Matthew C. Ehrlich

Shattered Glass, Movies, and the Free Press Myth

Myth is central to a critical understanding of journalism, communication, and culture. This article uses the 2003 movie Shattered Glass *as a case study of the free press myth in action: the popular belief that a privately owned, market-driven press is necessary for the functioning of American democracy and the survival of a free people. The movie, which has been called the most significant about journalism since* All the President's Men*, tells of how reporter Stephen Glass fictionalized stories for* The New Republic *magazine before he was found out and fired in 1998. Contrary to the fears of some journalists that writer-director Billy Ray's film would encourage public skepticism toward the press,* Shattered Glass *actually does what films about journalism more often do: It underscores the press's centrality in American life, in particular the notion that self-regulation of the press works.*

Keywords: *journalism; movies; film; myth; Stephen Glass*

Myth is central to a critical understanding of journalism and popular culture. Carey (1988) argued that it allows us "to see in a miraculously discontinuous world persistent practices by which that world is sedimented and held together" and that it "enlarge[s] the human conversation" (p. 15). Similarly, Slotkin (1998) wrote that Americans require myths that can generate "a genuine and usable national consensus" (p. 653) and "a true (or truer) understanding of our history" (p. 656). However, Slotkin also said myth can serve the interests of "powerful corporate and political institutions." Those include the press. Bennett (2003) asserted that the "myth of a free press . . . muddles popular understandings about information and democracy" and leaves "most journalists and citizens unable to imagine" anything other than a "highly commercial and minimally regulated press system" (pp. 252-253) that produces homogenized news propping up the status quo.

This article uses the 2003 movie *Shattered Glass* (Cruise, Wagner, & Ray, 2003) as a case study of the free press myth in action. The film tells of Stephen Glass who, in 1998, perpetrated "the biggest hoax in modern American jour-

Journal of Communication Inquiry 29:2 (April 2005): 103-118
DOI: 10.1177/0196859904272741
© 2005 Sage Publications

nalistic history" by falsifying more than two dozen stories for *The New Republic* magazine (Dowd, 1998, p. 15). Even some years later after a *New York Times* reporter was caught similarly fabricating stories, one of Glass's former coworkers said, "Compared to Glass, Jayson Blair was an amateur" (Plotz, 2003). *Shattered Glass* was controversial among some journalists who charged that it glamorized Glass's misdeeds or reinforced negative stereotypes of the press. However, it was also called "the best movie about journalism since *All the President's Men*" (Sterritt, 2003, p. 18). That comparison was apt, for *Shattered Glass* performed much the same role that the Woodward and Bernstein story and other journalism movies had done: It underscored the press's centrality in American life, in particular the notion that self-regulation of the press works.

Interpretive Framework

This article extends a broader study of American cinema's depiction of journalism in asserting that movies are powerful embodiments of myth (Ehrlich, 2004). Lule (2001) outlined an interdisciplinary model of myth drawing on Barthes (1972), Campbell (1970), Eliade (1958), Jung (1959), and others. According to Lule (2001), myth is "a sacred, societal story that draws from archetypical figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life" (p. 15). It presents a commonsensical worldview serving to "represent shared values, confirm core beliefs, deny other beliefs, and help people engage with, appreciate, and understand the complex joys and sorrows" (Lule, 2001, p. 15) of our existence. At the same time, myth plays an ideological role, maintaining the existing distribution of power while distorting understanding of power's uses and abuses: "If a society is founded upon inequality, that society's dominant myths 'explain' and support such inequality" (Lule, 2001, p. 145).

McChesney and Scott (2004) wrote that under the free press myth, the "commercial free press system is thought to be ordained by the Founding Fathers as the engine of participatory self-government. . . . [I]t is an article of faith if one believes in America, in freedom, in democracy" (pp. 1-2). In addition, industry self-regulation is seen "as the only viable solution to media flaws" (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 22). Such a myth is consistent with a social responsibility model of the press in which journalists see themselves as public servants capable of objectively separating truth from falsehood and independently determining what citizens ought to know (Nerone, 1995; Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). That model has been critiqued by scholars who argue that mainstream commercial journalism is a corporately manufactured product centered on formulaic stories and routine interactions between journalists and powerful news sources; they also argue that objectivity is a self-serving ritual designed to shore up professional authority (Bennett, 2003; Berkowitz, 1997). The free press myth is seen as obscuring the fact that journalism serves "the specific political and economic agendas of media owners and advertisers while depoliticizing or misinforming the citizenry" (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 4).

Furthermore, the image of the journalist as upstanding professional and devoted truth seeker has often been undercut by journalists themselves, from the fabrications of *The Washington Post*'s Janet Cooke, *The New York Times*'s Jayson Blair, and *USA Today*'s Jack Kelley to the blunders of Fox News and of Dan Rather and CBS News in covering the 2004 presidential campaign (Hill, 2004; Lichtblau, 2004). In such cases, though, journalists have been resourceful in what has been termed "paradigm repair" and "boundary maintenance" (Bennett, Gressett, & Haltom, 1985; Berkowitz, 2000; Bishop, 1999; Cecil, 2002); that is, they reaffirm norms of proper professional conduct by "constructing a boundary between good journalists and those who have gone astray" (Berkowitz & Burke-Odland, 2004, p. 5) while at the same time defending treasured "mythical archetypes" from challenge or harm (p. 2).

In that task, the press has been assisted by popular culture, which has regularly endorsed journalism's "power to expose and enlighten" (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001, p. 1). Although journalists have complained that Hollywood portrays them as "dim-witted social misfits concerned only with twisting the truth into scandal and otherwise devoid of conscience" (Rowe, 1992, p. 27), movies and other pop culture artifacts can reinforce professional authority and privilege (Papke, 1999; Turow, 1989). Even as they portray journalists "twisting the truth into scandal," they reproduce the free press myth: "While individual editors or publishers along the way may be castigated for failing to do their jobs well, the system itself is beyond reproach" (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 1).

The depictions also are consistent with the conventions of Hollywood genres that show "familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values" (Schatz, 1981, p. 22). Genre films have a dualistic structure in which characters representing opposing values clash. Typically, the two sides merge or reconcile as in a musical or romantic comedy, or else one side vanquishes the other, as in a Western (Altman, 1987; Schatz, 1981). That serves a key role of myth, to smooth over a culture's intractable differences and contradictions (Lule, 2001, pp. 144-145).

Ray (1985) argued that Hollywood cinema historically has vacillated between a "pair of competing myths: the outlaw hero and the official hero" (pp. 58-59). The outlaw reflects "that part of the American imagination valuing self-determination and freedom from entanglements" (Ray, 1985, p. 59), whereas the official reflects "the American belief in collective action, and the objective legal process that supercede[s] private notions of right and wrong" (Ray, 1985, p. 59). Outlaw and official types regularly appear in journalism movies, which constitute their own distinct genre with stock characters and relationships (Ehrlich, 2004; Ghiglione, 1990; Good, 1989, 1998, 2000; Langman, 1998; Ness, 1997; Saltzman, 2002). The wisecracking outlaw journalist (as exemplified by 1931's *The Front Page* and many movies since) is resolutely opposed to authority and appears to hold little hope for society's betterment. In contrast, the official journalist (as exemplified by 1976's *All the President's Men* and many others) is a conscientious professional dedicated to constructive social change.

As in other genre movies, character conflicts reflect broader cultural tensions, including those between outlaw and official philosophies. Such conflicts often are expressed through encounters between editors and reporters or between executives and subordinates. The movies thus highlight contradictions at journalism's core: public service versus commercial profit, personal commitment versus professional detachment, objective truth telling versus subjective interpretation and misperception, and so on (Ehrlich, 2004). At times, the movies strongly suggest that such opposing values cannot be reconciled, as with *Citizen Kane*'s "dramatization of the irresolvable conflict between American myths of success (celebrating energy and ambition) and of the simple life (warning that power and wealth corrupt)" (Ray, 1985, p. 57).

However, even though genre movies often criticize cultural ideals, in the end they tend to resolve their conflicts and reaffirm those same ideals (Schatz, 1981). Journalism movies regularly assert that people can make a difference, wrongs can be corrected, and the system can work, all with the help of a press founded on professional authority, independence, and free enterprise. So it is in *All the President's Men*'s depiction of Watergate, which Schudson (1992) said embodies the "central myth of American journalism" (p. 126) in how it "offers journalism a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys" (p. 124). Viewed today, the movie also is colored by nostalgia, with Jameson (1992) going so far as to say it represents "the heroic legendary moment of a vanished medium" (p. 77). Such nostalgia is typical of American myth and ideology (Slotkin, 1998).

Many movies that seem strongly antipress endorse the same myths. In *Absence of Malice* (1981), Sally Field's wayward journalist is publicly humiliated and promises to atone, whereas in *Ace in the Hole* (1951), Kirk Douglas's amoral reporter not only repents his sins but also pays for them with his life. Myth often tells such scapegoat stories, "affirming and defending social consensus" by doling out "dark consequences for those who deviate" (Lule, 2001, pp. 62-63). In so doing, they perform the same sort of paradigm repair and boundary maintenance that journalists themselves do.

With this interpretive framework in place, *Shattered Glass* will be studied using a qualitative approach outlined by Kellner (1995) and Pauly (1991). The goal is to develop a critical reading of the movie in the context in which it was produced and received. Concerning the film's production, an early script draft and studio publicity materials were located via archival sources. Those materials included firsthand accounts from the film's writer-director and one of its real-life subjects; similar accounts were drawn from the *Shattered Glass* DVD commentary track. As for the film's reception, cases such as that involving Stephen Glass generate considerable commentary regarding the press's place in contemporary culture. Such commentary and reaction to the movie itself were culled from news stories and film reviews located via Nexis, Google, and the movie Web site Rottentomatoes.com. Nearly 150 movie reviews were studied alongside a roughly equal number of news stories, which also provided biographical material on Glass and comparisons of his case with others involving journalistic deception. This was by no means a comprehensive sample; nevertheless, it generated "items [that were] representative of key threads in the media discourse" (Berkowitz & Burke-Odland, 2004, p. 9) and that appeared to cover "the range of rhetorical variations" (Pauly, 1991, p. 20).

The Stephen Glass Case

Stephen Glass started in journalism as editor of the University of Pennsylvania campus newspaper; members of his staff later praised him for his strong journalistic principles. After graduating in 1994, Glass interned at *The New Republic* and within 2 years was publishing major articles there while freelancing for other publications. He proved adept at office politics, disarming potential criticism by plaintively asking, "Are you mad at me?" By age 25, he was a *New Republic* associate editor and a "white-hot rising star in Washington journalism" (Bissinger, 1998, p. 176; Hughes, 1998; Ornstein, 2003).

During Glass's tenure, *The New Republic* reputedly was dubbed "the in-house magazine of Air Force One" even though the editor who nurtured Glass the most, Michael Kelly, was a fierce critic of President Clinton. The magazine attracted criticism in return. *The Washington Monthly* branded it "smug and cynical—the embodiment of much that is wrong with political journalism today," adding that its "toxic" culture resulted from its encouragement of young, inexpensive staffers "to find some appropriately easy target—some perceived practitioner of hypocrisy or sleaze—and meticulously wrap a web of venomous words around it" (Blow, 1997, pp. 24-27). Glass's first big story attacked the Center for Science in the Public Interest and its head Michael Jacobson. When Jacobson questioned the story's veracity, Michael Kelly called him a liar. After Glass, in a later story, described a purported gathering of "dejected, depressed, drunk and dumb" young conservatives engaging in "repellent" games of sexual humiliation, Kelly similarly stood by Glass (Bissinger, 1998; Glass, 1997, pp. 19-20).

However, Kelly was fired in September 1997 after falling out with the publisher. His replacement, Charles "Chuck" Lane, was much less popular with Glass and the rest of the staff. Still, he contributed the sardonic titles to Glass's (1998b) stories "Monica Sells," about sex novelties with Monica Lewinsky themes, and "Hack Heaven" about a teenage computer whiz becoming the toast of the "National Assembly of Hackers" (Glass, 1998a).

The latter story was Glass's undoing. An online reporter for *Forbes*, Adam Penenberg, reported it to be fictitious in May 1998 (Penenberg, 1998). Lane then fired Glass. A subsequent investigation revealed that Glass had fabricated at least 27 of his 41 stories for *The New Republic*, covering his tracks with "fake handwritten notes, fake typed notes from imaginary events written with intentional misspellings, fake diagrams of who sat where at meetings that never transpired, [and] fake voice mails from fake sources" (Bissinger, 1998, p. 180). He had even created a fake Web site for the fake software firm in his hacker story.

The New Republic told its readers it had fallen victim to "the systematic and intentional deceptions of someone who actually has no business practicing journalism" ("To Our Readers," 1998, p. 9). It added that "we promptly removed the culprit, and we publicly acknowledged the problem. *The New Republic*'s stringent tradition demanded nothing less" ("To Our Readers," 1998, p. 9). Some were unsympathetic, with *Mother Jones* saying Glass wrote "propaganda" that "gave credence to the assumptions his editors and readers already wanted to believe" (Cox, 1998, p. 20).

Others saw the problem as extending beyond Glass and *The New Republic*, blaming a "youth-happy journalism industry [that] catapults reporters into the big leagues before they have learned the fundamentals of their craft" (Pooley, 1998, p. 62), a "dark side of a new magazine journalism that puts a premium on sensationalism and style" (Dowd, 1998, p. 15), or a general decline in standards requiring a return to basic principles of accuracy and truth (Day, 1998; Parry, 1999; Seaton, 1998; Sheppard, 1998; Turner & Kosova, 1998). Some took comfort that it had been an "honest, blue-collar" reporter, Adam Penenberg, who finally exposed Glass (Cavanaugh, 1998, p. B06). One veteran journalist wrote that although there were bad reporters just as there were bad doctors and lawyers, "You can't often get away with deliberate falsifications or earth-shaking exposés that have no substance. The press will find you out" (Cleghorn, 1998, p. 17A).

The Movie

Shattered Glass, which took its title from a *Vanity Fair* article about the Glass case (Bissinger, 1998), was controversial even while in production. The *New York Daily News* charged that the picture would "inevitably glamorize fraudulent journalism" (Mathews, 2002, p. 18). When writer-director Billy Ray began to work on the project, he saw it as a satire: "I thought, this could be like *Network*" (Kaltenbach, 2004, p. 9T).

However, Ray eventually reconceived it a "tip of the cap to Woodward and Bernstein," saying "I was always raised to believe that what they had done was heroic—I still think it is" (Ray & Lane, 2004). In response to journalists' fears and criticisms, the filmmakers billed the picture as "a look inside our culture's noblest profession, one that protects our most precious freedoms by revealing the truth, and what happens when our trust in that profession is called into question" ("Lions Gate Films," 2003, p. 4).

Although Glass himself did not cooperate with the filmmakers, his onetime editors Michael Kelly and Chuck Lane did, with Lane helping "vet the script" (Kurtz, 2002, p. C01). Ray reportedly "checked with two separate sources" to confirm that each real-life incident in the script actually had happened, similar to what Woodward and Bernstein had done in reporting Watergate. Ray and his cinematographer also watched *All the President's Men* "dozens of times" for inspiration ("Lions Gate Films," 2003, pp. 8, 14).

The movie begins with a flush-with-fame Glass (Hayden Christensen) supposedly speaking to a journalism class at his old high school. That framing device is used to trace Glass's career: his rise at *The New Republic*, doted on by adoring female staffers including Caitlin (Chloë Sevigny); his close relationship with Michael Kelly (Hank Azaria) that ends when Kelly is fired and replaced with the unpopular Chuck Lane (Peter Sarsgaard); his fantastical stories that he "reports" for the magazine; his manipulation of the magazine's fact-checking system, aided by his own role as one of the chief fact checkers; his downfall at the hands of Adam Penenberg (Steve Zahn), who debunks the "Hack Heaven" piece; and his final confrontation with Lane, who discovers that his deceptions have gone well beyond even those uncovered by *Forbes* and who then fires him. At the end, it is strongly implied that the high school scenes have taken place entirely in Glass's imagination; the only person he still is deceiving is himself.

In Ray's words, "The first half of the movie is about Stephen Glass, and the second half of the movie is about Chuck Lane" (Ray & Lane, 2004). The filmmakers shot early scenes inside the magazine offices with a handheld camera but mounted it on a tripod for later scenes in which Lane begins to see through Glass's lies. The visual image of the magazine thus steadies itself as the film progresses, "the suggestion being that truth as an idea [is] beginning to take hold there, and that order [is] beginning to be restored" (Ray & Lane, 2004).

The movie also includes what Lane would later call "warm and fuzzy scenes with me and my wife that didn't [really] happen" (Kurtz, 2002, p. C01). Still, they make his character softer and more sympathetic. In addition, Billy Ray deleted a scene from the original screenplay draft that had depicted Lane as glumly resigned over his complicity in Glass's deceptions. The replacement scene in the movie shows a much angrier Lane confronting Caitlin, who still is standing behind Glass. "We're all going to have to answer for what we let happen here," Lane tells her:

> We're all going to have an apology to make. . . . Every competitor we ever took a shot at, they're going to pounce, and they should. Because we blew it, Caitlin! He handed us fiction after fiction, and we printed them all as fact, just because we found him entertaining. It's indefensible. Don't you know that? (Cruise et al., 2003)

At movie's end, the young staff that to this point has been hostile toward Lane presents him with a printed apology to the magazine's readers and then breaks into applause for their beaming editor. Ray said the film's message was that it was not "just the Stephen Glasses of the world" who worked in journalism, but also people "fighting the good fight and trying to defend the honor" of the press (Ray & Lane, 2004).

Reaction to the Movie

The *American Journalism Review* noted that before *Shattered Glass* arrived in theaters, "Half of the journalism industry was chomping at the bit for the film while the other half wished it would go away" ("Rapping on the 'Glass,'" 2003-2004, p. 13). It opened not long after the Jayson Blair scandal at *The New York Times*; the DVD appeared a few months later amid news of Jack Kelley's deceptions at *USA Today* (Hill, 2004, p. 20). In addition, Stephen Glass (2003) reemerged with his novel *The Fabulist* that recounted his *New Republic* experiences in the guise of fiction.

In light of those events, one journalist said the movie "likely will reinforce the Hollywood stereotype of journalists as sleazy and insensitive attack dogs with no regard for the truth" (Maier, 2004, para. 7), whereas another suggested that it reflected "ever-growing public cynicism and hostility toward the news media" (Shaw, 2004, p. E53). The *Columbia Journalism Review* charged that the film soft pedaled Glass's evident contempt for journalism in painting "a not-so-unsympathetic portrait of a desperate and imaginative striver who fails because he tries too hard to succeed" (Beckerman, 2003, p. 54). Another journalist wrote of how Glass "transformed infamy into a novel and became the subject of a feature film. . . . And we in the field of journalism have allowed this, turning our rapists into leading men" (Freedman, 2004, p. 13A).

Others, however, praised the movie. *The New York Times* reviewer said he had been "suspicious" beforehand but found the film to be "a serious, well-observed examination of the practice of journalism" (Scott, 2003, p. E1).

Another declared it even better than *All the President's Men* (Sterritt, 2003). Some compared it to a horror picture in which Glass was the monster that had to be vanquished (Howe, 2003; Schneider, 2003); one reviewer wrote that it "makes us feel the way our forefathers must have felt after a really good public stoning" (Edelstein, 2003, para. 3). Another noted how the real-life Glass had been "pilloried—by the very media who had lionized him—as a symbol not only of the ills of celebrity journalism, but of much that ails America in the age of spin" (Taylor, 2003, p. 38). Still, the critic continued, "I'm heartened that someone still has enough faith in the fourth estate to imagine this tawdry saga as an old-fashioned morality play in which the good guys come up tops" (Taylor, 2003, p. 38).

Some who otherwise liked *Shattered Glass* were wary of the morality play tone, with one saying the film "exposes [journalism's] Achilles heels so adroitly, indeed, that its insistence upon the redemptive heroism of editors such as Lane feels like an unnecessary palliative" (Stuart, 2003, p. B03). Others were more dismissive. They called the movie "self-important yet insipid" and full of "self-righteous sanctimony" (Hoberman, 2003, p. 67), branded it a "slick and self-satisfied . . . cream-puff exposé" (Lovell, 2003, p. 6), and said it was guilty of delivering "a big wet kiss" to journalism "when the profession might profit from a kick in the ass" (Bowden, 2004, p. 150). One went so far as to criticize it for propagating "the hoary myth that, save for the odd lying devil, the free press is a bastion of the gospel truth" (Groen, 2003, last para.).

In contrast to *The New York Times* reviewer's praise of the film, the *Times*'s Rich (2003, p. 1) lambasted it for celebrating *The New Republic* and paying Chuck Lane as a consultant. He added that "there's a gaping disconnect between a Hollywood critique like 'Shattered Glass' and the news media's more distressing ailments" (Rich, 2003, p. 1). Most scathing of all was *The New Yorker*'s Lane (2003), who called *Shattered Glass* "the most ridiculous movie I have seen this year" in how it heaped "wrath and lamentation on dodgy reporting" while ignoring "the strains of harm and negligence that genuinely corrode our lives" (pp. 104-105). That prompted a rebuttal from another critic, who said dismissing Glass's lies as comparatively trivial was akin to suggesting "that it's okay for presidents to fib about weapons of mass destruction" (Howell, 2003, p. D03). The critic added, "If truth isn't something worth making an issue about, let alone a movie, then should we not just abandon all preten[se] of civilization?" (Howell, 2003, p. D03).

Analysis

Contrary to some journalists' concerns that *Shattered Glass* denigrated the press by exalting Glass or treating him more sympathetically than he deserved, the movie does the opposite: It exalts the press by denigrating Glass. The film draws on the conventions of the journalism movie genre by pitting a reporter (Glass) against an editor (Chuck Lane) who represents opposite values. Lane embodies the so-called official hero in putting the common good ahead of "private notions of right and wrong" (Ray, 1985, p. 59). Glass embodied the outlaw characteristics of thumbing one's nose at prevailing authority and morality. Although some storytelling contexts make outlaw characteristics heroic (as when individuals right wrongs by taking matters into their own hands), Glass is depicted as going beyond the pale, lying and betraying the trust of his colleagues and friends.

Thus, he is made to pay for his transgressions. *Shattered Glass* symbolically delivers justice to Glass by making him a scapegoat whose deviance from consensual norms is duly punished to "serve and preserve social order" (Lule, 2001, 191; see also pp. 62-63). That is consistent with previous journalism movies such as *Absence of Malice*, despite claims that the earlier movie painted a darker and hence truer picture of the press (Bowden, 2004). *Shattered Glass* dramatized journalistic failings while drawing lessons from them in a way that maintained the status quo and the press's place in it (Ehrlich, 2004).

The so-called social order that journalism movies tend to serve and preserve rests on the myth of the free press. According to that myth, individual journalists may go astray; however, the system stays true to the principles of self-regulation in policing and correcting itself. Honest reporters from competing news organizations unmask the scoundrels who seek personal advancement by flouting the rules. The scoundrels are then summarily banished by conscientious professionals such as Chuck Lane who declare that some misdeeds are indefensible, that some things are more important than entertainment, that sometimes an independent press must hold itself to account. Truth is reestablished as the sine qua non of journalism, and trust in "our culture's noblest profession" is reaffirmed.

The mythic tale of *Shattered Glass* was necessarily ideological. It served the press's commercial interests not only by implicitly endorsing self-regulation but also by allowing *The New Republic* to transform ignominy into self-promotion; *Shattered Glass*'s Web site included a link for free issues of the magazine (Lions Gate Entertainment, 2003). Chuck Lane felt at the time of the Glass episode that "my career was ruined because I had let this happen," whereas his predecessor Michael Kelly branded himself "a goddam idiot" (Dowd, 1998, p. 15; Ray & Lane, 2004). Nevertheless, the movie venerated Lane and Kelly, the latter of whom died covering the Iraq war before the film opened. Whatever elements in the magazine's culture that may have contributed to the Glass affair were downplayed.

Shattered Glass also deflected attention from journalism's broader problems, as *The New York Times*'s Rich and others had argued; indeed, the press—

and specifically the *Times*—was criticized for vilifying the likes of Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair while ignoring its own more egregious sins in covering Iraq (Pollitt, 2003). Scapegoat stories "assume a widely accepted, taken-for-granted set of fixed taboos that are violated, leading to a ritual absolution of guilt and affirmation of the original values" (Pauly, 1988, p. 257). As with the Janet Cooke scandal before it, the Glass and Blair cases served as "ritual[s] of atonement" (Carey, 2003, p. 5) for the press, allowing "journalists to resolve their own internal contradictions symbolically, at least momentarily, by expulsion of the guilty" and renewed allegiance to traditional principles (Eason, 1988, p. 224). Such rituals are consistent with past journalistic attempts at paradigm repair and boundary maintenance (Bennett et al., 1985; Berkowitz, 2000; Bishop, 1999; Cecil, 2002).

Journalism's "internal contradictions" include what Carey (2003) described as a culture that "professes loyalty to truth, thoroughness, context and sobriety but actually rewards prominence, the unique take, standing out from the crowd and the riveting narrative" (p. 6). Thoroughness and sobriety can be seen as official virtues, whereas the unique take and standing out from the crowd are outlaw virtues. The press may pay more lip service to its official heroes; however, it has a long and rich history of accommodating outlaw types as well (Newton, 1999).

Myth calls attention to such contradictions; by exposing the differences between rhetoric and reality, it even can be a force for social change. More often, though, it smoothes over the contradictions and repairs the breaches (Lule, 2001, pp. 191-193). Far from completely rejecting outlaw characteristics, *Shattered Glass* lauds the scruffy Penenberg in his quest to score a career-enhancing scoop by exposing Glass's lies. Although the movie briefly pokes fun at Penenberg's rivalry with a fellow reporter over the Glass story, it implies that individual ambition and the riveting narrative are vitally important to journalism even as it condemns the excesses in ambition and narrative that Glass represents. Thus, the film uses Glass's disgrace as an opportunity "to showcase the central virtues of journalism" and "shore up the boundary between fact and fiction" (Carey, 2003, p. 5), aided by its documentary-like realism in suggesting that the world can be objectively rendered and implicitly granting authority to those such as journalists who are in charge of the rendering (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001).

Conclusion

From a critical scholarly perspective, the downside of the free press myth should be clear. It is key in deflecting attention from the idea that commercial journalism "has abdicated its responsibilities to democratic self-government in the pursuit of greater revenues and higher returns for investors"

(McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 4) and that fundamental structural reform is needed to remedy the situation. Instead, it promotes the notion that the press can take care of itself and, in turn, take care of us.

The question remains whether the free press myth is utterly illusory and *Shattered Glass* is completely wrongheaded in promoting it. "Don't we always insist in a tone of ironic knowingness that the media are inevitably the means to hegemonic power rather than democratic empowerment?" wrote Ettema and Glasser (1994, p. 5), who charged that such ironic knowingness—not unlike the kind in which Stephen Glass specialized—only serves "to undermine any public discussion of what is true and good" (p. 9) and any "possibility of journalism as [a] moral force" (p. 27)

In contrast, the free press myth presents an image of journalism as "the shining star of a democratic political economy" (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 1). Even if the myth "muddles popular understandings about information and democracy," it still can "inspire journalists, politicians, and citizens alike" (Bennett, 2003, p. 253). And although it may present an idealized vision removed from reality, Schudson (1992) said "that is precisely what myths are for: not to tell us in empirical detail who we are but what we may have been once, what we still might become, what we would be like 'if'" (p. 124).

Schudson was writing of the mythic status that Watergate holds in American journalism, a status solidified by the film of *All the President's Men*. During a distinctly less heroic time in which many journalists saw the press in crisis (Downie & Kaiser, 2002), *Shattered Glass* presented a similarly mythic vision of journalism as it once might have been and could be again, explicitly harkening back to the noble vision embodied by the Watergate film. Although skeptical toward claims of the press's being the linchpin of democracy, Nerone and Barnhurst (2003) noted that until comparatively recently, the culture of journalism "insisted that news was about Truth. We will miss that" (p. 449). Notions of the journalist as truth teller can seem quaint in a postmodern age of corporate media.

Nevertheless, in that very climate, *Shattered Glass* expressed faith not only in the press's ability and responsibility to report the truth but also in the idea that the truth "sets us free" (Ray & Lane, 2004). That is the faith undergirding the free press myth, which need not solely prop up the status quo. It also can serve the mythic role of providing "stories and exemplary models that can be used by groups to alter or shape social order" (Lule, 2001, p. 192), including the model of a transformed journalism that fulfills its social obligations. So we would be remiss if we swallowed the free press myth without question or criticism; however, we would be equally remiss—indeed, even more so—if we dismissed it entirely.

References

Altman, R. (1987). *The American film musical*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Barnhurst, K. G., & Nerone, J. (2001). *The form of news*. New York: Guilford.

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies* (A. Travers, Trans.). London: Jonathan Cape.

Beckerman, G. (2003, September-October). Facts and fictions. *Columbia Journalism Review*, *42*, 54-55.

Bennett, W. L. (2003). *News: The politics of illusion* (5th ed.). New York: Longman.

Bennett, W. L., Gressett, L. A., & Haltom, W. (1985). Repairing the news: A case study of the news paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *35*(2), 50-68.

Berkowitz, D. (Ed.). (1997). *Social meanings of news*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Berkowitz, D. (2000). Doing double duty: Paradigm repair and the Princess Diana what-a-story. *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, *1*(2), 125-143.

Berkowitz, D., & Burke-Odland, S. (2004, August). *"My mum's a suicide bomber": Motherhood, terrorism, news, and ideological repair.* Paper presented at the meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada.

Bishop, R. (1999). From behind the walls: Boundary work by news organizations in their coverage of Princess Diana's death. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *23*(1), 90-112.

Bissinger, B. (1998, September). Shattered glass. *Vanity Fair*, *457*, 176-190.

Blow, R. (1997, December). Liberalism's flagship adrift at sea. *Washington Monthly*, *29*, 24–29.

Bowden, M. (2004, March). When the front page meets the big screen. *The Atlantic*, *293*, 146–150.

Campbell, J. (Ed.). (1970). *Myths, dreams and religion*. New York: Dutton.

Carey, J. W. (1988). Taking culture seriously. In J. W. Carey (Ed.), *Media, myths, and narratives* (pp. 8-18). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Carey, J. W. (2003, June 16). Mirror of the times. *The Nation*, *276*, 5–6.

Cavanaugh, T. (1998, June 28). Is *Brill's Content* going to save the press from itself? *Newsday*, p. B06.

Cecil, M. (2002). Bad apples: Paradigm overhaul and the CNN/Time "Tailwind" story. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, *26*(1), 46-58.

Cleghorn, R. (1998, July 23). Keeping reporters honest. *Baltimore Sun*, p. 17A.

Cox, A. M. (1998, July-August). Half full of it. *Mother Jones*, *23*, 20.

Cruise, T., Wagner, P. (Producers), & Ray, B. (Writer/Director). (2003). *Shattered glass* [Motion picture]. United States: Lions Gate Films.

Day, N. (1998, August 30). What happened to the ABCs? *Boston Globe*, p. E7.

Dowd, A. R. (1998, July-August). The great pretender. *Columbia Journalism Review*, *37*, 14-15.

Downie, L., Jr., & Kaiser, R. G. (2002). *The news about the news*. New York: Knopf.

Eason, D. L. (1988). On journalistic authority: The Janet Cooke scandal. In J. W. Carey (Ed.), *Media, myths, and narratives* (pp. 205-227). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Edelstein, D. (2003, October 30). Stephen's bogus journey [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Slate*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from http://slate.msn.com/id/2090544

Ehrlich, M. C. (2004). *Journalism in the movies*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Eliade, M. (1958). *Patterns in comparative religion* (R. Sheed, Trans.). New York: Sheed & Ward.

Ettema, J. S., & Glasser, T. L. (1994). The irony in—and of—journalism: A case study in the moral language of liberal democracy. *Journal of Communication*, *44*(2), 5-28.

Freedman, S. G. (2004, March 24). Don't reward deceitful writers. *USA Today*, p. 13A.

Ghiglione, L. (1990). *The American journalist*. Washington, DC: Library of Congress.

Glass, S. (1997, March 31). Spring breakdown. *The New Republic*, *216*, 18-20.

Glass, S. (1998a, May 18). Hack heaven. *The New Republic*, *218*, 11-12.

Glass, S. (1998b, April 13). Monica sells. *The New Republic*, *218*, 10-11.

Glass, S. (2003). *The fabulist*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Good, H. (1989). *Outcasts*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow.

Good, H. (1998). *Girl reporter.* Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.

Good, H. (2000). *The drunken journalist*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.

Groen, R. (2003, November 28). All the facts that fit the film [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Canada). Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/Page/document/v4/sub/MarketingPage?user_URL=http://www.theglobeandmail.com%2Fservlet%2FArticleNews%2Fmovie%2FMOVIEREVIEWS%2F20031128%2FGLASS28&ord=1100214637961&brand=theglobeandmail&force_login=true

Hill, M. (2004, March 28). Stretching the truth. *Baltimore Sun*, p. 1C.

Hoberman, J. (2003, October 29-November 4). Bad faith is back [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Village Voice*, p. 67.

Howe, D. (2003, November 7). “Glass”: An eye for the lie [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *The Washington Post*, p. WE44.

Howell, P. (2003, November 28). Big game of untruths and consequences [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Toronto Star*, p. D03.

Hughes, S. (1998, November-December). Through a glass darkly. *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.upenn.edu/gazette/1198/hughes.html

Jameson, F. (1992). *The geopolitical aesthetic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1959). *Archetypes and the collective unconscious* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). New York: Pantheon.

Kaltenbach, C. (2004, April 8). “Shattered glass” changed paths. *Baltimore Sun*, p. 9T.

Kellner, D. (1995). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race, and class in media* (pp. 5-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kurtz, H. (2002, October 7). Stephen Glass: The true story. *The Washington Post*, p. C01.

Lane, A. (2003, November 3). Deceived [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *New Yorker*, *79*, 104–105.

Langman, L. (1998). *The media in the movies*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Lichtblau, E. (2004, October 3). Fox news, citing “bad judgment,” apologizes about a made-up posting about Kerry. *The New York Times*, sec. 1, p. 32.

Lion’s Gate Entertainment. (2003). “Shattered glass” official website. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.shatteredglassmovie.com

Lion’s Gate Films presents “Shattered Glass.” (2003). Unpublished publicity materials. Beverly Hills, CA: Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Lovell, G. (2003, November 7). A “glass” only half full [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *San Jose Mercury News*, Entertainment sec., p. 6.

Lule, J. (2001). *Daily news, eternal stories*. New York: Guilford.

Maier, T. W. (2004, May 11). The crumbling of the fourth estate. *Insight*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.insightmag.com/news/2004/05/11/National/The-Crumbling.Of.The.Fourth.Estate-673861.shtml

Mathews, J. (2002, September 1). Truth under fire. *New York Daily News*, Showtime sec., p. 18.

McChesney, R. W., & Scott, B. (2004). Introduction. In R. W. McChesney & B. Scott (Eds.), *Our unfree press* (pp. 1-30). New York: New Press.

Nerone, J. (Ed.). (1995). *Last rights*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Nerone, J., & Barnhurst, K. G. (2003). US newspaper types, the newsroom, and the division of labor. *Journalism Studies*, *4*(4), 435-449.

Ness, R. R. (1997). *From headline hunter to Superman*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow.

Newton, E. (Ed.). (1999). *Crusaders, scoundrels, journalists*. New York: Times Books.

Ornstein, C. (2003, November 3). Disgraced reporter once inspired. *Los Angeles Times*, p. E5.

Papke, D. R. (1999). Conventional wisdom: The courtroom trial in American popular culture. *Marquette Law Review*, *82*, 471-489.

Parry, P. (1999, February 7). Return to news basics needed. *Baltimore Sun*, p. 1C.

Pauly, J. J. (1988). Rupert Murdoch and the demonology of professional journalism. In J. W. Carey (Ed.), *Media, myths, and narratives* (pp. 246-261). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Pauly, J. J. (1991, February). A beginner's guide to doing qualitative research in mass communication. *Journalism Monographs* (Serial No. 125).

Penenberg, A. L. (1998, May 11). Forbes smokes out fake New Republic story on hackers. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.forbes.com/1998/05/11/otw.html

Plotz, D. (2003, September 30). Steve and me. *Slate*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.slate.msn.com/Default.aspx?id=2088948

Pollitt, K. (2003, June 16). White lies. *The Nation*, *276*, 9.

Pooley, E. (1998, May 25). Too good to be true. *Time*, *151*, 62.

Rapping on the "glass." (2003-2004, December-January). *American Journalism Review*, *25*, 13.

Ray, B., & Lane, C. (2004). Audio commentary. *Shattered glass* [DVD]. United States: Lions Gate Home Entertainment.

Ray, R. B. (1985). *A certain tendency of the Hollywood cinema*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rich, F. (2003, November 2). So much for "The front page." *The New York Times*, sec. 2, p. 1.

Rowe, C. (1992, November). Hacks on film. *Washington Journalism Review*, *14*, 27-29.

Saltzman, J. (2002). *Frank Capra and the image of the journalist in American film*. Los Angeles: Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture.

Schatz, T. (1981). *Hollywood genres*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schneider, S. (2003). Monster of the masthead [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Orlando Weekly*. Retrieved May 25, 2004, from www.orlandoweekly.com/movies/reviews/review.asp?movie=1615

Schudson, M. (1992). *Watergate in American memory*. New York: Basic Books.

Scott, A. O. (2003, October 31). A young writer's ambition, with loyalty and betrayal [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *The New York Times*, p. E1.

Seaton, E. L. (1998, July-August). Troubling times stress our need to work on credibility. *American Editor*, *793*, 2.

Shaw, D. (2004, May 9). For Hollywood, news biz is turning into showbiz. *Los Angeles Times*, p. E53.

Sheppard, J. (1998, September). Playing defense. *American Journalism Review*, *20*, 48-54.

Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Slotkin, R. (1998). *Gunfighter nation*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Sterritt, D. (2003, October 31). All the news that's fit to invent [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Christian Science Monitor*, Arts sec., p. 18.

Stuart, J. (2003, October 31). Ink-stained stretches [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *Newsday*, p. B03.

Taylor, E. (2003, October 31-November 6). Bullshit detected [Review of the motion picture *Shattered Glass*]. *LA Weekly*, Film sec., p. 38.

To our readers [Editorial]. (1998, June 1). *The New Republic*, *218*, 8-9.

Turner, R., & Kosova, W. (1998, June 22). There's enough blame to go around. *Newsweek*, *131*, 62-63.

Turow, J. (1989). *Playing doctor*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Matthew C. Ehrlich is an associate professor of journalism at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His 2004 book Journalism in the Movies *was published by the University of Illinois Press. He also has published in* Journalism & Communication Monographs*,* Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, and* Critical Studies in Media Communication*.*