

City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Lonsdale, S. (2026). Representing the Journalist-figure, from Balladeer to Blogger: Towards the Outlines of a Field. Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies, 35(1), pp. 11-25. doi: 10.7311/0860-5734.35.1.02

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/37319/

Link to published version: https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.35.1.02

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

Representations of Journalistic Practices
in Anglophone Literature, Film and Other Media

35/1 2026

GUEST EDITORS
Beatriz Valverde [bvalverd@ujaen.es]
Barbara Korte [barbara.korte@anglistik.uni-freiburg.de]

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF
Anna Rędzioch-Korkuz [annaredzioch@uw.edu.pl]
Przemysław Uściński [p.uscinski@uw.edu.pl]

ASSOCIATE EDITORS
Silvia Bruti [silvia.bruti@unipi.it]
Lourdes López Ropero [lourdes.lopez@ua.es]
Martin Löschnigg [martin.loeschnigg@uni-graz.at]
Jerzy Nykiel [jerzy.nykiel@uib.no]

ASSISTANT EDITORS
Dominika Lewandowska-Rodak [d.lewandowska10@uw.edu.pl]
Bartosz Lutostański [b.lutostanski@uw.edu.pl]

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDITOR
Mary Newbould [marynewbould23@gmail.com]

ADVISORY BOARD
Michael Bilynsky, University of Lviv
Andrzej Bogusławski, University of Warsaw
Mirosława Buchholtz, Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń
Jan Čermák, Charles University, Prague
Edwin Duncan, Towson University
Jacek Fabiszak, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Elżbieta Foeller-Pituch, Northwestern University, Evanston-Chicago
Piotr Gąsiorowski, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Keith Hanley, Lancaster University
Andrea Herrera, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
Christopher Knight, University of Montana,
Marcin Krygier, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań
Krystyna Kujawińska-Courtney, University of Łódź
Brian Lowrey, Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens
Zbigniew Mazur, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin
Rafał Molencki, University of Silesia, Sosnowiec
John G. Newman, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Jerzy Rubach, University of Iowa
Piotr Ruszkiewicz, Pedagogical University, Cracow
Krystyna Stamirowska, Jagiellonian University, Cracow
Merja Stenroos, University of Stavanger
Jeremy Tambling, SWPS University, Warsaw
Peter de Voogd, University of Utrecht
Anna Walczuk, Jagiellonian University, Cracow
Jean Ward, University of Gdańsk
Jerzy Wełna, University of Warsaw
Florian Zappe, independent scholar

GUEST REVIEWERS
Sergio Gutiérrez, Complutense University of Madrid
Patrick Ferrucci, Colorado State University
Leonarda García-Jiménez, University of Murcia
Daniela Lazcano, University of Valparaíso
Patrik Lundell, University of Örebro
Jesús Nieto, University of Jaén
Chad Painter, University of Dayton
Agnieszka Pantuchowicz, SWPS University, Warsaw
Marek Paryż, University of Warsaw
Maria Sulimma, University of Freiburg
Miguel Teruel, University of Valencia
David Varona, Complutense University of Madrid
Mikołaj Wiśniewski, SWPS University, Warsaw

UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW | INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW

Anglica. An International Journal of English Studies 35/1
ISSN 0860-5734, e-ISSN 2957-0905
Copyright © by Sarah Lonsdale, 2026
Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 (CC BY-SA 3.0)
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/
https://doi.org/10.7311/0860-5734.35.1.02

Sarah Lonsdale
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4058-7681
City St George's, University of London

Representing the Journalist-figure, from Balladeer to Blogger: Towards the Outlines of a Field

Abstract: Representations of the figure of the journalist and of media practice are ubiquitous in cultural artefacts produced over centuries. This article explores the perennial fascination cultural producers have with the journalist figure and lays out existing scholarship and the many different methodologies employed for its academic study. I suggest areas where researchers need to take responsibility for audience reactions to journalism fictions, particularly in TV and the cinema, and I indicate neglected and further areas of research. My review of the literature on this topic, much of it only published in the past twenty years, proposes that this is an important still-emerging field of research in the area of public understanding of the media, and one which is still finding its contours.

Keywords: journalists in fiction, film, representation, watchdog, field of cultural production

1. Introduction

Why is the figure of the journalist (and their many antecedents and successors: the messenger, travelling bard, newsboy, blogger and chronicler), such a perennial source of fascination for cultural producers, and thus, by extension, audiences? The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) project (www.ijpc.org) records in its database, as of February 2026, more than 101,000 cultural artefacts featuring journalist-figures and the information networks within which they operate. These

range in time and function from messengers sent by Old Testament kings to inquire about and report on the state of public opinion, the outcome of battles and the health of rivals, to 2026 films and TV miniseries. The most recent of the latter, *His and Hers* (Netflix, 2026), stars a former TV anchor playing a familiar "watchdog" role, investigating a murder in her hometown and clashing with the official detective who she feels is failing in his job. This latest fiction (like so many film and television fictions, and more of this later) is based on a novel written by a former journalist, in this case *His and Hers* (2020) by Alice Feeney, a one-time BBC journalist and producer. While the IJPC database does record non-English language items, these are by no means as numerous as English language ones. As an example, the database lists nearly 18,000 English-language feature films, dating from 1890, and just 3,713 non-English language items (the first, a French film featuring a newsboy calling out lottery results, which transforms the life of an impoverished listener, *Le Billet de Loterie*, directed by Louis Feuillade in 1908). One can thus safely assume that across the globe, and across time, cultural producers have created hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of artefacts featuring the journalist or journalist-figure. Not only do representations of the journalist constitute vast numbers and span millennia, but they also appear in myriad forms, from poetry, plays and short stories, to visual art, comic strips, video games and animated cartoons.

From these few general points and examples, we can already apprehend something of the contested status, and place in culture and society, of the journalist and their equivalents. This figure's fictional representation is multiple, fragmented and timeless, and occupies some kind of social no-man's land between kings and authorities on the one hand and the public on the other. The journalist is granted – by politics, society in general, and cultural producers – access to locations and sources of information not available to "ordinary people." Off-the-record briefings by government ministers; press passes to restricted areas of public and commercial life; previews of films and novels not yet launched, are all made available to journalists. Creators of journalism fiction have used this "superpower," this ability to "move at will in the fourth dimension" as journalist-turned-fiction writer Rudyard Kipling put it, in multiple narrative devices (2008b, 30). Fulfilling the needs of both the powerful and *demos*, journalists are compromised and sometimes endangered in serving these twin, and often conflicting masters. They are a disruptor and mischief-maker: this magic potion called news he or she finds, carries and distributes has the power to topple kings and raise up the lowly. Creators of all brows, from high modernists to writers of "penny dreadfuls" have used this shapeshifter's intensely malleable and plastic persona to pursue their specific narrative ends. As has often been pointed out, in many popular screen thrillers (and also novels), the journalist's role is similar to that of a spy or detective, and their role is usually either stock hero or clichéd villain (McNair; Ehrlich and Saltzman). Yet the figure of the journalist has also been used by some of literature's most garlanded writers, from William Shakespeare's travelling bard Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, who sells eye-popping "news" like

a tabloid hack, from village to village. The character is used by Shakespeare to test the audience's willingness to believe what is being told them, whether from elite, or vagabond voices in the play, or from the playwright himself, and thus to reflect upon the nature of truth during a turbulent political time after the relative stability of Elizabeth I's long reign. Some of the 20th and 21st century's greatest Anglophone writers: Virginia Woolf (*Between the Acts*, 1941), W. H. Auden (*The Orators*, 1932), James Joyce (*Ulysses*, 1922), Joan Didion (*The Last Thing He Wanted,* 1996), Martin Amis (*Yellow Dog*, 2004) and Colson Whitehead (*John Henry Days*, 2001), and so many others, have examined in plays, poetry and novels the character and professional practice of the journalist. In the hands of these "highbrow," or "elite," cultural producers there is something deeper than merely "hero" or "villain" going on: nothing less than the gloves-off combat between rivals in the never-ending contest over who gets to be called truth-teller; who is the rightful custodian of the written word, who gets to record their version of history (Lonsdale 2016).

2. Methodological Approaches

Because of the multiplicity of modes of representation, scholars (including the editors of, and contributors to, this special issue), have brought multiple methodological approaches from a wide range of disciplines to bear in the study of fictional representations of journalists and journalistic practices. This is still a relatively young area of study, to which no over-arching theory can be applied, and researchers have often found themselves with few field-specific prior studies to apply, having to borrow theories and concepts from related disciplines. Yet scholars are adding to our knowledge every year, with much research published in the past fifteen to twenty years. From the literary approach, scholars have used analytical tools ranging from textual analysis through close reading, Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal's theory of narrative embedding, and concepts of metarepresentation (Sperber), narrative framing, feminist literary theory and book history. Other literary genre-based approaches include Dallas Liddle's concept of Bakhtinian "Journalization," which he uses for studying the intricate waltz conducted by authors and journalists in the mid-Victorian literary marketplace, and Patrick Collier's analysis of the aggressive campaign waged by the high-modernists against journalism in the "battle of the brows" of the 1920s and 30s. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery's very recent study of the phenomenon of the late Victorian undercover journalist and their contemporary fictional representations demonstrates how permeable the boundaries between journalism and fiction were then. This new, and high-risk investigative journalism inspired innovations in narrative form by realist novelists desiring to "elevate the status of their own profession at the expense of a rival one" that was threatening their marketplace with lurid, but *real* stories from the underside of society (21).

From the social sciences approach scholars have used Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner) and Jürgen Habermas' Public Sphere Theory (1974). Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1990) and his model of the field of cultural production (1993) have been particularly helpful for scholars seeking to place journalistic practice both within the field and as influencing adjacent fields, such as the political (e.g., Korte). From journalism studies, scholars have used concepts such as media ethics and journalism's dubious assertion of objectivity (Ward; e.g., Valverde), and journalists' claim for status through the practice of "eye-witnessing," thus delivering to the world "the first draft of history" (Zelizer) and Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini's classification of different media systems (e.g., De Wulf Helskens). Scholars of journalists on film and television (for example Archibald) often wrestle with concepts of historical representation, as so many films featuring journalism dwell on events in both the near and distant past; recent examples include *The Post* (2017), *Scoop* (2024) and the Spanish *Soldados de Salamina* (2003). Others too (e.g., Ferrucci and Painter) have employed George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory to assess whether themes raised in television fictions might influence audiences' perceptions of the journalism industry. Sandford Borins and Beth Herst have employed structuralist narratology to analyse parallels between films depicting real-life investigations. Other scholars (e.g., Steiner et al.; Peters; De Wulf Helskens) have analysed audience responses (both journalists and the general public) to television series that portray fictional journalists. In the latter two studies, which focus on the general public's responses, there is a discernible ideal of "watchdog" journalism that the public wants, but also realises barely exists in today's impoverished and fragmented media landscape, "a nostalgic lament for the journalism of days gone by," as Chris Peters puts it (603). Finally, because so many films about journalists emanate from novels as original texts, adaptation studies examine the intricate journey from text-to-film that many cinematic representations of journalists make (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz). In videogames, representations of journalists as playable protagonists are now common, such as freelance photojournalist Frank West in *Dead Rising* and Madison Paige in *Heavy Rain*; their traditional "watchdog" role is barely changed from films and novels of fifty and one hundred years ago, although their antagonists might be witches and zombies as well as corporate machines. Ian Bogost et al. argue that in a reversal of roles, online newspapers are using videogame graphics and technology in order to make their storytelling more engaging and interactive.

While some work has recently been done on non-Western and non-English language fictions of journalists (including in this issue), this is a neglected part of the field. Peter Aker and Andrei Rogatchevski, in their study of Swedish, Russian and American journalist-crime novels 1991 to 2020, come to significant conclusions about hope for investigative journalism's survival in today's post-truth era and its economically challenged and fragmented media landscape. They find that hope for the survival of "watchdog" journalism is highest in the Swedish novels they

analysed, representing Hallin and Mancini's democratic corporatist media system, followed by some distance by the American novels, situated in the liberal model. Fascinatingly, the researchers found that the threat from an interfering and corrupt state was highest in the Russian novels, but also that they could find no Russian novels published after 2003 with an investigative journalist protagonist – just a few years after President Putin came to power. They propose: "It may have a great deal to do with the systematic persecution of investigative journalists in Russia" (Aker and Rogatchevski 594), and that in contemporary Russia neither publishers nor readers are interested in this figure. By their very erasure, then, fictional Russian journalists speak volumes for the role of journalism in a democratic society. In one of the very few studies of a non-Western fictional journalist, Raja Fadla and Mohammed Shaheen come to interesting conclusions about the representation of a journalist from a developing, postcolonial media system, in this case, Sudan. They point to several recent Anglophone novels by Arab writers which feature a journalist, often to express the problems of practicing "watchdog" journalism in repressive, autocratic regimes, or the figure of the exiled journalist who has fled their own country. In Fadla and Shaheen's study of Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with the Djinns* (2004), the fictional Sudanese journalist Yasin Zahir fails in his role of informing his country and in his desire to give "voice to the voiceless" due to heavy media restrictions. He becomes an exile in Britain and turns to writing fiction, which he sees as a better vehicle with which he can write about "the reality of the marginalized" in his former home (2381). Fadla and Shaheen's analysis of *Travelling with the Djinns* emphasises the difficulty for journalists in the global south to tell their own countries' stories, drowned out as they are by powerful western news channels such as CNN and the BBC, which are supplied with copy by the international news agencies whose roots are embedded in nineteenth-century imperialism (Thussu). Non-Western fictions are being produced in postcolonial countries with developing economies and still-developing media systems. Bollywood, for example has produced at least twelve films featuring journalists in the past three decades; the latest, *Dhamaka* (2021), features the moral choices a down-on-his-luck television presenter has to make when a terrorist plot threatens, in a commercial and cynical world of TV journalism. Clearly more work must be done in this part of the field to explore other topics and establish clearer boundaries. Themes of a fictional exiled journalistic diaspora and also of the vanishing fictional journalist in autocratic states seem particularly fruitful.

3. Problems of Classification

With such a multiplicity of representations over so many years and with so many different methodological approaches employed in studying the image of the journalist, different research areas can resemble an unfinished mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, and sometimes it is not clear how different parts join up to create an adequately holistic picture. Few clear patterns have emerged beyond the broadbrush "hero" versus "villain,"

"free press" versus "censorship," and "First Amendment crusader" versus "corporate or commercial proprietor" dichotomies. This is a good start, and it has been used by many scholars including Brain McNair or Matthew Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, and, with greater layers of interpretation, Borins and Herst. These, and others' research provide helpful systems of classification. But archetypes tell us more about cultural producers' storytelling processes than about the realities of actual journalism practice. Within the broad "hero" and "villain" categories, there are nuances within nuance: the "hero" reporter who risks his life for the truth often has a messy and deceitful private life (for example Cal McAffrey in the US-film remake of *State of Play*, 2009). Then there is the apparently professional, objective foreign correspondent Thomas Fowler, narrator of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* (1955) who, while claiming be a detached reporter only interested in reporting the truth, is not only lying to the face of other characters in the novel, but also to the reader, by letter to his absent wife, and to himself. In the British newspaper film *Defence of the Realm* (1985), while reporter Nick Mullen ultimately gives his life for the truth to come out, his tactics, which include impersonating a police officer, stealing documents and lying to a woman whose husband has betrayed her, defy all journalism ethics. When representations are examined through the lens of gender, female journalists are often fighting battles on two fronts: to expose the truth, but also to be taken seriously in a masculine field, and sometimes it is not clear which priority is uppermost in her mind (Lonsdale 2013). It is rare that a "good" journalist is also of unimpeachable moral character. And why would they be? The flaws and nuances make them interesting for viewers and readers, as well as authors, directors and actors. When Russell Crowe was offered the part of Cal McAffrey in *State of Play*, he told director Kevin Macdonald: "If you're expecting me to play a journalist as a hero you're talking to the wrong bloke. If you want me to portray a journalist as a human being full of faults, predilections and foibles and quirks, then yes, I'll play that" (qtd. in Appleyard 5). Author (and former *Guardian* journalist) James Meek has written two novels examining the state of British journalism, *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008) and *The Heart Broke In* (2012), both of which are peopled with broken down, manipulative and deceitful correspondents and editors. Meek has said that readers would simply not like a "preachy crusading journalist who wants to save the world" (qtd. in Lonsdale 2016, 245). There are exceptions, of course. In films based on true journalism scoops, as per Borins and Herst's research, such as *All the President's Men* (1976), *Spotlight* (2015), *She Said* (2022), and latterly *Scoop* and *A Very Royal Scandal* (2024), the journalists have quiet, dull, or non-existent private lives, indicating their serious approach to their work.

4. Problems of Verisimilitude

Here we have already reached a difficult stumbling block over fictional representations of journalists. If, as has been accepted, journalism fictions function as meta-journalistic discourses, informing audiences of the apparent working practices

of real-life journalists, how realistic or distorted a picture of real-life news work are audiences actually getting (Ehrlich and Saltzman; Peters; Plantinga; De Wulf Helskens)? No fictional newsroom, no matter how apparently true it looks, could possibly reflect the realities of day-to-day life for real journalists, which is often very dull, with repetitive routines, a lack of autonomy, phone calls often ending in dead ends, and investigative stories going nowhere because of insufficient resources. No real journalist's life or work is neat enough to fit the screen writer's narrative demands for antagonist, crisis, climax and resolution. Liberties must be taken. An instructive example is the recent dual representation of the infamous 2019 interview conducted by then *Newsnight* journalist Emily Maitlis, with (then) Prince Andrew over his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, *Scoop* and *A Very Royal Scandal*. Although both productions employ a realistic documentary-style approach with both actors portraying Maitlis wearing outfits identical to the one she wore for the interview, they present two very different versions of the journalistic process that led up to the giant-killing event. *Scoop* plays up the role of *Newsnight*'s interview booker Sam McAlister, while *A Very Royal Scandal* dramatizes Maitlis' work and personal jeopardy in the run-up to, and during, the interview.

In interviews, directors, authors and screenwriters admit to twisting reality and using cinematic techniques to convey messages or boost dramatic content. In *State of Play*, director Kevin Macdonald deliberately had the newsroom of the fictional *Washington Globe* look like the fictional *Washington Post* newsroom from *All the President's Men*, "except 35 years on, and nobody's tidied up" (Appleyard 4). He also deliberately blurred backgrounds using a shallow depth of field, to imply murkiness and uncertainty. Similarly, in the last season of *The Wire* (2008), which features a fictional *Baltimore Sun*, writer and producer David Simon "carefully replicated the look of the [real] *Baltimore Sun*, from the color of the office walls to the way people rolled up their sleeves" (Steiner et al. 708). Yet journalists' responses to the portrayal of the *Sun* varied wildly from accusations of lacking any adherence to the truth (from those who worked on the paper), to "dead-on" and "grittily realistic" (Steiner et al. 712). *All the President's Men*, the high-water mark of the American "free press myth," attempts to convince the audience, through its deadpan, documentary-style of presentation, that it is watching real events unfold. The director Alan Pakula even imported onto the set actual waste from the *Washington Post* newsroom desks (Ehrlich and Saltzman 31). And yet of course the director has used artistic license, from boosting the sound of the reporters' pens scratching on their notebooks, to bathing the *Post* newsroom in bright light, while casting the White House and other Washington monuments in darkness. Moreover, critics have pointed to numerous ways Pakula's journalistic procedural departs from the truth, particularly in focusing solely on Woodward and Bernstein as the heroes of the piece. While they certainly worked solidly and often alone in the early weeks and months after the 1972 break-in at the Watergate complex, often their journalism, "hardly hypodermic in its impact," failed to reveal enough to raise further questions

(Perloff and Kumar 802). The role of Watergate burglar James McCord in admitting in March 1973 that he and the other burglars had been pressured to remain silent and plead guilty; other media organisations and journalists who worked on the story, particularly the *Los Angeles Times*, CBS news and Seymour Hersh at the *New York Times*; and the Senate hearings led by a critical group of Republican legislators, all played equally important parts in the complex jigsaw of events: but these would muddy the narrative waters of the lone (or in this case, double-act) mythic hero on the trail of an overwhelming enemy (Feldstein; Lang and Lang). Furthermore, recent studies of Watergate, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the break-in, debunk the persistent myth that the *Washington Post*'s coverage of the scandal, and the subsequent release of *All the President's Men* in 1976, inspired a generation of young men and women to become journalists in the US (Perloff and Kumar). The only marked increase in applications to US journalism schools happened from 1970 to 1971, and were almost entirely down to young women enrolling in college and choosing writing and communications courses, a result of gains in second wave feminism, rather than any Watergate effect (Perloff and Kumar).

Negative representations of journalists, such as Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1958 adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, or David Simon's final series of *The Wire* (2008), display active hostility towards journalism. But are the directors pointing out problems with a crucial, yet deeply flawed profession, or is something else at work? In *The Quiet American*, Mankiewicz rewrote the ending as it appears in Greene's novel, to obliterate what he saw as Greene's "absurd anti-Americanism" (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz 299). The film exculpates the American CIA agent Alden Pyle from all wrongdoing and plays up Thomas Fowler's role in the assassination, attributing it wholly to his obsessive jealousy of Pyle who has taken his lover from him, rather than the more complex political attitude of the novel. Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz argue this attack on Greene's original text had less to do with verisimilitude than Mankiewicz's desire, as an "auteur," to "challenge or even replace the literary original," agents from different parts of Bourdieu's cultural field once again wrestling for cultural authority (300). In the final season of *The Wire*, creator David Simon is highly critical of the fictional version of the *Baltimore Sun*, the newspaper he worked on as a crime reporter for several years. He has variously been accused of "character assassination" and of using an otherwise highly acclaimed artwork as a vehicle for "getting even with his former bosses" (Steiner et al. 704). Were the themes of *The Wire* Season 5 the warning cry of someone deeply interested in journalism's role in upholding democracy, that corporate takeovers, reduced resources and demoralised journalists were having a negative effect on business and local government accountability? Or was it a signal from an agent within the field of cultural production, that he has climbed out of journalism and moved into a more culturally elevated territory of artistic creation?

Perhaps the most dangerous arena where fact and fiction clash is that of the over-sexualisation of so many female journalists. Recent films and TV series that

have unnecessarily portrayed female journalists sleeping either with colleagues to get a better job, or with sources to get good stories, include *The French Dispatch* (2021), *Richard Jewell* (2019), *Crazy Heart* (2009), *Trainwreck* (2015), *Sharp Objects* (2018), *House of Cards* (2013–2018) and *Nightcrawler* (2014), and there are many more. After the release of *Richard Jewell*, the executive director of the International Women's Media Federation (IWMF), Elisa Lees Muñoz, put out a statement urging directors to consider the safety of women journalists and that the "ubiquity of these sexist and sexualized stereotypes about women in media has real consequences for female reporters" (Pan). The previous year the IWMF had released a survey of six hundred women media workers which showed that more than half had been threatened or harassed in person, and that two thirds had been harassed online (Ferrier). The over-sexualisation of women reporters, of course, has nothing to do with reality and everything to do with Hollywood and how to sell movies.

From the above arguments, it seems that it is ethically difficult, if not impossible, to study how TV and cinematic representations of journalists impact public perceptions, without scholars initially studying the intentions of the directors. If scholars are surveying TV and cinema audiences for their responses to screen representations of journalists, it is vital that researchers draw viewers' attention to themes and plotlines in the films where realism has been abandoned for the sake of the drama. Much of what audiences see offers a distorted view of the trade, this distortion being all the more dangerous for the superficial attempts at presenting verisimilitude. Real reporters still have to go out and meet the public every day.

5. Journalists Producing Fictions of Themselves

It is a regular criticism of journalists that while they are more than happy to examine and critique, minutely, all other parts of politics, business and society, they rarely pause to reflect on their own culture and practices (e.g., Overholser; Shannon; Schudson). The Leveson Inquiry (2012) into the culture and practices of the British press, following the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, noted, somewhat wearily, that this was the seventh Government-appointed inquiry into the ethics and functioning of the British press in seventy years, partly because newspapers themselves seemed so resistant to reflecting on their own industry. Yet journalists' self-reflection has been staring us in the face for decades. While more work in this area is to be done, it has not escaped the notice of scholars in this field that a large quantity of fictions about journalism in film, television and in novels, have been produced by journalists themselves. In one of the very few sociological studies of working journalists, Oliver Barrett-Boyd found that three-quarters of the seventy-three apprentice reporters aged eighteen to twenty he surveyed wanted, ultimately, to write a book (some were already doing so), and the vast majority of them, possibly surprisingly for journalism personnel, wanted to write a novel,

not non-fiction. In my own study of journalists in British fiction, which examined one hundred and fifty-five novels written between 1902 and 2012, around two thirds (ninety-eight) had been written by former or practicing journalists. These include Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Michael Frayn, Edgar Wallace, Philip Gibbs, James Meek, Monica Dickens, and a whole host of other acclaimed writers. Journalism was their training ground; it often gave them their first experience of professional writing, yet their relationship with it was highly complex. The Barrett-Boyd survey also tells us something about journalists' creative, storytelling impulse and where they see themselves within the field of cultural production. According to Bourdieu, journalists, close to the economic pole of the field and furthest from the cultural pole, occupy one of the lowliest parts of it, rather like Dante's lowest circle of *Inferno*. This evidence for a widespread desire amongst journalism personnel to occupy part of the field much closer to the cultural pole, novel-writing, may perhaps explain journalists' often ambivalent attitudes to their profession. It pays their bills, it gives them some kind of public platform, and yet they are aware of the tensions in newsrooms between selling papers/getting clicks and the ethical responsibilities of providing people with the truth.

Those journalists who produce fictions of their trade often use it to criticise its shortcomings but also offer their fictions as a map by which readers can navigate the world of the media and its role in "our (self) understanding of modern and postmodern culture" (Valverde 3). Graham Greene, for example, worked as a journalist before he could support himself with his fiction, and although he enjoyed his days in the *Times* sub-editors' room, he disliked his former profession because of its practitioners' carelessness with words. Beatriz Valverde has discussed Greene's own "fixation with accuracy" (24) while his fictional journalists sometimes display a fatal disregard for ethics. Yet he still cannibalised his own reportage from Indo-China for use in his novel *The Quiet American*, lifting phrases and similes wholesale from his non-fiction and inserting them into his fiction, illustrating both the proximity, as well as the rivalry between the two forms of literary production (Lonsdale 2016; Valverde 2025). Another journalist-turned novelist, and equally critical of his old "black art," as he called it, also saw it as offering him a skeleton key, as it were, to pass between worlds. Rudyard Kipling may well have mercilessly lampooned foreign correspondents in his novella *The Light that Failed* (1891), but in *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), the journalist-narrator can only bring readers his story because of his trade, which gives him access to see and hear things that a novelist sitting at their desk could never do: "Sometimes I wore dress clothes and consorted with Princes and Politicals, drinking from crystal and eating from silver. Sometimes I lay out on the ground and devoured what I could get, from a plate made of leaves" (2008a, 247).

In the world of film and television, journalists and former journalists have provided source material in the form of memoirs and novels. Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* has twice been adapted for the cinema in 1958 and 2002; Woodward and Bernstein's 1974 "ur-text" *All the President's Men* provided

much material for Pakula's film (Brennen 115); Mary Mapes' memoir *Truth: The Press, The President and the Privilege of Power* (2005) formed the basis for the film *Truth* (2015), about her own failed investigation into President George W. Bush's National Guard Service, which ended her career. Most recently, the British journalist Nick Davies' memoir *Hack Attack* (2014) provided much of the material used in the ITV series about the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, *The Hack* (2025). Journalists have also worked as writers and producers on films and television shows, from Charles Lederer (*His Girl Friday*, 1940) to Emily Maitlis (*A Very Royal Scandal*). Even in films and series where no former journalist gets a producing/screen-writing credit, they are often brought in as consultants or to help with verisimilitude, such as in Aaron Sorkin's TV series *The Newsroom* (2012–2014). Films and television offer journalists ways for their storytelling to reach mass audiences where often their reporting and, if they write them, their novels cannot. Perhaps this is why that the "journalist-hero" archetype is so much more prevalent in films about journalists than in novels. A fruitful further area of research in this field would be in analysing and comparing fictions from the point of view of whether their authors or creators/directors were former or practicing journalists or whether they had no connection at all with the industry.

6. Conclusion: Why Should the Study of Journalists in Fiction Matter?

From the above observations, we can conclude that the state of journalism is of equally vital concern to thinkers, cultural producers and the public as to journalists, and to the state of democracy itself. You can't have one without the other. Thus, creations of fictional journalism, and responses to them, form part of the conversation society has with itself about the way it is being governed. While the fictional journalist's contemporary cousins, the detective and spy, work in important fields, it could be argued that the journalist trumps them all. In detective fiction, the police and justice system act as the public's proxies to issue revenge on wrongdoers; in spy fiction, government agents or other nations' secret services put matters right. In journalism fiction, the ultimate goal for the good journalist-protagonist is to put nothing less than the truth into the public domain, be it a government cover up or corporate sleaze and corruption. It is therefore the public, reading, watching, hearing the facts, that deals out its ultimate verdict. Fifty years on from the most iconic screen representation of journalists of all time, *All the President's Men*, why are those closing moments still so powerful? When all apparently seems lost, finally the sound of the journalists typing, and the steady crescendo of the *Post* ticker tape drumming out the truth, drowns out the lies emanating from the White House. What happens next is understood: public opinion, informed by the press, will force the President from office. Richard M. Perloff and Anup Kumar suggest that, were a present-day "Woodstein" to embark on a similar investigation, it is

unlikely their discoveries would have the same effect: they would be belittled and undermined by social media "trolls" and right-wing podcasters; their paper's owner, leaned on from the White House, might have them sacked; even if presented with the truth, the current incumbent of the White House would not be shamed into resigning and would probably dismiss the story as "fake news"; a supine Congress would not move to impeach. While journalists and authors/directors seem still to be battling each other right at the disputed and fluctuating boundary between fiction and journalism over who gets to be called truth-teller, it is a battle that, at present, both sides seem to be losing. Contemporary fictions in films and novels reflect this too, emphasising the vulnerability of watchdog journalism and its practitioners, and the importance of a free press in a healthy democracy. In order to understand so many complex and sometimes clashing representations, theories and philosophical viewpoints, this special issue is a vital contribution to the journeys scholars are making towards defining and consolidating this important field of inquiry.

References

Aker, Patrik and Andrei Rogatchevski. 2020. "The Journalist as a Detective: The Media Insights and Critique in Post-1991 American, Russian, and Swedish Crime Novels." *Journalism Studies* 21.5: 582–597.

Amis, Martin. 2004. *Yellow Dog*. London: Vintage.

Appleyard, Brian. 2009. "The Genuine Article." *Sunday Times Culture* (5 April): 4–7.

Archibald, David. 2012. *The War That Won't Die: The Spanish Civil War in Cinema.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bal, Mieke. 1980. "Notes on Narrative Embedding." *Poetry Today* 2.2: 41–59.

Barrett-Boyd, Oliver. 1970. "Journalism Recruitment and Training: Some Problems in Professionalisation." *Media Sociology: A Reader*. Ed. Jeremy Tunstall. London: Constable. 181–201.

Bogost, Ian, Simon Ferrari, and Bobby Schweizer. 2010. *Newsgames: Journalism at Play*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Borins, Sandford, and Beth Herst. 2020. "Beyond 'Woodstein': Narratives of Investigative Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 14.7: 769–790. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1664927

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. London: Polity.

Brennen, Bonnie. 2003. "Sweat Not Melodrama: Reading the Structure of Feeling in *All the President's Men*." *Journalism* 4.1: 113–131.

Collier, Patrick. 2006. *Modernism on Fleet Street*. Basingstoke: Ashgate.

Colón Semenza, Greg M., and Bob Hasenfratz. 2015. *The History of British Literature on Film, 1895–2015*. London: Bloomsbury.

Davies, Nick. 2014. *Hack Attack: How the Truth Caught Up with Rupert Murdoch*. London: Vintage.

De Wulf Helskens, Maxine. 2025. "Decoding Fictional Journalism: A Diary-Interview Approach to Uncovering Flemish Audience Interpretations of Journalism in Fiction." *Journalism Studies* 26.4: 405–422. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2433630

Didion, Joan. 1996. *The Last Thing He Wanted.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Donovan, Stephen, and Matthew Rubery. 2025. *Undercover: Victorian Investigative Journalism in Fact and Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ehrlich, Matthew, and Joe Saltzman. 2015. *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Fadla, Raja, and Mohammed Shaheen. 2022. "Voicing the Voiceless: The Significance of the Fictional Journalist in Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with the Djinns* (2004)." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 12.11: 2381–2387.

Feeney, Alice. 2020. *His and Hers*. London: HQ.

Feldstein, Mark. 2014. "Wallowing in Watergate: Historiography, Methodology, and Mythology in Journalism's Celebrated Moment." *American Journalism* 31.4: 550–570. https://doi.org/10.1080/08821127.2014.968946

Ferrier, Michelle. 2018. *Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting*. https://e1.nmcdn.io/assets/iwmf/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf

Ferrucci, Patrick, and Chad Painter. 2017. "Print Versus Digital: How Medium Matters on *House of Cards*." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 4.12: 124–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859917690533

Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Trans. J. E. Lewin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gerbner, George. 1998. "Cultivation Analysis: An Overview." *Mass Communication and Society* 1.3–4: 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.1998.9677855.

Greene, Graham. 1955. *The Quiet American*. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1974. "The Public Sphere." Trans. Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox. *New German Critique* 3: 49–55.

Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Joyce, James. 1922. *Ulysses*. Paris: Shakespeare and Company.

Kipling, Rudyard. 2008a [1888]. *The Man Who Would Be King*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kipling, Rudyard. 2008b [1937]. *Something of Myself*. London: Wordsworth Editions.

Korte, Barbara. 2009. *Represented Reporters: Images of War Correspondents in Memoirs and Fiction*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Lang, Gladys Engel, and Kurt Lang. 1983. *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press and the Polls During Watergate*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Leveson Inquiry. 2012. https://www.discoverleveson.com/home/about

Liddle, Dallas. 2009. *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Lonsdale, Sarah. 2013. "'We agreed that women were a nuisance in the office, anyway.' The Portrayal of Women Journalists in Early Twentieth-Century British Fiction." *Journalism Studies* 14.4: 461–475. https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.718572.

Lonsdale, Sarah. 2016. *The Journalist in British Fiction and Film: Guarding the Guardians from 1900 to the Present*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

McNair, Brian. 2010. *Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Overholser, Geneva. 2000. "It's Time for Newspapers to Do Real Self-Criticism." *Columbia Journalism Review* 38.5: 64–65.

Pan, Deanna. 2019. "Why the Tired Trope of the Sexualised Female Journalist Persists in Movies Such as Richard Jewell." *The Boston Globe* (12 December) https://www.bostonglobe.com/2019/12/12/arts/why-tired-trope-sexualized-female-journalist-persists-movies-like-richard-jewell/

Perloff, Richard M., and Anup Kumar. 2022. "The Press and Watergate at 50: Understanding and Reconstructing a Seminal Story." *Journalism Practice* 16.5: 797–812. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.2018664

Peters, Chris. 2015. "Evaluating Journalism Through Popular Culture: HBO's *The Newsroom* and Public Reflections on the State of the News Media." *Media, Culture and Society* 37.4: 602–619. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714566902

Plantinga, Carl R. 2018. *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schudson, Michael. 1995. *The Power of News*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shannon, Richard. 2001. *A Press Free and Responsible: Self-Regulation and the Press Complaints Commission 1991–2001*. London: John Murray.

Steiner, Linda, Jing Guo, and Paul Hills. 2012. "*The Wire* and Repair of the Journalistic Paradigm." *Journalism* 14.6: 703–720. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884912455901

Tajfel, Henri, and John C. Turner. 2004. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior." *Political Psychology: Key Readings.* Ed. John T. Jost and Jim Sidanius. New York: Psychology Press. 7–24.

Thussu, Daya Kishan. 2022. "De-colonizing Global News-flows: An International Perspective." *Journalism Studies* 23.13: 1578–1592.

Valverde, Beatriz. 2025. *Fictional Representations of (Un)ethical Practices in Graham Greene's Work: Burnt-Out Reporters*. London: Routledge.

Ward, Stephen J. A. 2015. *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond*. Montreal: McGill University Press.
Whitehead, Colson. 2001. *John Henry Days*. London: Fourth Estate.
Woolf, Virginia. 1941. *Between the Acts*. London: Hogarth Press.
Zelizer, Barbie. 2007. "On 'Having Been There': 'Eyewitnessing' as a Journalistic Key Word." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 24.5: 408–428. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180701694614

Filmography

A Very Royal Scandal. 2024. Dir. Julian Jarrold. Prod. Amazon MGM.
All the President's Men. 1976. Dir. Alan Pakula. Prod. Warner Brothers.
Crazy Heart. 2009. Dir. Scott Cooper. Prod. Fox Searchlight.
Defence of the Realm. 1985. Dir. David Drury. Prod. Rank Organisation.
Dhamaka. 2021. Dir. Ram Madhvani. Prod. Netflix India.
His Girl Friday. 1940. Dir. Howard Hawks. Prod. Columbia Pictures.
House of Cards. 2013–2018. Dir. Beau Willimon. Prod. Netflix.
Le Billet de Loterie. 1908. Dir. Louis Feuillade. Prod. Pathé Frères.
Nightcrawler. 2014. Dir. Dan Gilroy. Prod. Open Road Films.
Richard Jewell. 2019. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Prod. Warner Brothers.
Scoop. 2024. Dir. Philip Martin. Prod. Netflix.
Sharp Objects. 2018. Dir. Jean-Marc Vallee. Prod. HBO.
She Said. 2022. Dir. Maria Schrader. Prod. Universal Pictures.
Soldados de Salamina. 2003. Dir. David Trueba. Prod. Lolafilms.
Spotlight. 2015. Dir. Tom McCarthy. Prod. First Look Media and Open Road Films.
State of Play. 2009. Dir. Kevin Macdonald. Prod. Universal Studios.
The French Dispatch. 2021. Dir. Wes Anderson. Prod. Searchlight Pictures.
The Hack. 2025. Dir. Lewis Arnold. Prod. ITV Studios.
The Newsroom. 2012–2014. Dir. Greg Mottola and Alan Poul. Prod. HBO.
The Quiet American. 1958. Dir. Joseph Mankiewicz. Prod. United Artists.
The Quiet American. 2002. Dir. Phillip Noyce. Prod. Miramax.
Trainwreck. 2015. Dir. Judd Apatow. Prod. Universal Pictures.
Truth. 2015. Dir. James Vanderbilt. Prod. Sony Pictures.