suggesting we expand the term, journalistic fiction, to include these “pockets of activity.”

So, how might we envision future representations of the journalist (ever more broadly defined) in popular culture in the world Shirkey, Chuck D, and the Knight Foundation help us to imagine? Suppose a world where some forms of professional journalism persist, though in a weakened state, perhaps more prey than ever before to the corruptions and compromises wrought by their corporate ownership: perhaps these forms of journalism are more apt than the past to self-censor around sensitive topics, to play “both sides” logics in response to divisive public debates rather than adopt forceful positions, and to embrace sensationalism in their competition with other media in the attention economy. Within those institutions, there will still be men and women of conscience, old school journalists, trying to get the truth out to their communities, even if doing so places them at war with their own organizations. Such fictions can articulate traditional journalistic values even as they acknowledge the legitimacy of many critiques of the institutions that own and operate contemporary news.

Think of these characters as the journalistic equivalent of Dirty Harry -- a cop who refuses to accept the police force’s corruption and bureaucratic constraints, even as he still wears the badge and does the best job he can (at least according to his own code) to clean up the streets. Dirty Harry was a lightning rod for debate, precisely because the film pits “law and order” values against the organization that historically was seen by the public (or perhaps some sector of the public) as the instrument for those values. As they pursue these goals, these journalists often find themselves aligned with new kinds of reporters representing Knight’s “pockets of
activity,” often scrappy, grassroots organizations, without resources but with much heart, performing the functions of journalism without professional identities or institutional affiliations.

Any number of science fiction stories represent such a narrative. Take for example the television series, *Max Headroom*, where a team of television reporters (Edison Carter, Theora Jones) pursue the truth wherever it takes them while working for the corporate media (Network 24) which values ratings over human life (think Blipverts). The news team gets the results of their investigations out to the world in various ways: sometimes they depend on the mercy of a corporate executive, Ben Cheviot (modeled after Ben Bradlee, or perhaps only Jason Robards, hard to tell), who may put his fingers on the scale to protect his reporters and force his organization to do the right thing. Sometimes Max Headroom, Carter’s digital alter ego, disrupts the feed not unlike a culture jammer, circumventing corporate censorship because, well, information must be free. And sometimes they end up partnering with Blank Reg, who runs a pirate television outfit (Big Time TV) to make sure the information reaches the people who need it most. *Max Headroom* offers a complex account of journalistic values and practices within a hybrid media “ecosystem,” where institutional and grassroots practices are still negotiating their relations to each other and the public is seeking out information across diverse channels.

In such a world, reporters -- increasingly freelance or frustrated with their institutions--struggle to identify which channels are willing to push their messages out to the world. Here, we might read Ronan Farrow’s *Catch and Kill* against the more institutionally focused *All the President’s Men*. Woodward and Bernstein have the powerful support of *The Washington Post*, whereas Farrow shifts from network news to *The New Yorker* when his bosses refuse to release his reports on Harvey Weinstein. Imagine Farrow’s story as the template for future journalism fictions.
As we tell these new stories about journalists working outside established organizations, we may see a shift away from objectivity and towards transparency as a driving goal of the post-journalism narrative. For a model of what these new journalism fictions look like, we might point to the example of Spider Jerusalem in Warren Ellis’s *Transmetropolitan* comic book series: Spider (a cyberpunk reimagining of Hunter S. Thompson) constructs himself as a wild-man/agent provocateur, the only honest man in a corrupt universe, a master of the post-apocalyptic rant. But Spider is also governed by old school journalistic assumptions about the importance of speaking truth to power. He goes anywhere and does anything in the pursuit of his story, and he finds a world shaped by sinister conspiracies and callow self-interest, not to mention all kinds of post-human transformation and subcultural weirdness. As the series starts, he’s a major headache for his publishers, but ultimately, he breaks with institutionalized journalism: when his publishers at *The Word* refuses to publish his reports, he goes directly to the public via *The Hole*, an open newsfeed site. Here, he’s more Wikileaks than Ronan Farrow.

So far, we have considered stories focused on what happens within the residual forms of professional journalism. The period of experimentation and innovation Shirkey and Knight describe might result in stories about different configurations of news gathering, ones that progressively blur the line between reporter and activist. Another Warren Ellis comic book series, *Global Frequency*, envisions a smart mob-like intelligence agency, where people from all professional backgrounds step up as needed within a fully realized adhocracy in order to share knowledge or take action enabling citizens to hold nation-state governments accountable for the massive problems they have unleashed on the planet. Nobody is calling themselves a reporter, yet gathering information online and off remains core to their commitment to serving the public interest.
Or consider Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s 2009 film *MicMacs*, where a group of protestors kidnap the leaders of several major corporations, force them to confess to various crimes against humanity, and then release the confession to a global public via the internet. Here, the investigation is motivated by advocacy and self-interest (many of the gang are victims of the corporations’ irresponsible actions), and there are no ethical constraints (they want to get the truth out at any cost including kidnapping and torture). Yet underlying the story is the basic faith that “the truth will set us free,” and a final montage shows citizen networks helping to pass along the confessions because they share the traditional journalistic belief that the public has the right to know.

All of these stories speculate about what it might mean to live in a post-journalistic society -- not necessarily one where journalism has ceased to exist but one where institutionalized journalism may no longer be trusted to fulfill its historic missions and alternative structures are emerging to respond to that vacuum. Each of these alternative practices might generate their own genres or at least narrative conventions, reframing journalism fiction to stress grassroots rather than professional reporting.

Yet, however radical their representation of the news environment may be, each of these stories still articulate at least some core values from the legacy paradigms, in part because they are taking aspects of the plot structures of earlier journalism fictions as the basic building blocks for their narratives, just as these alternative forms of reporting build on the infrastructure provided by institutionalized journalism. This process of remixing, reproducing, and rebooting these older stories in new contexts and for new audiences is part of how popular culture operates over time. Carried to its logical extreme, decades from now, we may not recognize the iconography (consider how alien the tattoo-covered body and profane mouth of Spider Jerusalem
is from the cigar chomping scotch-swigging reporters in pin-striped suits in a 1930s drama), but underneath, the narratives may still build on the same thematic oppositions.

In none of these stories is institutionalized journalism dead. Rather, the worst elements envisioned by the news media’s critiques have taken hold. News is all about sensationalism and distraction, serves corporate interests, is dominated by ratings and beholden to authorities. Within those organizations, there are good people who still uphold the established values, but they often have to align with alternative channels in order to release their most urgent stories. Though change is hard, there is still a core belief that the truth will set us free. Such stories will play a core role in increasing the trust and accountability of the emerging alternatives to legacy journalism. If anything, these new stories are apt to be more idealistic and romantic about the power of a hardworking reporter to challenge official truths. These are stories about people who care enough about meeting the needs of their communities that they pursue truth without institutional protection and in some cases, without a business model to support their efforts. Of course, they are idealists, and insofar as they are the heroes of their stories, the cynical surface masks an idealistic hope for what the future of journalism might look like.

I have thus proposed two scenarios for the image of the journalist in popular culture in a post-journalistic era. In the first, the reporter-centered narrative has become a retrospective genre, looking back to what the press had been in the 20th century as a means of reflecting on struggles to shape the public perception of reality in their own era. Such narratives may be all the more urgent because of the absence of real-world institutions to embody those ideals. In the second, new hybrid narratives start to emerge to reflect an increasingly hybrid news “ecosystem.” In some cases, the professional reporter is still the protagonist, but often set at war with the increasingly distrusted institutions within which he or she is embedded. In other stories,
new agents who pursue old school journalistic values are operating to hold leaders accountable and protect the public’s right to know.

Of course, if the collapse of professional journalism results in a collapse of democracy and thus autocratic constraints on what stories may be told, or if the collapse of the market results in a loss of popular culture’s responsiveness to public tastes and interests, then all bets are off.

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Endnotes

1 I am bracketing here the question of whether journalism fiction constitutes a genre or whether it is a theme or a character that cuts across all genres: I would argue it is both. I am using Good’s journalism fiction to refer to this genre, since newspaper drama is too narrow to describe the range of different journalistic practices involved.


5 Interestingly, during the Spanish Flu pandemic in the early 20th century, masks were known as “Bill Harts,” evoking the top cowboy star of the era and thus giving the wearing of masks a rugged, masculine mystique.


