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Civil Servants: Hollywood Heroes?

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The stereotypes of government and civil servants as lazy, incompetent and even dangerous are so commonplace, few ever challenge it. But new research by a University of Dayton professor finds an unexpected twist in this long-standing perception in one of the most influential places: box-office hits.

Despite an expected negative portrayal of government in general (60 percent of the films researched depicted government as inefficient, incompetent and/or bad), individual civil servants — those employed by the government — were, "more often than not, presented as intelligent, well-trained and efficient."

Political science professors Michelle Pautz from the University of Dayton and Laura Roselle from Elon University have their research — "Are they ready for their close-up? Civil servants and their portrayal in contemporary American cinema" — published in the current issue of Public Voices (Vol.11, No. 1).

Pautz and Roselle enlisted undergraduate students to watch the top-10 grossing films of the year from 1992 to 2006 for their portrayals of civil servants. The list included films such as Harry Potter, Star Wars, Austin Powers and Finding Nemo — the movies people actually watch, and which have more potential to influence culture, according to Pautz.

"The overall views of government were negative, but the individual actors were all good — there's a disconnect there, and I think that's fascinating," Pautz said. "It would seem to parallel the experience of most Americans, who on the surface think government is bad but actually find their day-to-day interactions with government to be positive."

While some might disagree on that point — think IRS, license bureaus and even the negatively tinged word "bureaucrat" — Pautz said civil servants most commonly encountered in life leave positive impressions, such as teachers, police officers and librarians.

This distinction between types of civil servants emerged in the films Pautz and Roselle researched. For example, 68 percent of CIA officials appear in films that depict government negatively. In contrast, 67 percent of teachers and 100 percent of astronauts appeared in films with a positive depiction of government.

The researchers also found a distinction between the government "system" and government individuals. In two-thirds of the films that portrayed government negatively, it was because of the "system," such as the inability of Gotham's government to protect its citizens in Batman Begins or the ineptitude of the criminal justice system allowing Roxie to get away with her crimes in Chicago.

However, in films that portrayed government positively, it was an even split between whether it was the "system" or individuals who were good.

"In many cases, the civil servants who were viewed positively had to contend with a corrupt government that they were not responsible for," Pautz said.

Other findings in the research include:

- Films pre- and post-9/11 showed virtually no difference in depictions of government and civil servants.
- Civil servants in the films were most often described as good-looking and knowledgeable.
- Compared to the actual civil service, characters in the films were more often male (84 percent vs. 56 percent in real life) and white (80 percent vs. 69 percent).
- Of the 150 films examined, 95 featured at least one civil servant, and 105 featured a portrayal of government. The majority of films (51 percent) were classified as action/adventure.

"Film is the most accessible art form for most Americans, and it has the power to both entertain and influence our culture, especially young people," Pautz said. "We should think about the images and portrayals of government and civil servants we create and what we want to share with young people about how government works."
take in, often even subliminally, and take a step back and ask, 'are these perceptions justified?'

Pautz said she plans to update the research with more recent films and include politicians, military and law enforcement. She expects to have a paper to present at a conference this fall with it published in the spring.

Her interest in film research began as an undergraduate at Elon University while working at a movie theater. She had research on movie attendance published in 2002, which has been quoted often in media reports, including a 2009 story by The New York Times.

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