

H-Net Reviews

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Matthew C. Ehrlich, Joe Saltzman. *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. viii + 241 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08065-4.



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Matthew C. Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman's *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture* is a multidisciplinary study that seeks to examine representations of reporters and editors in a wide range of cultural forms in American life. The underlying and important question posed by the authors is, why study the image of the journalist in popular culture? Three answers emerge from the text: 1) journalism provides us with the information we need to govern ourselves, 2) the journalist character in popular culture likely shapes the way we think of news media, and 3) popular culture is a powerful tool that can be used to think about journalism. Throughout the book the authors show that popular culture influences the way we think about and understand a subject, in this case journalists and the role of journalism in our society. Because journalistic work often happens behind the scenes, the portrayal of journalists and their work in popular culture is often as close as most people will get to the reality of the profession. Thus, analysis and understanding of those images and how they got that way is important. Many Americans, according to the authors, feel there is much to criticize in contemporary journalism, but they also view the Fourth Estate, when it abides by the best practices and traditions of professionalism, as a powerful force for good. *Heroes and Scoundrels* is not a

comprehensive survey, but it is wider ranging than any previous works on the subject. For example, both authors have previously published books on journalists in popular culture, but these have focused only on film depictions.

Ehrlich and Saltzman analyzed countless films, cartoons, comics, TV series and episodes, plays, music, novels, short stories, radio programs, and computer and video games. The book examines the most common journalist types, who are often protagonists or supporting characters, including the anonymous reporter, the columnist, the critic, the cub reporter, the editor or producer, the investigative reporter, the photojournalist, the publisher or media owner, the sports journalist, the television journalist, the real-life journalist, the veteran male journalist, the war or foreign correspondent, the female journalist, and the newsroom family. The authors also attempt to address issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation in journalism as portrayed in cultural reference. This work is based on Saltzman's Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Online Database (IJPC), a database of eighty-five thousand items. This resource, an exceptional tool for studying almost every possible cultural reference to journalism and journalists, is a great companion piece to the book and should foster much additional research in

this area.

Ehrlich and Saltzman present six chapters based on theme: history, professionalism, difference, power, image, and war. The first chapter focuses on the image of journalism's past in popular culture. Specifically, the authors examine two eras of American journalism: the decades 1890-1940 and 1945-80. Popular culture depictions of the first are nostalgic for the heroic big-city journalist who exposes crime and corruption, while portrayals of the second era focus on "unconscientious professionals" (p. 37), like Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. In both cases there is a certain mythology around the profession and the journalists themselves. The authors also acknowledge that popular culture depictions of journalism's past can be critical of the established mythology, as seen in the numerous parodies poking fun at the press's involvement in Watergate.

The next subject is the popular portrayal of journalistic professionalism. This chapter discusses how key tenets of objectivity and ethical choice as well as the value of journalism schools are communicated in popular culture. According to the authors, popular culture celebrates good and responsible journalism and criticizes irresponsible journalism. One of the high points of this chapter is a consideration of the various interpretations of Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, and how he "highlights potential problems with objectivity" (p. 48).

The next chapter is all about differences. The popular image of journalists is of people who are different both from each other and from the rest of society. Journalists are often depicted as outsiders, or even outlaws who operate outside the bounds of normal society. Attention is given in this chapter to the portrayal of female, minority, and homosexual journalists. One of the more interesting parts of the chapter is the examination of real-life authors who fall into one or more of the above categories and how they depict their fictional counterparts.

Chapter 4 deals with power and how the media is represented in dealing with both its own power and the power of others. The conclusion is that popular culture depicts the press as a force that can do great good or great harm. One of the more fascinating sections of the chapter is the examination of the depiction of the female journalist who becomes intimately involved with a source in order to get a story, such as Zoe Barnes in *House of Cards* (2013).

In the next chapter, the authors examine photojournalists and television journalists as they are represented

in popular culture. As with the previous topics, the depiction of these journalists is both positive and negative. Photojournalists and television journalists are sometimes portrayed as documenting wrongdoing and promoting accuracy and fairness, while at other times they are an "oppressive force" (p. 102) that fabricates, trivializes, and dehumanizes.

The final theme is war. War reporting, both in actuality and in popular culture, carries a certain amount of prestige. However, the war reporter is often represented as a hero disturbed and hurt by what she or he has witnessed. These journalists often have to confront questions about their loyalties, while any attempt at objectivity fails. This chapter is divided into subsections that offer thoughtful examples of reporter characters in America's many recent wars.

Finally, Ehrlich and Saltzman use the conclusion to discuss how popular culture views journalists and journalism in the twenty-first century and beyond. The authors look at speculative fiction and video games, as well as the rise of the Internet, which has created the blogger and citizen journalists. The last part of the conclusion consists of the author's suggestions for further research, such as images of journalism and journalists in popular culture in other societies.

Clearly, an abundance of source material has been collected and examined. The authors did an excellent job choosing material that would be familiar to most readers, even if they have not actually read or seen the film, show, play, or book. However, a closer look at the subtopics, such as the representation of homosexuals, minorities, and female journalists, would have been desirable, although a comprehensive study of this topic would have been challenging given the scope of the work; a separate, more focused book project might be more appropriate. Also, the authors tend to focus on films despite the book's goal of studying popular culture more broadly.

However, the authors have certainly laid the foundation for further study. Overall *Heroes and Scoundrels* is an informative (and fun!) look at the portrayal of journalism and journalists in American popular culture. It is a good introduction for students of journalism, journalism history, and popular culture, as well as anyone curious about how journalists do their jobs. As a bonus, those who buy the book can receive a specially produced DVD set if they join the IJPC at a reduced membership fee. The book's analysis and the multi-media resources available make this a valuable contribution to the field.

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