

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky. Just a heads up, today's episode will contain spoilers for several superhero movies and TV shows. I put a list in the show notes if you want to double check first.**

**In a superhero movie or TV show, the general public is usually just used as fodder to be killed by villains or saved by heroes. But as a journalist, I always wonder, how well informed are these people about the threats to their lives?**

**I thought about this a lot when I was watching Falcon and The Winter Soldier. The show is about Sam Wilson becoming the new Captain America. And the most dramatic moment isn't a fight. It's a speech that Sam gives to a powerful group of politicians, and it's broadcast live on TV around the country.**

*SAM: Look, you people have just as much power as an insane God or misguided teenager. The question you have to ask yourself is how are you going to use it?*

**Maya Philips writes about comic books and pop culture for The New York Times. She says it's no coincidence that this series delved into the relationship between The Avengers, the public, and the media more than other Marvel properties.**

MAYA: Because obviously a big part of that storyline is about kind of the perception of heroes and the perception of America. And like who gets to wear that, that, I mean, literally wear that costume and, and especially because you know, they went into the whole, the presentation of a Black hero and like that goes back to presentation of Black people in the media and how terrible that tends to be and how terrible our country tends to be with Black people.

**Another thing that intrigued me about that speech is that Sam refers to Thanos as, "as an insane god." So, clearly everybody knows why half the population disappeared. But they don't seem to know how The Avengers brought everyone back or what happened to Steve Rogers. So, how did they get their information? Did some of the Avengers do interviews? Which ones? What did they say?**

**Who knows? There aren't many journalist characters in the MCU. The only one I can think of is Christine Everhart. She publishes a critical piece about Tony Stark in the first Iron Man movie. But she's better known for sleeping with Tony at the beginning and getting dissed by Pepper Potts.**

*CHRISTINE: You must be the famous Pepper Potts.*

*PEPPER: Indeed I am.*

*CHRISTINE: After all these years, Tony still has you picking up the dry cleaning.*

*PEPPER: I do anything and everything Mr. Stark requires. Including, occasionally, taking out the trash.*

**Now the subject of superheroes and journalists is near and dear to my heart. When I worked at WNYC, and I was doing stories for the newsroom, I used to fantasize about meeting a superhero on the rooftop and getting an exclusive interview.**

**In fact, in 2013, I produced a radio drama where my friend Mallory Kasdan played a fictional public radio reporter who gets an interview with a high-tech vigilante called The Troll, who uses an invisibility cloaking device.**

*SHELBY: Hello?*

*THE TROLL: I'm right here.*

*SHELBY: Oh my God, you scared me! How can those men see you?*

*THE TROLL: They have heat-seeking goggles. I need you to be my emissary, to fill in the blanks for New Yorkers. They need to know that I'm looking out for them.*

*SHELBY: Dude, I can't be your press agent.*

*THE TROLL: You and I are very similar. We take down the bosses, we afflict the powerful and comfort the afflicted.*

*SHELBY: I don't comfort anyone except my cat.*

*THE TROLL: I trust you.*

**That audio drama is already a time capsule because in 2013, before Gamergate, I didn't realize how toxic trolls were, and how much they were going to disrupt the whole ecosystem of fact-based journalism.**

**What hasn't changed is that superheroes are still the dominant form of entertainment media. So, I think it's worth exploring how journalists are portrayed in these stories, and whether that affects the way people see journalists in the real world. And I discovered, I'm not the only journalist who's wondered about this. We'll hear more from them after the break.**

**BREAK**

**So, I talked with several reporters who are comic book fans, and the journalist character that kept coming up – the character they felt truly represented the best**

**type of journalist -- was Ben Urich. And you just said, "who?" you probably haven't read many Daredevil or Spider-Man comics.**

**James Queally is a big Marvel comics fan. He's also a crime reporter for the L.A. Times.**

JAMES: Urich was definitely my personal superhero as a kid, you know, he's just kind of the ink-stained wretch, and it's kind of the old, the older model of reporter that I think a lot of, at least my professors either were or aspired to be. So yeah, he just kind of became that lionized journalist character almost the same way. I feel like maybe hopefully a lot of maybe serve as members look at Captain America or something.

**James's favorite storyline from the comics was in the early 2000s, when a tabloid reveals Daredevil's secret identity. And this tabloid is a rival to The Daily Bugle, which is run by J. Jonah Jameson. Jameson is furious. He calls all the reporters into his office, including Ben Urich, and Peter Parker.**

JAMES: And adds up all their salaries and he's screaming at them as to how, how did he spend this much money to lose this story to this tabloid? And I think you're somewhere in the argument, tells them, he knows who Daredevil is and he always has, but he won't give him up because he's a source. And frankly, he gives him access to way more important stories than just the splashy. What I guess now we would call clickbait who is, who is Daredevil, but, you know, that cuts you off from however many more important stories you're going to get about Hell's Kitchen or criminal justice or whatever else, knowing a superhero would get you. And I think Jamison threatens to fire him if he doesn't cough up his ID and he refuses and he walks out of the room. I mean, frankly, these were some of the first media ethics lessons I think I got before I went to college.

**But characters like Ben Urich get more respect in comics. And this is a spoiler for the Daredevil series on Netflix, but I'm so mad they did this, I don't mind spoiling a bad plot choice. In the first season of Daredevil, they killed off Ben Urich because he got too close to exposing the villain, Wilson Fisk.**

*BEN: You know how many times people have threatened me, get me to keep my mouth shut?*

*FISK: I am not here to threaten you. I'm here to kill you!*

**Maya Philips was happy they cast a Black actor to play Urich, until that moment.**

MAYA: I was so upset about -- first. And you know, of course, part of that, me being upset is like, I'm like, Oh, here's like the one Black character in the show and he's awesome. And you're going to kill him, really guys?

**To add insult to injury, they gave Urich's office to Karen Page, the occasional love interest of Daredevil, who had no experience in journalism. Eventually, Karen does become a good reporter, but:**

MAYA: I was so annoyed by that. I was like, okay, I didn't study journalism and do all those fricking internships and fact checking and all of that to see Karen Page, just walk on it and get a job like, okay, that was very, that was personal rage right there.

**I assume the writers thought they could kill off Ben Urich because he didn't see him as a well-known character. In other words, he's no Lois Lane.**

**Now I happen to like Lois Lane. She's been kicking ass lately, like in the 2020 graphic novel "Lois Lane: Enemy of The People", and in the new show on the CW, Superman and Lois, where – again, spoiler alert – in the second episode, she quits The Daily Planet because her new boss compromised her integrity.**

*LOIS: You rewrote my story.*

*MORGAN: I merely corrected what was wrong.*

*LOIS: Just to be clear, we can't do any actual reporter here anymore, correct?*

**But there have been countless versions of Lois Lane over the last 80-something years, and the journalist Sean Kelly says for much of the time, Lois embodied some of the worst stereotype of reporters.**

SEAN: There's the fact that, you know, like most of her stories are about Superman while she is very clearly in love with and has a complicated relationship with Superman.

***And that's well, before she knew who he was and married him.***

SEAN: Right, right. You know, and once she knew who he was and was married to him, she probably should have stepped back, you know, for her own sake, even if nobody else knew that she was married to Superman, she knew, and her sense of journalistic ethics should have had her back off a bit.

**Unfortunately, Lois is not an outlier. On The Flash, Iris West is a reporter who covers The Flash, gets saved by him, and marries him. Even the reporter April O'Neill in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles hooks up with a superhero – but it's a human one. Maya Philips cringes whenever she sees this trope.**

MAYA: Oh God. Yes. Yes. It makes me so sad to see like, as a journalist, it like really bothers me a lot now to be like watching this and be like, no, you shouldn't be doing that. Think about the other women in your field!

**But Sean says, when it comes to conflicts of interest, Clark Kent is the worst.**

SEAN: It's actually, it's one of the most unethical things about Clark Kent as, as a person, because you know, Superman is, you know, a very honest guy and a very upstanding guy, but he lies in articles all the time because he writes articles that feature Superman and he's making stuff up for them, which is not really like him in any other way. But, uh, when he's in his journalism career of all places, he makes stuff up a lot.

**That must run in the family because on the Supergirl TV show, Kara Danvers – who is Supergirl -- also faked an interview with herself for the media outlet she worked for. And Sean is also bothered by the way the job itself is portrayed.**

SEAN: Comic book authors, when they're writing journalism, just assume that it's kind of like writing a story and that like the amount of research they would have to do for that is, you know, maybe they have to talk to some people, but like usually Lois is like approach to writing stories, involves breaking into some place and like sneaking around until someone tries to kill her. And then the story has revealed itself.

***You know, some people may say, okay, fine, all good points. But I mean, come on, this is about a guy from another planet who looks exactly like a human and can fly and all this other stuff, like why would anyone actually be influenced by a portrayal of Lois Lane and think that that resembles real reporters?***

SEAN: Well, I mean, it's not only like one of the most prominent examples of reporting, like there aren't really any other TV shows out there about, uh, reporters and then, uh, you know, at the movie level, it's like you have to go back to maybe All The President's Men or uh, Spotlight, you know, very, very rare examples of, you know, true stories about journalism for the most part like Lois and Clark are kind of it in a lot of media. Like that's most of what people are seeing of how reporters are portrayed. And it's also because it's usually a kid friendly story. It's one of the earliest portrayals people get, you know, people watch, you know, like the Christopher Reeve Superman movie when they're like six years old and that that's hard to sway people away from.

**We do live in a time when there is so much cynicism about the news media, a lot of people have fallen for propaganda that's supposed to be the real truth.**

SEAN: The general perception of, of reporters is that they're, you know, rich, they're coastal elites. You know, they live in Metropolis. They have, you know, they have good salaries, they're star reporters, they have tons of autonomy. The editors never know what they're doing. They can just go out. They find somebody, they don't like whether it's, you know, Lex Luther or, you know, Morgan Edge or whatever. And they write a big old take down, they throw the story together in first person. It gets onto the front page with no editorial review, no fact checking. I think it's, it's funny because you know, it's in that environment, it's with that kind of baseline perception that you will, you know, "how reporters" that we've seen this surge in, uh, alternative sources of news, you know, they're all pushing against this idea that isn't true.

***Well, there are some other reporter characters, like what do you think about Peter Parker taking pictures of Spider-Man, not revealing as conflict of interest, and then selling them to a paper that vilifies him?***

SEAN: In a lot of ways. I feel like that's more realistic because he is constantly on the verge of getting evicted. You know, like he is, he is grossly underpaid. He's not actually staffed at the newspaper a lot of the time. He's just, you know, freelancing this stuff out, you know, very much a gig economy kind of worker, like that's a better portrayal.

**In fact, Peter's boss J. Jonah Jameson has always been used as a critique of "fake news."**

*JAMESON: I'll give you 300, that's the standard freelance fee. Tear up page 1. Run that photo instead.*

*ROBBIE: Headline?*

*JAMESON: Spider-Man: Hero or Menace? Exclusive Daily Bugle photos.*

*PETER: Menace? He was protecting that armored car...*

*JAMESON: You take the pictures. I make up the headlines. That okay with you?*

*PETER: Yes, sir.*

*JAMESON: Goodie.*

**And the character's gotten updated as the media changes. Like in the recent Spider-Man video games, Jameson has become an unhinged podcaster.**

*JAMESON: Sometimes, he's a threatening menace and sometimes he's a menacing threat but come on! How can you menace someone without being a threat! And for those grammar Nazis among you, I'm being redundant, it's an art, I'm a wordsmith, it's a rhetorical device!*

**And James Queally says in the recent comics, Jameson left The Daily Bugle to start a website called Threats and Menaces.**

JAMES: That is only doing, you know, clips, sound bites just real fast, like superhero fight, look clickbait and with not really much in the way of fact-checking and that is destroying The Bugle on page views and subscriptions, it's clearly the more successful of the two outlets. So I think it is a nice little jab at just the general public as news literacy, like no matter what era we're in Jamison has been, whether intentionally or not like an interesting portrait of some kind of fatal flaw in my business.

**But James thinks the most interesting storyline about news reliably was in the 1986 graphic novel Watchmen.**

**If you're not familiar with the comics, they take place in an alternate timeline where superheroes change the politics of the Cold War, often for the worst. And, spoiler alert, one of the so-called heroes stages a catastrophe with a giant creature that kills millions of people. And he does it because he thinks this tragedy brings the US and the Soviet Union together and stop them from fighting each other. When one of The Watchmen discovers the plan, he gives the information to a right-wing newspaper -- which only exists in the comics -- called The New Frontiersmen. They publish the truth, and no one believes them.**

JAMES: Considering Watchmen was published, what, well, before we were in the situation we are now in reality, there are so many publications that could stand in for The Frontiersman now. And that in that situation, I don't know what my gut reaction would be upon seeing that news story. Like if you have established yourself as an, an unshakable ideologue of a publication, what happens when you actually get the real important, critical story? Why would anyone believe you?

MAYA: Yeah, that ending just kills me every time. It's like the boy who cried wolf situation. And it feels so relevant to like what's happened in the last couple of years.

**Again, Maya Philips.**

MAYA: And I will say this happens with The Times too in the opposite respect that it's like sometimes, you know, The Times is criticized for trying to be so objective, which of course is impossible. Objectivity is an impossible ideal. And in doing so it may sound like at times it's supporting ideas that are very much not based in fact when it's trying to humor both sides of the political spectrum.

**The question of objectivity is one of the biggest debates in journalism right now. Objectivity had been the gold standard for a long time, but historically, that wasn't always the case.**

**So lately, a lot of journalists have been trying to be more transparent about where they come from, so news consumers can evaluate them better. Otherwise, the whole idea of fact-based journalism can be undermined if any bias is revealed whether it's intentional or not.**

**This issue has been explored in indie comics. James really appreciated these two characters that are reporters in a sci-fi comic book series called Saga. The reporters are a gay couple from an alien planet where same-sex relationships are taboo. And they're covering the main storyline in the comics, which is another forbidden relationship – because it involves two sides of an intergalactic war.**

JAMES: Their experience, their lived experience of being in this kind of, you know, banned romantic affair helps them when I think more sympathy, more empathy, and ultimately be more understanding of the piece they're trying to write and the focus of their story. And that is something that I feel like it's frowned upon sometimes in, in the real world. You know, if you, I, I, a lot of times my father was a police officer and I cover criminal justice. So, there are people that no matter what, think that's a bad thing, that I'm going to be automatically overly sympathetic to police, which is, if anyone has ever read anything I've written is not even remotely true. That I think improves my work. And I think it improved the same situation played out there, and I don't think it's automatically a problem as a lot of people might see it as.

**The question of objectivity is also at the heart of Transmetropolitan, which ran on the Vertigo Comics imprint from 1997 to 2002. The main character is a columnist named Spider Jerusalem. He looks a lot like Hunter S. Thompson -- the real-life journalist who was totally outlandish. And like Hunter S. Thompson, Spider is bald, wears funky sunglasses, and often has a cigarette dangling from his mouth. But Spider lives in a futuristic city that looks like a cross between Blade Runner and The Fifth Element.**

**Petra Mayer works at NPR. She is one of many reporters who are big Spider Jerusalem fans.**

PETRA: We certainly look up to him because everybody wishes they had that kind of power, right? Like the first major sequence of Transmet is him sitting on that rooftop, tapping out his column about the police riot. And he sends it out into the ether and the

power of his voice causes this outcry and the police back down and like who actually gets to see that happen, right?

**Transmetropolitan comics have had a resurgence lately. Petra discovered this when she went to ComicCon and cosplayed as Spider Jerusalem. The first time she did it in 2014:**

PETRA: Nobody knew who I was.

**But in 2018, she dressed up as Spider again.**

PETRA: And boy, did everybody recognize Spider then I even found another Spider it's. So gosh, what changed in the world between the first time I did it? And the second that people would, would recognize and want to read about a crusading journalist? Hmm.

**The first big storyline in the comics is a presidential election between a populist bully that Spider calls The Beast, and a slippery challenger that Spider calls The Smiler. He goes after both of them, and the public trusts Spider -- not because he's impartial. They know he's opinionated. He's usually high, and sometimes he zaps people he doesn't like with a "bowel disrupter gun."**

PETRA: But I think that no matter how nuts Spider is, he does get at something that's essential to journalism, which is the telling of stories that you wouldn't have otherwise heard.

**And we actually see Spider do the job of investigative journalism – whether it's digging into a candidate's past or hitting the streets and meeting people. Like in one issue, he talks to a woman who was cryogenically frozen in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the future shock was more than she could bear. Now she's homeless, and there's no support system to help people like her.**

PETRA: And that also kind of ties into what I think about Spider, the humanity at his core and his desire to find the people in this overwhelming swirl of the city and tell their stories like she is just as one singular, incredibly unimportant person. But when Spider crosses paths with her, you find out that she has this crazy rich backstory and this poignancy to her life. And yeah, it makes me cry.

**Even though the comics were drawn when the Internet was just coming into our homes, they foreshadow a time where digital screens are everywhere.**

PETRA: And I can only imagine that if you actually lived there, you would go insane from overstimulation. So having his voice and his concentration or his focus on the actual human beings that live in this place, I think that's pretty important.

LIZ: I think it's better for him to be for the comic book to be set in the future, because if it was set in present day, maybe we would be too invested to take his message more seriously.

**That is Liz Publika. She was inspired to become a journalist when she read Transmetropolitan in high school. By that point, Liz had been in the U.S. for 10 years. She was born in the Soviet Union, and she thinks that experience gives her a certain perspective on why it's important to have characters like this.**

LIZ: I think it's very important to respect journalists. Um, there is yellow journalism. There are people who are writing for, in order to be inflammatory in order to create conflict in order to create a story when there isn't one, but for the majority of journalists just want to inform you of information. In the Soviet Union, I'm sure that there are a lot of people who know this and, you know, even in modern day Russia, there are people who are risking their lives to get us the information that maybe some powers don't want you to have. And that's extremely valuable. That is something that is so incredibly necessary, that it's very difficult to kind of be okay with how dismissive people have become of quality information and of the people who risked their lives to get that information to them.

**But in the last few years, we learned a disturbing truth about the writer that created Spider Jerusalem. His name is Warren Ellis, and over 60 women have come forward with stories of unwanted sexual advances. He also had affairs with many of his female fans. His predatory behavior brings up similar issues around how we evaluate the people who create the media we consume.**

LIZ: I'm not like very eager to go and support him, but did this make me a better person? Did this make me think about, you know, did his work make me think about society in a better way? Did it make me more motivated to be an honest journalist? Did it make me more observant that the society around me, didn't he think more about the way that I want to be active in the society and to which I belong? I never liked Warren Ellis. I've always liked, you know, Spider Jerusalem. That's who I identified with.

**But Spider Jerusalem is still not a household name. There are no movie or TV adaptations – probably because there are no heroes in his world. So how could**

**superhero stories do better with journalist characters? Well first of all, Maya Phillips says, they have to break the mold.**

MAYA: The journalists fall on one extreme or the other of that, that they're like either like also praising this hero and like fawning over them without actually like, you know, examining it even further because I say this as a critic, like you can examine something critically, but not also be just like fawning over it. It doesn't have to be propaganda, or the opposite extreme is like the Jonah Jameson. Like just without even thinking about it, just like totally shooting down these heroes. Like there is a middle path there!

**Here's where I think the fans are ahead of the game.**

**At the beginning of the episode, I mentioned a reporter character named Christine Everhart, who briefly appeared in the Iron Man movies. She also appeared in a couple viral videos that Marvel put out which were literally fake news.**

*CHRISTINE: I'm Christine Everhart, this week on a special edition of Newsfront, the world the hero leaves behind.*

**But on the fanfiction website, Archive of Our Own, the fans have turned Christine into a major character. And they've proven there is a desire to see journalists ask tough questions of powerful people, even people that we like.**

**My favorite one of these stories is called Can I Quote You on This. It's by a writer called Wix. This fanfiction story takes place right after the movie Age of Ultron. Christine is sent to The Avengers headquarters to do a puff piece. But when she notices that Tony Stark is not in a publicity photo of the team, she starts digging, as any good reporter should.**

**Here is the actress Mallory Kasdan reading a section of that story.**

"Tony's a consultant with the Avengers." Steve clarifies. "He's not an official Avengers member."

"A consultant?" She asks as she glances in Tony's direction. "So...Mr. Stark is not part of the Avengers lineup?"

"He didn't pass the entrance exams." Clint laughs and she turns her attention back to them.

“Entrance exam? What did that look like?” She asks. “An entrance exam will sound good in print, proof I guess that you’re all not just adding members lackadaisically.”

“There was rigorous psychological profiling.” Natasha Romanoff says.

“I see. And how did that go? Did Tony go into SHIELD? Get tested by the best of the best?” Christine doesn’t mention how SHIELD was technically a fanatical order bent on world domination, so really, them saying that Iron Man needed to go far away was probably a point in his favor rather than out of it.

“I was sent into Stark Industries to oversee Tony in his natural habitat and report back.”

“Sent in?” Christine says. “So, you were spying on him?”

“I was profiling him.” Natasha corrects and Christine nods slowly.

“I went into Stark Industries and poised myself in a position that would...attract his attention. And when I was in his inner circle, I observed his behaviors and reactions to the situation at hand.”

“What situation?”

“The Whiplash Event.”

“Well, shouldn’t Tony have been accepted based on his response time and success rate at the Expo?” Christine asks. “There were no lives lost, and the area was contained.”

“He was erratic during the entire event, and a loose cannon. You remember the birthday party?” Natasha asks and Christine frowns.

“Where he got drunk in the suit?” Christine asks and Natasha makes a ‘there you go’ movement with her hand. “But even drunk in the suit Tony didn’t attack or assault anyone. He behaved the same way he would if he’d just been wearing a normal three-piece suit.”

“He destroyed his house.” Natasha tries to remind her, but Christine was there and that’s not entirely what she would say about what happened.

“Did the others get an exam?”

“Steve is Captain America.” Natasha says like that somehow gives him a Hail Mary. “Clint and I were SHIELD agents. Sam proved himself during the Washington incident.”

When you broke into a government facility and stole government property, Christine thinks to herself, and attacked a threat you didn’t inform outside parties of, who could have assisted on American soil.

“Thor is Thor.” Natasha says it with a smile and Christine doesn’t try to point anything out with that statement, it’d be far too easy. “Vision was approved by Thor’s hammer. And Wanda was rehabilitated.”

Good God.

“Okay, so let’s recap real quick just to be sure that I’ve got this all down correctly.” She says as she looks at her page. “There’s an entrance exam that apparently only Tony Stark has to undergo. An exam done by a government agency that had and has no real authority that ended up being Hydra in disguise.”

“There were a lot of good people in SHIELD too who didn’t know about Hydra.” Steve interjects and Christine holds up her hand to silence him as she continues.

“An exam that was done honeypot style during an event where, and correct me if I’m wrong, the subject was under heightened stress and severe palladium poisoning which could impair response times and reactions – and yet despite these problems managed to save half a city with no civilian casualties and you’re telling me he somehow failed?”

Natasha seems to realize that she shouldn’t answer that question for the first time today and Christine looks at Tony. “Tony, what did the report say?”

“Classic narcissist and that I’m not a team player.”

“Are you kidding me right now?” Christine asks and glances at them. “Okay...ignoring all of that. Please inform me of how your ‘rigorous psychological profiling’ admitted Wanda Maximoff onto the team?”

“That’s inside information.”

“I’ll bet it is.”

“I think this interview is over, Miss Everhart.” Clint says firmly and she slowly closes her notebook.

**On my website, I put a link to the original story from Archive of Our Own. Also, if you want to learn more about the website, I interviewed one of their founders, Francesca Coppa, in 2018.**

**That’s it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Maya Philips, Sean Kelly, James Queally, Petra Mayer, Liz Publika, Mallory Kasden and Wix, for giving us permission to adapt their story.**

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