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Truth and the Art of 'The Social Network'



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"I don't want my fidelity to be to the truth; I want it to be to story-telling." So said Aaron Sorkin in Mark Harris' intriguing [New York Magazine piece](#) on the origins of [The Social Network](#).

But, when a film is about real people, real events and real time, shouldn't there be fidelity both to truth and to story-telling? I think so.

Some of the debate about the film has, of course, been whether it gives an "accurate" portrayal of the character and motivation of Mark Zuckerberg. The polar positions on the facts are represented by two books: the anti-Zuckerberg [The Accidental Billionaires](#) by Ben Mezrich (based on the story of Zuckerberg's jilted early partner and an important source for the film) and the pro-Zuckerberg [The Facebook Effect](#) by David Kirkpatrick (based on extensive cooperation with Facebook).

These books are works of journalism. And the code of journalism—and of its more stately relative, history—is accuracy about facts. Journalism and history seek to recount

events as accurately as possible, even though it is understood that there is necessary choice (subjectivity) in the interpretation put on facts. Journalists and historians aren't supposed to make it up.

But many commentators say that, in viewing *The Social Network*, the actual Zuckerberg is quite beside the point. Like Sorkin, they view the film as a creative act which (to use a Graham Greene distinction) either provides excellent "entertainment" or, for some, achieves cinematic "art." They view the story of friendship, obsession, jealousy, revenge and betrayal—set in the internet age—as a modern parable with many dimensions and implications.

For these commentators, accuracy about facts is not important; the human truths told in entertainment and art are more profound than whether certain scenes or events in the film are the literally correct. Two examples:

- David Denby, reviewing the film in *The New Yorker*, [writes](#): "The debate about the movie's accuracy has already begun, but Fincher and Sorkin, selecting from known facts and then freely interpreting them, have created a work of art. Accuracy is now a secondary issue."
- The *New York Times*' Joe Nocera, one of the best business columnists, [criticizes](#) Mezrich ("he amps...events up to the point where the final product is an indistinguishable blend of fact and fiction") and praises Kirkpatrick ("a business journalist of the old school...would never take the kind of dramatic liberties taken by Mr. Mezrick and Mr. Sorkin"). But, he says that *The Social Network* is "possibly the finest film about business ever made" because the arrogant, unpleasant obsession it portrays is so essential to starting a new venture and because, despite Kirkpatrick's fair points about the movie's errors, Sorkin captures that "deep lasting truth." (Nocera's pen would disembowel any CEO who ignored facts in attempting to portray some larger corporate "truth.")

Yet, should entertainment or art about contemporary events that presents itself, as *The Social Network* does, as a "real" account of people and events—and not as parody or satire or cartoon—strive to be accurate, to strive for some deference to journalistic or historical accuracy in addition to skillful story-telling.

Sorkin actually says that he does owe Zuckerberg some balance. In a [New Yorker piece](#) by Jose Antonio Vargas, Sorkin states: "I don't want to be unfair to this young man

whom I don't know, who's never done anything to me, who doesn't deserve a punch in the face. I honestly believe that I have not done that."

Yet, he has also says in the same piece that, while he has tried to reflect many different points of view in the film, Zuckerberg "spends the first one hour and fifty-five minutes as an antihero and the last five minutes as a tragic hero." Fairness?

I find Mark Harris' observation in *New York* important on the dangers of poetic license in this type of film:

"Sorkin's most daring decision, to turn Zuckerberg himself into a "character" complete with a set of personality traits—prickliness, intelligence, verbosity, wit, arrogance, and occasional dead-eyed blankness—that make him a classic Sorkin creation but also represent a big leap of imagination..."

We're used to seeing movies reprocess history and even current events into drama...But it's one thing to play with Tony Blair or Bill Clinton. It's a new kind of license to turn a real-life 26-year-old whose most life-changing decisions were made as a teenager into an incarnation of Silicon Valley killer instinct, undergrad dorkdom, impatient brilliance, and middle-class Jewish-American aspiration fighting the WASP Establishment...It's a great idea for a character—but you don't have to be particularly sympathetic to Zuckerberg to understand his likely horror at having an entire set of motives, flaws, and vulnerabilities so publicly and permanently ascribed to him."

So, for me, one of the more interesting questions raised by the film is whether works of entertainment or art presenting themselves as real accounts of contemporary events owe fidelity, not just to story-telling, but also to a search for truth in a journalistic or historical sense. Certainly some of Sorkin's own statements suggest that he didn't want *The Social Network* just to be story-telling. And, if that is so, then he had an obligation to get closer to the facts.

But, if he did want pure fidelity to "story-telling" there was a different way to shape the movie, which has as its direct forebear the film many believe is the greatest ever made, [Citizen Kane](#). Orson Welles' classic was based on the life of William Randolph Hearst, but in the movie he was a fictional character, which allowed Welles great artistic license. What if Sorkin had fictionalized *The Social Network*, including its main character (Sam Kainenborg in homage to the past)? Wouldn't the film have been at least as powerful (perhaps with less of the hokey deposition by-play to trigger flash-backs) without the legitimate, and troubling, debate about the fairness of the portrayal?

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