

ROUNDTABLE (/ROUNDTABLE)

The Myth of the Fourth Estate

What is the true purpose journalism?

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IMAGE: Newsroom of the *New York Times*, 1942. Photograph by Marjory Collins. Library of Congress.

In *The Front Page* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suFZpie9JuM>), Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur's 1928 send-up of the rough-and-tumble world of Chicago journalism, the ace reporter Hildy Johnson is ready to throw in the towel. "Journalists! Peeking through keyholes! Running after fire engines like a lot of coach dogs! Waking people up in the middle of the night to ask them what they think of Mussolini. Stealing pictures off old ladies of their daughters that get raped in Oak Park. A lot of lousy, daffy buttinskis, swelling around with holes in their pants, borrowing nickels from office boys! And for what? So a million hired girls and motormen's wives'll know what's going on."

Johnson longs for a more respectable job and a steadier income. But he'll see the light—when the next big story comes in through the window, in the guise of the death-row escapee who pleads his innocence—and devote himself once again to the pursuit of truth. But his question would linger. And for what? What is the purpose of the press?

Frank Capra provided a telling response in *The Power of the Press* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W_G3tp1XWbY), a silent film from the very same year. Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., as shiny as a new dime, plays the eager cub reporter at the *Times*. He's stuck in a corner of the newsroom, stuck on obituaries and the weather report, and longs for his chance at the big time. Ambitious as he is naïve, he lands his

break when he catches the daughter of a local politician sneaking away from the home of the murdered District Attorney.

Stop the presses! A screaming headline will be drawn up and our bright-eyed reporter will be the hero of the newsroom. But glory is fleeting. Before long he discovers the ill effects of his scoop and comes to see that he got the story completely wrong. Our hero will get an education in life and letters in the last reels of the film. The intrepid reporter defends the young maiden's honor, catches the real killer, battles the corrupt politics of the metropolis, and finds love along the way.

Capra plays the story for laughs and romance. But he also serves up a portrait of the fourth estate in all of its complicated glory. Bumbling and misguided, the reporters and editors do whatever they can to sell papers. But somehow, out of the industrial machine of the modern press, the truth will out.

It's a fun ride. And it stands in pretty well for the heroic vision of the fourth estate. It's only a few steps to the more earnest vision of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, served up by Alan Pakula in his memorable account of the Watergate scandal, *All the President's Men* (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuaYh9_ZK1U). The word—stamped in black and white from typewriter to teletype—will set us free.

It's a long time since Thomas Carlyle described in 1841 the power of the press as “the fourth estate.” He attributed the idea (mistakenly) to Edmund Burke (<http://lq-beta.com/voices-in-time/dead-moon.php>), who he supposed to have said that “there were three estates in Parliament; but, in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth estate more important far than they all. It is not a figure of speech, or a witty saying; it is a literal fact.” Carlyle elaborated, “Printing, which comes necessarily out of

