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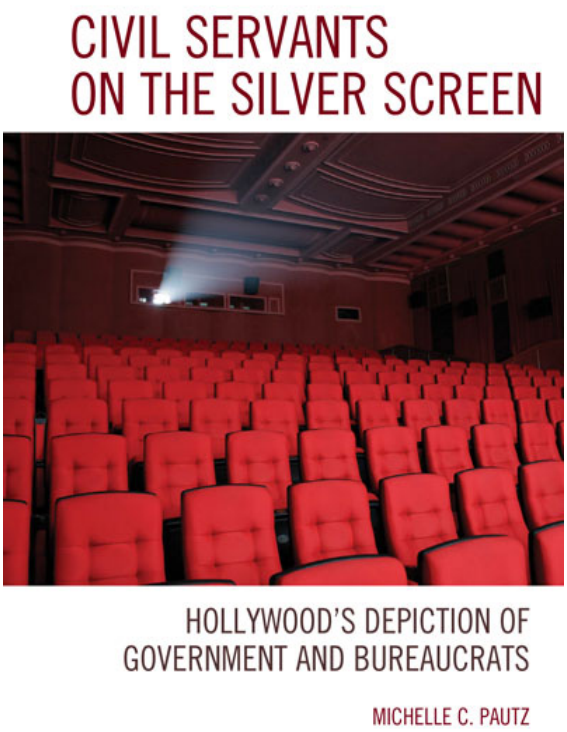
Thursday January 25, 2018

Silver Screen Research

University of Dayton political scientist Michelle Pautz explores how movies influence our opinions of government in a new book that looks at the top box office grossing films of the 21st century.



"Films are subtle in the way they inform and provoke thinking in their audiences," said Pautz, associate professor and assistant provost for the University's Common Academic Program. "When it comes to bureaucrats, we aren't necessarily cognizant that we are seeing images of them but they are prominent in film — just as they are in real life — and these images can influence our views on government."

Pautz's book, "Civil Servants on the Silver Screen: Hollywood's Depiction of Government and Bureaucrats," examines hundreds of government workers in films released from 2000 to 2015 — from the fictional Ministry of Magic employees of "Harry Potter" to the pilots in the dramatization of "Pearl Harbor."

While nearly half the films portrayed government as a whole in a negative way — which aligns with popular opinion — most of the individual characters were shown positively, Pautz found. They were

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often physically attractive and younger. Their most common attributes: intelligence, strength, loyalty, kindness and dedication.

Pautz also found evidence audiences change their opinions after watching movies. She asked people about government and policy issues — including how much people trust Washington to do what's right — before and after watching films like "The Day After Tomorrow," "Argo" and "Zero Dark Thirty." Their trust in the government improved, for instance, after watching "Argo." which chronicled a CIA operation to rescue six Americans in Tehran during the 1979 U.S. hostage crisis in Iran.

"It's interesting that a quarter to a third of audience members changed their responses to the question after watching one movie that lasts just a few hours," Pautz said.

Pautz cautions it's almost impossible to prove scientifically that watching films will change your opinion. But for now she says: "Most Americans have a love-hate relationship with the government, and we see that complexity extends to film."

For more information, contact Meagan Pant, assistant director of news and communications, at 937-229-3256 or mpant1@udayton.edu.

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