

# Modern Portrayals of Journalism in Film

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## Abstract

*As the journalism profession has evolved, so has the portrayal of journalism onscreen. Based on trends in past journalism films explored by scholars and research about current trends in the industry, it is hypothesized that journalism films released in the past five years fall under three categories: films about current media trends, nostalgic films about media history, and films about media ethics issues.*

## I. Introduction

Just as the industry of journalism is evolving, so is the portrayal of the media in film. In the 1930s, screwball comedies like *It Happened One Night* and *Meet John Doe* featured newspaper reporters who run into moral slip-ups but emerge as heroes in the end. In the 1970s, movies like *All the President's Men* portrayed newspaper reporters as determined, hard-working people who will stop at nothing to expose wrongdoing, while films like *Network* began addressing broadcast news and the dangers of becoming too consumed with ratings. Today, the portrayal of journalism onscreen is still evolving as new media moves to the forefront of reporting. Scholars like Matthew Ehrlich (2004) and Howard Good (1989) have devoted much of their careers to the study of journalism in film. However, often the most recent movies these scholars address are 2003's *Shattered Glass* and 2005's *Good Night and Good Luck*. Though there is a wealth of scholarship surrounding older journalism films, there is little research on films reflecting modern trends in journalism, perhaps because these films are just now emerging.

There are countless films depicting newspapers, magazines, television and media ethics cases. Films only recently began exploring current journalism trends, such as the advent of the Internet and recent struggles with shield laws and confidential sources. Based on a general knowledge of current journalism films and existing scholarship about trends in past journalism films, it is hypothesized that journalism movies now typically fall into three categories: films depicting modern developments in the profession (like *State of Play*, which examines the conflict between traditional print media and online journalism), more nostalgic films that hearken back to the media's glory days (like *Frost/Nixon*, which recounts how David Frost and his team, through a series of TV interviews, persuaded Richard Nixon to admit his guilt in the Watergate scandal), and films examining media ethics issues (like *Thank You For Smoking*, in which a reporter sleeps with her source to obtain more information for a story).

This study does not determine cause and effect. Whatever the motivation behind these onscreen portrayals of the media, journalism films enter into "a cinematic public sphere that could be used to communicate ideas and shape public opinion" (Ross, 2002, p. 3). Without interviewing the filmmakers, one can only speculate the reasoning behind the way journalism is portrayed in film, and without interviewing the audiences that consume those films, one can only speculate how these portrayals have influenced how viewers feel about the media. However, through a qualitative content analysis, observations can be recorded and analyzed that paint

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an overall picture of how the media are being portrayed onscreen today, adding to the wealth of scholarship about media portrayals onscreen pre-2005. This overall picture of the media onscreen likely influences audiences to some degree. According to film historian Steven Ross (2002), movies are “partly a reflection of what [audiences] are. And what they are is no less influenced by what they see” (p. 1). Regardless of the reasoning behind these portrayals, observing and analyzing the media’s representation onscreen says something powerful about how the media are viewed in society today.

## II. Literature Review

While there is little scholarship on recent journalism films like *Frost/Nixon*, *State of Play*, and *Nothing But the Truth*, researchers have examined related areas like journalism ethics in film and the use of nostalgia in journalism films. There is also scholarship about specific modern media trends conveyed in cinema, like the rise of online journalism and recent struggles surrounding confidential sources and shield laws.

### **Media and ethics in film**

One researcher at the forefront of journalism in film scholarship is Matthew Ehrlich, whose book *Journalism in the Movies* details the overall portrayal of the media in film throughout history. Ehrlich deals primarily with films in the “journalism genre,” or movies in which the main plot is about journalism or the main characters are journalists. Ehrlich notes the contradictory nature of the portrayal of the media onscreen, saying “The movies have portrayed journalists both as upstanding citizens and heroes and as scruffy outsiders and villains” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.1). Ehrlich addresses the negative portrayals of journalism in film in his article “Facts, Truth and Bad Journalists in the Movies.” According to Ehrlich, many real-life journalists would likely say many onscreen journalists exercise inappropriate and unprofessional behavior. However, he says “‘bad journalist’ characters actually have helped shore up the press’s preferred self-image, either by seeing through lies and pretense to the truth or by paying the price for not telling the truth,” (Ehrlich, 2006, p. 502). Ehrlich also says that by examining the profession in this way, journalism movies can be seen as “a culture thinking out loud about itself” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 2). This idea is the primary focus of Ehrlich’s article “Thinking Critically about Journalism through Popular Culture.” In this article, Ehrlich argues that people can be educated about the media profession by studying journalism “more broadly as a practice and institution by analyzing movies as a long-running commentary on the press,” (Ehrlich, 1996, p. 35).

In *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film*, Howard Good focuses on some of the same points Ehrlich does, but Good tends to dwell more on the negative portrayals of journalists in film. Good says, “It is a rare film today that honors journalists for their absolute commitment to their profession, or that celebrates their legendary disdain for legal niceties and ethical restraints” (1989, p. 16). However, Good says journalism films of the 1970s, like *All the President’s Men*, focused more on the heroics of the media because “Watergate restored some of the prestige and glamour the press had lost in the sixties” (1989, p. 18). In “The Hollywood Version: Movie Portrayals of the Press,” Thomas Zynda (1979) acknowledges that many film portrayals of the press are negative, but like Ehrlich, he chooses to look at the larger picture of the overall portrayal of the media in film. He uses films like *Five Star Final*, *His Girl Friday*, *Meet John Doe*, *The Green Berets*, and *Network* to exemplify the characteristics often portrayed in journalism films and offers key phrases to describe the character of the reporters in these films: “manipulate public opinion,” “increase their wealth,” “essentially sociopathic characters,” and “must resort to the equivalent of spying” (p. 19-20). Above all, Zynda upholds Ehrlich’s argument that journalism films hold the press accountable, saying “As the press serves as a watchdog on government, so Hollywood, likewise on behalf of the public and with a like commercial basis, keeps an eye on the press,” (1979, p. 32).

### **Current media trends**

Ehrlich’s “*Shattered Glass*, Movies, and the Free Press Myth” (2005) is one of the few journal articles to address the presence of online journalism in film. Ehrlich briefly addresses that it was an Internet journalist from Forbes Online who exposed Glass. According to Ehrlich, “Some [audiences] took comfort that it had been an ‘honest, blue collar’ reporter, Adam Penenberg, who finally exposed Glass” (2005, p. 108). Other scholars focus on current media trends outside of film. In “Facing ‘The Fabulous Monster’: The Traditional Media’s Fear-Driven Innovation Culture in the Development of Online News,” An Nguyen (2008) argues that

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a culture of fear surrounds online journalism but it ultimately plays a role in facilitating development because news organizations want to stay relevant, and that through this development, traditional news outlets can grow to embrace online media. In “A Contemporary History of Digital Journalism,” Ben Scott (2005) focuses less on the fear angle of Nguyen’s article and more on how online media have the potential to aid what he sees as a decline in the quality of journalism. He says through online media, “the public may finally be able to use journalism as it was intended, as a set of guidelines and talking points that convene a discussion among a democratic citizenry” (Scott, 2005, p. 92).

In terms of research about recent issues with shield laws, Rachel Smolkin (2005) in the article “Under Fire” cites First Amendment attorneys who express fear over the increasing number of high-profile court cases ordering reporters to disclose confidential sources, saying, “They warn of a chilling effect on sources’ willingness to share unflattering information about employers, stifling reporters’ ability to unearth – and to tell the public – government secrets such as Watergate and the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal” (p. 19). In a 2005 article from the journal *Communications Lawyer*, journalist Judith Miller argues why confidential sources are important to journalists and why she would go to jail to protect them. Miller, who was jailed for her reporting on the Valerie Plame case, argues, “In a post-9/11 era in which dramatically increased amounts of information are being classified secret, and hence, are no longer available for public review, confidential sources, particularly in the national security and intelligence arenas, are indispensable to government accountability” (2005, p. 9).

### ***Nostalgia in film***

While some modern journalism films explore recent trends in the profession, others hearken back to a significant period in journalism history and rely on a sense of nostalgia in their storytelling. In *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film*, Vera Dika (2003) examines the use of nostalgia in film overall. Dika uses *American Graffiti* as an example of the quintessential nostalgia film. Though it was produced in the 1970s, the film takes place in the early 1960s, which is reflected in everything from the neon sign-style opening credits to the music to the way the characters speak. Dika says “*American Graffiti* invokes that historical period directly, eliciting a sense of regret and confrontation with it” (2003, p. 90). In “The Tube is Flickering Now: Aesthetics and Authenticity in *Good Night and Good Luck*,” Sina Nietzsche (2007) applies the type of cinematic nostalgia Dika discusses to a journalism film. Nietzsche says *Good Night and Good Luck* is nostalgic both in its content, focusing on McCarthyism and the Cold War in the 1950s, and its style. Nietzsche argues that audiences connect with this particular nostalgia film because the overall look and feel of the film (such as the costumes, the attitudes and demeanor of the characters, and its black and white style) give it a sense of authenticity.

There is a great deal of scholarship surrounding journalism in film, but most of this scholarship ends with 2005’s *Good Night and Good Luck*. There is very little research on journalism films that have been released in the past five years, a hole in the scholarship this study aims to fill. Nostalgia in film and media ethics in film have also been studied in the past, but not in recent journalism films. Some scholarship exists surrounding recent trends in the media like the rise of online journalism and issues with shield laws, but as these issues have only recently begun being portrayed onscreen, there is virtually no scholarship surrounding their use in film. This study takes existing scholarship on journalism in film, media ethics in film, nostalgia in film and current trends in journalism and applies it to recent journalism movies that do not yet have much scholarship surrounding them.

## **III. Methodology**

This study is a qualitative content analysis about current portrayals of journalism onscreen. The project follows Susanna Priest’s (1996) definition that “content analysis is a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write, produce on television, or make movies about” (p. 23). The study describes these recent portrayals of media in the movies but does not determine the cause and effect of those portrayals. The project presents a critical analysis of the major journalism films of the past five years, a total of ten films. These films are either solely about journalism, or journalism plays a major role in the plot. There is a great deal of scholarship surrounding journalism in film throughout history, and the purpose of this

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study is to build on that scholarship by addressing more recent films that have not yet been subject to much research. The first step in the research process was figuring out which films to include in the study. A sample of journalism films released from 2005-2009 was compiled using the Web site for the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project ([www.ijpc.org](http://www.ijpc.org)). The sample began with *Good Night and Good Luck*, the last journalism film that has been studied heavily by scholars. Every film listed on the site from *Good Night and Good Luck* onward is listed below:

- *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005)
- *Superman Returns* (2006)
- *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)
- *Scoop* (2006)
- *Thank You for Smoking* (2006)
- *Blood Diamond* (2006)
- *Zodiac* (2007)
- *Frost/Nixon* (2008)
- *Nothing But the Truth* (2008)
- *State of Play* (2009)

Once the film titles were obtained, secondary research was conducted to determine the existing scholarship on journalism in film. Based on the findings of Ehrlich, Good, and Zynda and a general knowledge of the films being studied, it was hypothesized that modern journalism films would generally fall into three categories: stories focused on media ethics, nostalgic films hearkening back to journalism's glory days, and movies with a primary emphasis on current trends in journalism. Once this hypothesis was proposed, additional secondary research was conducted on media ethics in film, nostalgia in film, and current trends in the media.

With the hypothesis and secondary research in mind, a series of open-ended research questions were developed to answer for each of the ten films:

What is the primary type of media depicted in the film (newspapers, television, radio, magazines)?

When and where does the story take place?

How are the time period and location in which the story takes place portrayed onscreen?

Are the journalists honest in their newsgathering practices?

What kinds of relationships do the journalists have with their sources?

What kind of relationship do the journalists have with their co-workers and superiors?

How is the journalist's personal life portrayed?

Are any modern trends in journalism portrayed onscreen?

If so, are there any tensions between these new trends and old ideals?

What do the journalists look like (race, gender, age, size, how they dress)?

Each of the ten films was then viewed, and each research question was answered for every film. The notes on each film were compiled, and based on the data for each individual film, the researcher attempted to place the films into the three hypothesized categories. The data for the films in each category was analyzed for trends and common themes, and that data in each category was also compared to the other data in the ten-film sample as a whole.

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## IV. Findings and Analysis

Overall, the films did fall into the three hypothesized categories, with the ethics category containing the most films. *State of Play* and *Nothing But the Truth* fell under the current issues category; *Good Night and Good Luck*, *Frost/Nixon*, and *Zodiac* fell under the nostalgia category, and *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Thank You for Smoking*, *Blood Diamond*, and *Scoop* fell under the ethics category. The only anomaly in the study was *Superman Returns*, which was not as easily definable because while the *Daily Planet* newspaper and journalists Clark Kent and Lois Lane played prominent roles in the story, journalism was not the primary focus of the film and was used less than in the other films. However, the film does raise a few ethical questions about journalism and could therefore be considered part of that category, but this film does not place the same emphasis on ethical issues in journalism as the other films in that category. For the most part, however, journalism films today do either deal with current issues in journalism, nostalgic portrayals of journalism, or ethical dilemmas in journalism.

### ***Current issues in journalism***

Although there are a number of current issues in journalism affecting the industry today, such as the struggle between print and online media, only two of the ten films in the sample focused primarily on current journalism trends – *State of Play* and *Nothing But the Truth*. Though the two films share a few similar themes, they focus on different issues for the most part. *State of Play*, a suspense film about a jaded newspaper reporter and a fresh-faced politics blogger who team up to investigate a corporate conspiracy, heavily emphasizes the struggle between print and online journalism. In the film, there is clearly a hierarchy at the newspaper involving print and online media. Though Cal McAffrey is a veteran crime reporter at the *Washington Globe*, a fictional representation of the *Washington Post*, he comments that Della Frye, the new politics blogger, has a new computer and fancy equipment while he has been there “15 years with a 16-year-old computer” (*State of Play*, 2009). Cal and his editor, Cameron Lynne, also discuss a potential redesign for the paper early on in the film. The mockups she shows him of the new design is much more colorful and eye popping than the newspaper’s traditional design. She tells him the owners want them to turn a profit so they have to figure out better ways to appeal to their readers, and he sarcastically replies that “I hear the online side is doing just fine” (*State of Play*, 2009). Cameron replies that they are emphasizing the online side because of young new reporters like Della, who she says is “hungry, she’s cheap, and she turns out copy every hour” (*State of Play*, 2009).

This five-minute exchange between Cal and Cameron emphasizes the tension between print and online media that most newspapers and magazines today are attempting to balance. Readers are becoming less interested in traditional text-and-photo stories and more interested in bright design that breaks up information into more accessible, bite-sized chunks. They are also turning to online journalism for shorter stories that are updated more frequently. Like Cameron says, young new reporters like Della are eager to work, cheaper to employ than veteran reporters like Cal, and are able to generate more content faster. In a world where people are busier than ever, that is what print media organizations want. In order to keep up with the increasing popularity of online media, they have to start using online media themselves. Based on their conversation, it seems the *Washington Globe* is driven more by fear of becoming irrelevant in an increasingly technology-driven world rather than excitement about new media developments. This supports An Nguyen’s argument that “by forcing traditional media to act, the fear of new media usually plays a crucial role in facilitating their birth and development” (2008, p. 93).

It is evident from the beginning of the movie that while the newspaper as a whole is focusing on its online staff, Cal does not think Della and the other bloggers are serious journalists. When she asks him for help on a piece she is writing about relationships in the political sphere, he sarcastically replies “I don’t know, I’d have to read a couple of blogs before I could form an opinion” (*State of Play*, 2009). The film also contains a continuing plot point that Della never has a pen with her when she needs to write down a crucial piece of information. While a pen is supposed to be a reporter’s most basic tool, Della relies more on her computer. Here, the film seems to be implying that while Della’s job is technology-based, she should not forget the basics of traditional reporting. At the end of the film, once Cal and Della finish their story revealing the corporate conspiracy, Cal says he is surprised Della is not posting the story to the Web site, but Della says, “A story this big, people should probably have newsprint on their hands when they read it” (*State of Play*, 2009). The message behind *State of Play* seems to be that while online media may be the new trend, traditional print media will not disappear because it is still considered the most serious form of media, a permanent record of

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an event's impact.

The tension between print and online journalism is also briefly alluded to in *Nothing But the Truth*. When her son's classmate tells Washington, D.C., reporter Rachel Armstrong that they get the newspaper at her house, Rachel tells her to tell her friends to do the same "because the Internet is killing us" (*Nothing But the Truth*, 2008), implying the newspaper is struggling in the wake of online media. Other than this exchange, however, the movie focuses more on the issue of shield laws than online media. The film follows Rachel as she is arrested and held in contempt of court for not revealing her source in a story in which she revealed the identity of a CIA operative. While some states have shield laws, there is no federal shield law, so Rachel had no legal protection. *Nothing But the Truth* is a fictional story, but it was released three years after *New York Times* reporter Judith Miller was jailed for refusing to name her source in a story revealing the identity of former CIA agent Valerie Plame. The film even opens with a disclaimer that the events in the film are fictional, indicating the filmmakers knew how similar the story was to Miller's situation and were likely inspired by it to some degree. According to an article in *American Journalism Review*, more than two dozen subpoenas were issued to obtain journalists' sources or notes in the two years preceding the Judith Miller/Valerie Plame case, and "the last time there was such a concentration of court cases seeking reporters' confidential sources or notes was during the height of the Nixon administration" (Smolkin, 2005, p. 20). Issues surrounding shield laws and confidential sources still affect journalists today, but when this film was being written and in pre-production, this concentrated period of court cases would have been fresh in the filmmakers' minds.

*Nothing But the Truth*, while presenting both sides of the issue, seems to be arguing in favor of legal protection for journalists when asked to reveal confidential sources and a federal shield law. The movie cites significant events in media history involving confidential sources like Watergate and the Pentagon Papers, arguing that without confidential sources, reporters would have never been able to break those stories and communicate that information to the public. Rachel's lawyer, Albert Burnside, reminds the Supreme Court what a close decision *Branzburg v. Hayes* was and argues that abandoning confidentiality would mean no source would speak to Rachel or her paper again. He also tells the court that jailing reporters for not revealing confidential sources makes news publications and the First Amendment irrelevant, saying "How would we know if a president has committed crimes? We as a nation would never be able to hold those in power accountable" (*Nothing But the Truth*, 2008). This argument is consistent with Miller's argument when she was released from jail. In a 2005 article in *Communications Lawyer*, Miller said, "We are only as good as our sources. So their confidence that we will not divulge their identity is crucial to their willingness to come to us with allegations of fraud or abuse or wrongdoing, or a dissenting view in their agency or company that might be critical to the American Public (p. 4).

*State of Play* and *Nothing But the Truth* emphasize the important current issues in journalism of the tension between print and online media and the controversy surrounding confidential sources and shield laws, but they are the only two movies in the past five years to do so. The only other movie mentioned in the study's secondary research that addresses the rise of online journalism is 2003's *Shattered Glass*, in which a reporter for Forbes Online realizes that Stephen Glass fabricated one of his stories. *State of Play* and *Nothing But the Truth* are the two most recent films in the sample, indicating that journalism films are just now beginning to address current issues in the industry. In 2008 when *Nothing But the Truth* was released, the other journalism film released that year, *Frost/Nixon*, was much more popular and received more acclaim. That film falls under the nostalgia category, reminding audiences of what is arguably the peak of glory for journalism – Watergate. While these two most recent journalism films address some of the most important issues facing journalists today, it seems journalism films in the other two categories resonate more with audiences. However, perhaps the fact that the two most recent journalism films deal with current issues in the industry is an indication that upcoming journalism films will follow the same path. Both films in this category are also about newspapers, indicating that newspapers are the type of media facing the most challenges today.

### ***Nostalgia for the old days of journalism***

While journalism films are only now beginning to address current trends in the media, some of the most recognizable journalism films of the past five years have more of a nostalgia angle. *Good Night and Good Luck*, the 2005 film about Edward R. Murrow's series of CBS news pieces against Senator Joseph McCarthy, is perhaps the best example of a journalism film based primarily in nostalgia. In the film, as much emphasis is placed on creating the movie's atmosphere and the feeling it invokes in the viewer as is placed on the actual story. To capture the sleek, classic feeling of a 1950s newsroom, director George Clooney shot the

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film in black and white. This style of filmmaking enhances the setting by recreating the look and feel of 1950s film and consequently enhances the feeling of nostalgia for the audience. The technique sets the stage for a depiction of 1950s journalism as classier and less corrupt than the images of journalism portrayed in more ethics-centered films. The costumes and hairstyles also contribute to the nostalgic 1950s image of the film. The women wear conservative skirts and shirts buttoned to the neck and have curly, short to shoulder length hair, while the men always wear suits, have their hair slicked back and parted to the side, and constantly have a cigarette in hand. The slow, jazzy piano music that plays throughout the film also gives viewers an audible cue about the nostalgic atmosphere in addition to the visual cues of the costumes, hair, and black and white coloring. Additionally, the film also uses real footage of McCarthy, adding to its sense of authenticity.

According to Nitzsche in "The Tube is Flickering Now," the film's reflection of both the 1950s lifestyle and 1950s films provides a feeling of authenticity. Nostalgia films like *Good Night and Good Luck* are likely often popular because they not only hearken back to what is often seen as a brighter time for journalism but simultaneously contain themes relevant to modern journalism. For example, Nitzsche says *Good Night and Good Luck* "launches an imaginary journey back to the beginnings of American television through the construction of an 'authentic' filmic evidence of that time. It further serves as an instance of articulation about the dissatisfaction with current American politics by offering a connection to the era of McCarthyism" (2008, p. 1). Additionally, Murrow is portrayed as an honest and thorough reporter who is in constant pursuit of the truth. Nothing is shown of his personal life. The audience only knows that at work, Murrow is a true professional. *Good Night and Good Luck* portrays Murrow as a hero, which audiences likely relate to more than the flawed characters driven by negative stereotypes often portrayed in films in the ethics category. The hero role combined with the feelings of nostalgia that draw viewers back to the 1950s creates a highly positive and artistic portrayal of journalism that is pleasing for viewers both visually and emotionally.

*Frost/Nixon* and *Zodiac*, both set in the 1970s, use this same technique. Unlike *Good Night and Good Luck*, these films are in color, so they rely primarily on costumes, hairstyles, and set pieces to capture a nostalgic setting of the 1970s. The men wear suits and have longer, wavy hair while the women wear plain dresses and have straight, long to waist-length hair. The set pieces contain primarily warm colors like browns, yellows, and oranges, a popular 1970s color palette. Though both films are in color, *Zodiac* has a grittier look to it, as though some of the color may have been removed in post-production, reflective of both the Technicolor appearance of 1970s film and the gritty murders that drive the story. While *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Frost/Nixon* both focus on the rise of television, *Zodiac* revolves around the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, and several blunt references are made to the organization's lack of technology and the lack of technology in the era in general. For example, when detective Bill Armstrong tells a detective in Vallejo that he will telefax him a handwriting sample, the detective replies that they do not have telefax yet, and Armstrong will have to mail him the sample. These mentions of technology, along with the 1970s soundtrack, also contribute to the nostalgic setting of the film as well as its sense of realism.

Also present in *Frost/Nixon* and *Zodiac* is the portrayal of the reporter as a hero as seen in *Good Night and Good Luck*. *Frost/Nixon* and *Zodiac* both portray more of the lead characters' personal lives than Murrow's in *Good Night and Good Luck*, and consequently the characters in the 1970s-set films are more flawed. Of the three leads in the films in the nostalgia category, David Frost in *Frost/Nixon* is probably the most flawed, but in the end he emerges as an underdog hero. At first he is viewed as a playboy in his personal life and nothing more than a celebrity talk show host in his professional life, but he proves himself to be an honest and thorough reporter dedicated to pursuing the truth about Richard Nixon's involvement in Watergate and persuading him to issue a confession. In *Zodiac*, crime reporter Paul Avery is an alcoholic with some pushy and questionable reporting practices, but editorial cartoonist Robert Graysmith, the film's protagonist, emerges as the story's true hero. He may not be able to maintain a relationship in his personal life, but his thorough reporting, dedication, and initiative lead him to be an honest reporter, publishing a detailed book about the Zodiac killer.

In addition to featuring more heroic characters than most of the films in the ethics category, the films in the nostalgia category are built around time periods that were arguably two of journalism's highest peaks – McCarthyism of the 1950s and the Watergate scandal of the 1970s. *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Frost/Nixon* address McCarthyism and Watergate directly, and while *Zodiac* does not address Watergate directly, it still takes place around the same time in the 1970s, a time in which more and more people wanted to pursue careers in journalism following Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's exposure of the Watergate scandal. While Cal and Della in *State of Play* and Rachel in *Nothing But the Truth* are also portrayed as heroes, audi-

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ences may prefer not to think about the current struggles of journalism in what they perceive as an entertainment medium. Audiences may get more entertainment value out of seeing stories in which heroic characters are depicted in times they already know to be bright spots in journalism history.

### **Media ethics**

The highest number of films in the sample fall under the media ethics category, which is not a surprising statistic given that most of the existing scholarship surrounding journalism in film addresses ethical situations onscreen. Good argues that journalism movies focusing on ethical situations often foster negative stereotypes about journalists, saying “Hollywood has given us reporters corrupted by cynicism, ambitions, and drink, careless of others’ lives and reputations, and ever reluctant to let the truth stand in the way of a good story” (1989, p. 9). As indicated in previous scholarship, this study also found that most ethical situations presented in journalism films often focused on negative characteristics, actions or decisions of the journalists. The majority of the journalists depicted are corrupt or unethical in some way, while the protagonist is usually either the only ethical reporter in a sea of unethical ones, or an unethical reporter who rises above the rest to become a heroic and honest journalist. This type of portrayal has been discussed in journalism in film scholarship before. Good emphasizes this idea in one of his books, saying “every year brings yet more journalists to the screen, sometimes to play the hero, sometimes the villain, and sometimes something of both” (2008, p. 5). This study found that three types of ethical situations were most often presented in the films – deception or unethical reporting practices, most often involving relationships with sources, and questionable choices in personal relationships and home life.

Given Zynda’s observation that reporters are most often portrayed onscreen as “confident, aggressive people who are young, attractive, and single” (1979, p. 23), it is not a surprising finding that romantic relationships often find their way into journalism movies. Perhaps the most glaring example of an unethical relationship in the sample is in the Woody Allen comedy *Scoop*, in which student journalist Sondra Pransky develops a romantic relationship with millionaire Peter Lyman because she believes he is the murderer in a crime story she has been investigating. Not only does she become romantically involved with a potential source, but she is deceptive about it. She does not identify herself as a reporter but tells him she is an actress named Jade, making it a habit of sleeping with him and snooping around his house looking for possible clues while he is asleep. The line between what is a matter of her career and what is a matter of her personal life becomes even more blurred when Sondra actually falls in love with Peter, admitting “I’m an investigative reporter who’s fallen in love with the object of her investigation” (*Scoop*, 2006). Her relationship with Peter is not the first time she has slept with a source. At the beginning of the film, she wants to interview an actor and decides she should “use my sex appeal like Katherine Hepburn” (*Scoop*, 2006) to get answers out of him, but ends up sleeping with him and getting no story. Sondra is not even a professional journalist – she is only a student. The movie implies that negative behavior in the media starts before journalists become professional reporters, that unethical choices are somehow tied to the profession.

Inappropriate relationships with sources are also explored in *Thank You For Smoking* and *Blood Diamond*. In *Thank You For Smoking*, the journalist in question, Heather Holloway, is another example of the “young, attractive, and single” stereotype Zynda mentions. She meets tobacco lobbyist Nick Naylor in a romantic restaurant for an interview and proceeds to flirt with him, ultimately suggesting that they continue the interview at his apartment and saying “I want to see where the devil sleeps” (*Thank You For Smoking*, 2006). They continue engaging in a sexual relationship, which quickly comes to an end when Heather’s article about Nick is printed. She used information that he assumed would be off the record since he told her in an intimate setting, but she replies, “You never said anything about off the record” (*Thank You For Smoking*, 2006). She said she talks to some sources over dinner or drinks, but he wanted to have sex and that was fine by her. Not only does Heather engage in an inappropriate relationship with the subject of her story, but, like in *Scoop*, she engages in deceptive behavior while in the relationship. She knew all along she would use all of the information Nick gave her while he thought she actually liked him. These movies seem to be implying that young, attractive female reporters are not afraid to use their sex appeal if it will help them land a story, a practice seen again with the character of *Time* magazine foreign correspondent Maddy Bowen in *Blood Diamond*.

In her pursuit of a story about conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone, Maddy recognizes smuggler Danny Archer at a bar and proceeds to flirt with him. She does not identify herself as a reporter until Danny realizes she is a journalist when she asks him about blood diamonds. The first few times Danny meets Maddy, they are at a bar, and she always has a beer in hand, fueling the negative stereotype Good mentions that jour-



nalists are heavy drinkers. Of the three flirtatious journalists in these films, however, Maddy is perhaps the most professional. She uses her resources as a reporter to help Danny's friend Solomon find his son, who has been forced into the military as a child soldier. While the ethics behind Maddy pulling some strings to do Danny and Solomon this favor could be considered questionable, in this case she is doing it for the good of someone else, something that did not occur in *Scoop* or *Thank You for Smoking* and therefore resulting in a more positive portrayal here. However, all three of these films feature female reporters using their sex appeal to achieve results in their reporting, an act that is highly frowned upon in the real professional world. This sends the message that women reporters in particular use questionable reporting practices. However, older journalism films often portrayed male reporters in a negative light, so this trend may also be reflective of the fact that today more women work in the industry, and they are now portrayed negatively just as their male counterparts once were.

*The Devil Wears Prada* explores a journalist's ethics on a more personal level. The film follows eager, fresh out of college journalist Andy Sachs, who is forced to take a job at *Runway* magazine (a fictional version of *Vogue*) when she cannot find a job anywhere else. As Andy spends more and more time with her stuck up, demanding boss Miranda Priestly, the film shows how she progresses from an honest reporter to someone who makes questionable choices at work and at home. She views her job as more important than anything else, continuously working late and leaving for work again early in the morning. She even misses her boyfriend's birthday to attend a gala for work, reinforcing "the myth of the self-reliant individual" (Good, 1989, p. 14), the journalist who is so obsessed with work they no longer focus their energy on relationships, perhaps even considering them unnecessary. In the end Andy does find herself again and lands a job at a small newspaper, an example of the corrupt individual who rises above the rest to become a good, honest reporter. Had Andy remained the unethical professional she had become, she very well could have taken the next step and become a Heather Holloway or a Sondra Pransky, one so obsessed with the job she would do just about anything to achieve results.

The one anomaly in this study that does not fit as easily into one of the three categories is *Superman Returns*. The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project likely included it on their list because the *Daily Planet* newspaper and reporters Clark Kent and Lois Lane are featured so prominently, but journalism is not the primary focus of the film. Particularly the newspaper itself and Lois' role as a reporter do not actually impact the plot of the film for the most part. The focus is kept on Clark's identity as Superman, his battle with Lex Luthor, and the more science fiction aspects of the film. However, a few ethical questions about the journalism in the film are raised, so the movie could potentially fall under the ethics category. The most glaring example is yet another instance of an inappropriate relationship between a reporter and a source. Lois continues to cover Superman even though, as Jimmy Olson informs Clark, the whole office knows they had a romantic relationship. She even won a Pulitzer Prize for a piece called "Why the world doesn't need Superman." Even when Lois asks to be allowed to cover something else, her editor refuses. He knows of their relationship and uses it to his own advantage. He knows because Lois and Superman had an intimate relationship she will be able to get information other reporters will not, even if she cannot be objective in her coverage. This indicates that it is not only that reporters sometimes form inappropriate relationships with sources – it is that editors sometimes not only allow the relationship to continue but encourage it for the benefit of the media outlet. Lois is also often shown working at home at night, demonstrating an obsession with the job like Andy in *The Devil Wears Prada*. While there are instances of ethical questions like this, they are not as obvious as in the other four films in the category. The other films focus primarily on those questions, while this film serves primarily as a comic book movie that alludes to some ethical questions.

While some of the journalist characters in the films in the ethics category emerge as heroes, for the most part the films reinforce the notion that the portrayal of the media in journalism movies "is usually not very favorable; despite an occasional *All the President's Men*, the films are more like *Network* in their critical and even cynical view of journalism" (Zynda, 1979, p. 17). It is also worth noting that the primary journalist characters in the films in this category are all women. In all of the movies in this category, including *Superman Returns*, it is female journalists who engage in unethical relationships with sources and fill the role of the workaholic reporter whose personal relationships and home life suffer. On the opposite end of the spectrum, the films in the nostalgia category are all centered on male reporters and their roles as heroes fighting against a corrupt or illegal entity. While some of their flaws are shown, the same emphasis is not placed on them as is placed on the flaws of the female reporters in the films in the ethics category, partially because the historically-based situations presented in the films in the nostalgia category are not as conducive to emphasizing these negative traits.

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## V. Discussion

Several key ideas about the portrayal of journalism in film emerge from the findings of this study. While journalism films cover a wide range of subjects, they often can be categorized into groups of films containing similar themes. In the case of this study, it was found that modern journalism films are most often focused on current issues in journalism, nostalgic portrayals of journalism, and media ethics. These are certainly not the only categories of journalism films, but they are the categories that emerged from the journalism films of the past five years.

Only two films in the study were included in the current issues category, indicating this is an area of journalism film that is still developing. In the past, films like *Network*, which addressed concerns about the rise of television following the Vietnam War era, dealt with topics in journalism that were current at the time, and films addressing similar subjects later followed suit. The lead characters in *State of Play* and *Nothing But the Truth*, though flawed, serve as heroes, defending the basic rights of citizens or, as mentioned by Ehrlich and Zynda, serving in the role of a watchdog over government or corporate wrongdoing. These films tell compelling stories, but they were not as popular with audiences or critics as most of the films in the other categories. It could be that audiences do not find as much entertainment value in stories that explore struggles in the media industry, and any media professionals who watch journalism films may not want to be reminded of the current tensions they face at work when they watch movies. In the coming years, as these current issues within the industry develop, movies will likely start to feature trends like online journalism more prominently.

Other journalism films utilize a more nostalgic portrayal of the media, focusing on real-life events in media history and capturing the essence of the time period through costumes, hairstyles, set design, and the coloring of the film. Though the flaws of some of the characters in the film are shown, the protagonists are portrayed as heroes in pursuit of the truth and looking out for the public's best interest. These portrayals of the media are very positive overall and therefore likely more appealing to audiences than films portraying current struggles in journalism. Though those films portray journalists as heroes, many more questions are raised about their actions and a lot of emphasis is placed on negative tension. In more nostalgic films, particularly the three from this study focused on the time periods in which McCarthyism and Watergate were prominent, audiences are likely attracted to the role of the journalist as investigator and crusader in a time they recognize as a high point in journalism history.

The majority of the films in the study fall under the ethics category, which is not surprising given that films focused on ethical dilemmas have been continuously prominent since the earliest days of journalism films. The ethical questions raised in these films likely appeal to audiences because they present an exciting conflict. Though they often perpetuate negative stereotypes about the media, most of the films show the evolution of a character from practicing unethical reporting tactics or tackling ethical dilemmas between their personal and professional lives to finding themselves and finding a more honest personal and professional outlook. According to Ross, "in addition to entertaining people, films can often provide a mechanism for discussing some of the most important ideas of the day" (2002, p. 9). These films raise questions and incite discussion while simultaneously featuring stories audiences can find pure entertainment in, which is likely part of their appeal and part of the reason this category of journalism film has stayed strong through the years.

## VI. Conclusion

Although this study does not determine the cause and effect behind the portrayals of the media presented in these films, which could not be achieved without interviewing the filmmakers and audiences, it does paint a picture of the images of the media being presented to moviegoers today. A wealth of scholarship exists about journalism in film, but the last film to be subject to significant study was 2005's *Good Night and Good Luck*. This study fills in a hole in the scholarship by examining the journalism films from *Good Night and Good Luck* to today. Further studies could analyze the films individually and dig deeper into the media portrayals within each film rather than dealing with multiple films in broader categories. However, this study does present the overall image of common portrayals in modern journalism films and uses observations about the films and existing scholarship to draw comparisons between the films.

According to Ehrlich, however the movies choose to portray journalists, "Hollywood has reproduced myths in which the press is always at the heart of things and always makes a difference" (2004, p. 1). The

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media play the important role in society of communicating information to the masses. Journalism films communicate ideas to audiences about the industry that provides them with the information they receive every day. The ideas presented in journalism films reach a mass audience and likely affect viewers' thinking about the media to some degree. For this reason, it is important for media professionals to have an understanding of how the industry is being portrayed in popular culture. The media are constantly evolving, and as the industry continues to change, so too will the image of journalism in film.

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