

Fundamentals of Journalism as Portrayed in *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men* and Taught in College Journalism Classrooms

Jonathan Sarver Jr.

Journalism
Elon University

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Past scholars have examined the fundamentals of journalism that were portrayed in Spotlight (2015) and All the President's Men (1976), and the importance these films had to American freedom of press. This study delves further into the two films, and compares their portrayals of journalism and its fundamentals to how they are taught in college journalism classrooms. The research for this study comes from five in-depth interviews with college journalism professors from four different American universities. The films served as a backdrop to a deep discussion about their methods for teaching specific aspects of reporting to their students. After conducting the interviews, it was determined that there was a clear parallel between the portrayals of journalism fundamentals in both films and their place in these five professor's classrooms. Additionally, there was clear consistency among all five interviews when it came to the most important fundamentals to teach journalism students in college classrooms.

I. Introduction

The events portrayed in the films *Spotlight* (2015) and *All the President's Men* (1976) are not only major moments in American history, but are based on monumental moments for the journalism industry. As big as these events were for journalism, the fundamentals that the reporters in each film displayed allow for the films to be useful teaching tools in college journalism classrooms. Concepts such as interview techniques, pitching stories and anonymous sourcing shine through in both films, and are topics that come up in journalism classrooms, which could provide a sense of familiarity for a journalism student experiencing these films for the first time. The basis of this research will be in-depth interviews with five journalism professors at universities across the United States. The films ultimately served as a backdrop for a much larger discussion with these professors. The discussions center on how each professor goes about teaching some of these fundamentals, regardless of whether or not the films were actually used as a teaching device.

Director and writer of *Spotlight* Tom McCarthy wanted to create a film that accurately portrayed the events he was portraying. McCarthy told *The Seattle Times*: "We just committed fully at a very early stage to be as faithful to the world of these reporters as possible" (2015). *The Seattle Times* also quoted him as saying that he wanted to avoid "sensationalizing" the events in the film. Based on the account of McCarthy, it appears that he almost wanted to take a journalistic approach to making a movie. Likewise, following the

Keywords: journalism, cinema, education, interviews
Email: jsarver@elon.edu

journalism fundamentals proved to be crucial for this research project. To prepare for the interviews with these five professors, this researcher watched both films in their entirety, taking note of any journalism fundamentals that managed to shine through, and centered the interview questions on those moments.

II. Literature Review

Past scholars have examined the fundamentals of journalism that were portrayed in both films, each director's approach to making these films, and the importance these films had to American freedom of press. Also relevant to this study is literature on journalism pedagogy, technology, and the practice of hands-on learning for journalism students.

Drohan (2016) examined different scenes in the movie *Spotlight* and applied them to First Amendment protections and Freedom of Press, and those same scenes can also inspire one of the key questions in the interviews that were conducted for this project. In her conclusion, Drohan wrote:

While it's clear that newspapers as institutions also hold great power by their ability to set agendas through selection and placement of stories, the argument is strongly made in the film and other texts that it's more dangerous to a democratic society to censor the press than it is to give them full freedom to decide what they should or should not print and trust that the journalists working in a professional environment know their responsibility and honor the journalistic values that at the core of the profession (Drohan, 2016, p. 218-219).

Another source that informs this research was Matthew Ehrlich's book *Journalism in the Movies* (2004), where he examined the portrayal of journalism in a number of films, ranging from *Citizen Kane* to *Network*. Since the focus of this research is on nonfiction journalism films, the section that best aided in preparation for this analysis was on *All the President's Men*. Ehrlich makes several points on the reporting process of *The Washington Post's* Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and their efforts to uncover the scandal that would lead to the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Ehrlich wrote:

The tedium of investigative reporting was shown through the reporters' constant phone calls and note taking, which [Alan] Pakula filmed in long takes and tight closeups. The filmmakers also shot on location at the Watergate and in the Library of Congress, spending \$90,000 for the overhead shot of Woodward and Bernstein sifting through library clips to try to link the White House to a smear campaign against Ted Kennedy (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 114).

The gap in technological tools between journalists in both *All the President's Men* (set in 1972-1973) and *Spotlight* (set in 2001) and journalists today is noticeable. Rather than utilizing internet databases or smartphones, Woodward and Bernstein were forced to sift through physical documents due simply to the fact that it was the early 1970s. This technological gap is worth exploring with today's journalism professors.

When looking further at the technological gap between journalists today and the journalists in the two films, another notable gap is the use of social media. Social media was not a tool that was used at all by either of the sets of journalists in both films. In 2013, Parmalee examined how social media has changed the way that journalists do their job now. In his conclusion, Parmalee wrote:

While daily work practices have changed, Twitter use does not seem to have altered other aspects of newspaper journalism, such as adherence to the norms of objectivity and gatekeeping. Participants said formal guidelines, advice from colleagues and their own sense of a journalist's role in society were the reasons they did not stray from traditional norms (Parmalee, 2013, p. 303).

When it comes to student journalists developing their skills, Valencia-Forrester (2020) noted that the most important way is through hands-on experience. In her article, she stressed how important it is for journalism students to participate in hands on experience to become better journalists and strengthen their job prospects. She mentions how it translates to the workplace:

The changing nature of the industry and its subsequent requirements on its workers mean that practice-based, experiential education is essential for tertiary journalism programmes to produce work-ready graduates. Practice-based education is increasingly being utilised in tertiary education and appears well aligned with the particular needs of students today (Valencia-Forrester, 2020, p. 708-709).

While Valencia-Forrester makes a good point on the importance of students being able to enter the workplace with experience already under their belts, it does not change the fact that the students must have the skills and fundamentals as well. The research conducted in this paper focuses heavily on the fundamentals of journalism, rather than the ways by which the students develop them.

III. Methods

This study works to expand knowledge on journalism education in universities with insight from professors. To examine the fundamentals of journalism that are taught in college classrooms, five in-depth interviews were conducted to determine the following: which fundamentals were the most important to each professor, how the fundamentals portrayed in each film compared to their teaching of those same fundamentals, and what are the methods that these professors go about teaching these fundamentals to college journalism students. Some of the elements discussed in the interviews included, but were not limited to: interview techniques, technology, anonymous sources, ethics and story pitching. The researcher's university's institutional review board approved this study as exempt.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and all conducted over Zoom. *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men* served as a backdrop for the interviews, and questions covered journalism fundamentals from each of the two films. Each professor had the opportunity to give their opinion of the ways in which each film went about portraying and addressing these fundamentals, while also talking about their own approach for teaching on these topics.

These five professors came from different areas of the United States: two teach at southeastern universities, two of them teach at a midwestern university, and one of them teaches at a southern university. Additionally, all five professors have experience as professional journalists. One of the professors was the author of one of the works in the literature review, Dr. Matthew Erlich. The quotes attributed to Ehrlich in the findings are all original quotes for this study. Most of the interview subjects for this research were found through references from either the faculty mentor for this paper or through the interview subjects themselves.

Due to time constraints with a few of the interview subjects, not every single fundamental outlined in the films were covered in each interview. However, there were three elements covered in each interview, and those are the ones outlined in the findings below.

IV. Findings

The main findings in these interviews focused on three fundamentals of the journalism profession and their depictions in the films: Interview Techniques, Story Pitching and Technology, and are discussed in the sections below.

Interview Techniques

In *Spotlight*, one notable scene sticks out regarding interview techniques. Near the beginning of the Spotlight Team's investigation of systemic child abuse in the Catholic Church in Boston, the reporters interviewed Phil Saviano, the head of a support group for people that have been sexually abused by Catholic priests, and a survivor himself. Throughout the course of the interview, each reporter did a series of things, which included asking follow-up questions, asking clarifying questions about the details of Saviano's story, and trying to make the subject feel comfortable during the interview process. Additionally, after the interview was over, the Spotlight team debriefed in order to assess how trustworthy Saviano was as a source for their investigation. All of these topics were brought up in the interviews with the interview subjects in this

study. Some of the professors provided insight into how they teach interview techniques in their respective classrooms. Among all of the interviews, two key ideas that were brought up are forming relationships with the interview subjects, and how to structure interview questions.

One interview subject said that, when it comes to a reporter approaching an interview, the tone and strategy can vary based on the situation and type of story that is being reported on. University of South Carolina professor Dr. Kevin Hull, who specializes in sports reporting, talked about the importance of making the interview subjects feel comfortable:

I think approaching interviews as a partnership is something that I think early journalists don't really think about. That you get so focused on asking your questions and making sure that you're okay and you get everything you need, but you have to make sure that the person that you're talking to is comfortable as well.

Additionally, Hull noted that it is important for a journalist to structure the interview questions in a way that the interview subject would be able to answer difficult questions more easily. For instance, he said that starting interviews with easy questions will help build the relationship between a reporter and the interview subject, and then the reporter can begin shifting into more difficult questions. In the interview, Hull elaborated on this further when he said:

Obviously you want to build up to that question, you want to, tell me a little bit about yourself, tell me a little bit about your story first, tell me about your childhood, and how you got in this situation... We've kind of developed this sort of connection through these four or five kinda softballish type questions, and then we can kind of go right into the big big questions, which are what the story is really about.

Another important aspect of interviewing for news stories is assessing the trustworthiness of the source, as shown in the film. Dr. Anthony Hatcher, who is a professor and chair of the Journalism department at Elon University and regularly uses *Spotlight* in his classroom, said that his own experience as a journalist reflects that importance. "I've interviewed people who sounded authoritative. And then when I looked him up, it's like, you're not the authority on this," Hatcher said. "You don't know what you're talking about. You don't have the right credentials." He would go on to say that fact checking is a key component in avoiding situations like the one he described, and that is one fundamental that he teaches in his classrooms.

Story Pitching

In *All the President's Men*, the Watergate story was thrust upon Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (1976). However, *Spotlight* was different. Early on in *Spotlight*, the head of the team, Robby Robinson, explained to editor-in-chief Marty Baron the selection process that his team goes through to find the right story to investigate. Robinson talked about how it can be a time-consuming process due to the scale of the team's investigations. Ultimately, it was Baron who nudged Robinson towards pursuing the allegation of systemic cover-ups of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church in Boston. One of the preliminary steps a reporter takes when working on a story is pitching an idea to the editor. In the interviews with professors, each of them provided their ways of finding the right kind of stories to pursue. Some important methods that some of the professors brought up were finding stories that pushed a reporter out of his/her comfort zone, as was done in *Spotlight*, and looking at the larger implications of an investigative story.

In Dr. Matthew Ehrlich's interview, he said that he regularly uses *All the President's Men* as a teaching device in his classrooms. At the beginning of the interview, he said that he is retired and is no longer a full-time professor. However, he did outline several methods for teaching his students how to find good stories to pursue as reporters. One piece of advice he gave was to breach one's comfort zone in order to find a good story. In his interview, he said: "In a classroom setting with students, a lot of times it's like, 'Don't always pick the story of least resistance.' Actually, do try to push yourself a little bit. Try to get interviews with people that you wouldn't normally come across in your everyday circles." When it comes to what it personally takes for a student journalist to find a good story, he said:

Try to find stories that not everybody else is already doing. So that takes some pushing, and it takes on the part of the students not only a little bit of assertiveness, but also being curious and researching beyond again, just the stories that seem to be the easiest ones to do.

When a journalist tries to pick a story to pursue, he/she might look at the long-term objective and impact of the story. In *Spotlight*, Boston Globe editor Marty Baron urges the Spotlight Team to pursue the systemic abuse of children by priests in the Catholic church in Boston, rather than pursue a specific person to bring down (2015). Professor Brant Houston, who specializes in investigative reporting and teaches at the University of Illinois, said the following:

What's developed over time in investigative reporting, is looking at the systemic problems. Not doing what they talked at one point in the old days [as] inappropriately 'taking scalps.' That's getting bad people fired. That might happen, but what you're really looking at is, why has a particular problem, an issue, systematically got out of control? Where has actually the system broken down?

Houston essentially echoed Baron's sentiment by saying that it is important to look at the bigger picture when pursuing an investigative story. In *Spotlight*, Baron says the consequences of going after one person in particular is that the broken system will continue to operate the same way that it was before.

Technology

In terms of technology, the field of journalism has come a long way since the events that took place in *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men*. In both films, reporters spent a painstaking amount of time sifting through physical documents in order to conduct their research, and both of the teams conducted their investigations prior to social media in America. Today, journalists have a number of technological tools at their disposal in order to help them tell a complete and accurate story. Each professor in this study talked about the ways in which reporting is different today because of technology, and just how big of a role technology plays in each of their respective classrooms. One key takeaway on this topic is that the importance of in-person interaction and note-taking are still key components to journalism, despite the increase in technology at a reporter's disposal.

Professor Deborah Nelson teaches journalism at the University of Maryland and is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter. Nelson said that the use of social media can prove to be a beneficial tool for reporters. Specifically, she said that social media platforms have been useful to her students on a reporting project in finding people that are affected by eviction, but she also noted that it is important to teach students to not invade people's privacy while using these tools.

While there is more technology at a reporter's disposal now than there was in the eras of *All the President's Men* and *Spotlight*, that does not mean that some of the techniques shown are outdated, especially when it comes to notetaking, according to some of the interview subjects for this study. Hatcher advises his students how to conduct interviews: "Record your interviews, but also take notes during your interviews ... I don't know how many of them do it, but I really stress that while you're interviewing somebody, especially if you're sitting down in person." In terms of the type of notes that the student reporter should take, Hatcher said that it is helpful to use an audio recorder and look at the recorder for a timestamp on a particular quote, which will make it easier to find that moment in the recording after the interview is over.

The Most Important Fundamentals

At the beginning of each interview, before either of the films were even mentioned, each professor was asked to elaborate on what he/she believed to be the most important fundamentals to instill in students in a college journalism classroom. Nearly all of the professors gave the same answer, which was that accuracy was one of the most important fundamentals of journalism that they teach.

While most of the professors brought up accuracy as the key component of any journalism classroom, Brant Houston brought up three elements of investigative reporting as a response to this question. In the interview, Houston said: "One [component] is documents, or data. A second one is interviewing people. And the third one is observation -- that is getting out in the field. And with those three things, or at least two out of three, you can establish some real credibility." In addition, Houston also noted that being fair and balanced in

one's reporting is another important fundamental that he teaches in his classroom.

Ehrlich did not disagree with the idea of being balanced but, rather, said that there is a certain point where a reporter will try to be balanced when it is not necessary to do so:

The overarching mission of journalism is truth telling. So, making sure that the facts are correct, making sure that the reporting is trying to be fair without going overboard in presenting false balance, or always assuming that every perspective on a story is equally valid. Because we are seeing increasingly that that's not the case.

In addition to accuracy and fairness, some other fundamentals that the five professors mentioned in response to this question were ethics, examining why a story is important and making sure to verify information before rushing to break a news story.

V. Conclusion

Based on the interviews with these college professors for this study, there are a number of key takeaways that can be drawn about *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men*, as well as the way that journalism is taught in college classrooms. Not every professor employed the films in their respective classrooms, but there are fundamentals and lessons that the professors teach that are consistent with the ones that are portrayed in the films. Additionally, when setting aside the films entirely, the professors all gave fairly similar answers in regard to how they go about teaching fundamentals such as interview techniques and story pitching. However, the one limitation of this study is the limited number of interview subjects. A larger number of respondents would provide a broader perspective on a number of different areas of teaching journalism.

It was clear based on interviews that the fundamentals portrayed in the two films were consistent with what these professors teach in their classrooms. In a few instances, some of the professors expressed praise of the films and their honest portrayals of journalism. In fact, Ehrlich said the following about both *Spotlight* and *All the President's Men*:

I think they show in a fairly accurate, straightforward manner, what journalism at its best can do, and not necessarily save the republic. You know, the criticisms which I talked about a little bit in the book, *Journalism in the Movies*. Part of the criticisms of *All the President's Men* is that it makes Woodward and Bernstein too heroic, and it makes journalism too all powerful. And it may, in fact, have encouraged journalists to be too cocky, and thinking that they could accomplish more than they could reasonably accomplish and kind of be too big for their britches. And I would argue that the movie actually suggests that journalism can, you know, turn attention to things that are really important and cannot be cowed by people in power, who want to squelch it ... or demonize journalism.

Finally, when examining what these journalism professors deemed to be the most important fundamentals to teach in their classes, the responses were remarkably similar. First and foremost, the most important takeaway for journalism students to take from their classes is being accurate in their reporting. All five professors stressed how important it is that the reporters relay correct information to their audiences.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Jane O'Boyle for her mentorship in the research and writing of this paper. I would also like to thank the professors quoted in this paper for allowing me to interview them and providing me their insight. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to all of my friends, family and professors who helped and guided me throughout my undergraduate studies at Elon University.

References

- Anderson, S. (2015, 8 November). In the “Spotlight”: Tom McCarthy and his just-the-facts journalism film. Retrieved from <https://www.seattletimes.com/entertainment/movies/in-the-spotlight-tom-mccarthy-and-his-just-the-facts-journalism-film/>
- Drohan, M. (2016). *Spotlight* and investigative journalism: How the film reinforces the essential role of a free, professional press in a democracy. *The Serials Librarian*, 71(3-4), 212-220.
- Ehrlich, M. C. (2004). *Journalism in the movies*. The University of Illinois Press.
- Parmelee, J. H. (2013). Political journalists and Twitter: Influences on norms and practices. *Journal of Media Practice*, 14(4), 291–305. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.14.4.291_1
- Valencia-Forrester, F. (2020). Models of work-integrated learning in journalism education. *Journalism Studies*, 21(5), 697–712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2020.1719875>
-