How Moviemakers Frame the Media: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Journalism in Popular Vietnam-Era Cinema
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This research project, guided by framing theory, explores how journalism as a profession and the media were portrayed in film during a time in which journalism was arguably transforming its role in society – the Vietnam War. Rather than studying films focused primarily on journalism, a content analysis of the most popular films was conducted and the presence of the media in everyday life situations coded. The top five highest grossing films from 1968-1977 were included in the sample. These films were in production during the war, and their images reached more than 1 billion Americans. This research is significant because by making the deliberate choice to utilize media in their movies, filmmakers are unconsciously producing media frames about the function and role of the media during the Vietnam War. Framing theory argues that unconsciously, the portrayal of journalism in film generates thinking about how the media affect people’s lives and how journalism impacted the war. Filmmakers including images of media in film can be a powerful process, because when filmmakers communicate their unconscious perceptions of media to mass audiences, it is the filmmaker’s perspective audiences carry with them. The 50 films studied contained 460 representations of media that paint an overall picture of how media was portrayed to audiences in this era. Variables studied included the type of media present (i.e. newspapers, television), whether it appeared in the foreground or background of the scene, whether its use moved the action forward, and the reporter’s demographic information and professional conduct. Some key findings include that 53.3% of the media frames were of newspapers, characters responded to the media 32.6% of the time, the media moved the plot forward 45.4% of the time, 30.2% of television portrayals were framed as sensationalistic (using dramatic, over-the-top reporting that often stretches the truth and is concerned with increasing readership or viewership), and more Black and female journalists appeared in the last four years of the sample. The study also introduces a grounded theory in the qualitative data collected that cinema communicates in a visual and creative way history as it is happening.