



BOOK REVIEW:

Tokyo Vice series a slap in the face for journalism programs

Reviewed by Catherine Strong

Crime drama *Tokyo Vice*, produced by Endeavor Content and HBO Max, available on various streaming sites, two seasons.

On the surface the streaming series *Tokyo Vice* could be good for journalism students to watch. The storyline is a young Missouri man lands a job as a cadet reporter at a large Japanese newspaper. He is tenacious in trying to crack news stories about the powerful crime gangs controlling Tokyo businesses as well as controlling the police.

The tall, good-looking main character, Jake Adelstein, played by Ansel Elgort, does the lauded journalism tasks of long hours, hard work, constant networking, and digging for the truth. The video series could be seen as whipping up enthusiasm for the dramatic chase that young journalism students are aiming to join.

The series is based on the book by the same name, written by real life journalist Jake Adelstein, who did work in Japan. Understandably, there are exaggerations and fabrications between the real life experience, the book, and the video series.

The main character supposedly started at University of Missouri, which we know has a reputable journalism program, and yet young character Jake seems to be ignorant of the basics of journalism reporting and writing. His editor complains he “uses too many adverbs,” which is a euphemism for editorializing

within the text. He doesn’t know the difference in describing a body he has seen as “killed” or “murdered” in the legal sense of writing for the media. He is also very sloppy about protecting his sources.

A little more digging for this article shows the original book version says he only started studying at UM and then transferred to another university to major in Japanese. That explains why the character doesn’t know much about news reporting, but it doesn’t explain how he got such a plum job.

There is no mention of him studying journalism, but here is the slap in the face to journalism education – why would a large newspaper of 10 million readers, which is able to hire interns from any number of reputable Japanese universities’ journalism schools, take on someone with no journalism background and whose only talent is speaking good Japanese?

The storyline sort of says journalism training isn’t really important. Ouch!

The young journalist’s storyline and ability to go undercover while working at a Japanese newspaper has been discredited by others. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/tokyo-vice-problematic-source-material-1235135828/>

More fundamentally, however, western journalists

know that reporters normally have to be experienced and prove their ability before a newspaper would allow them to use unnamed sources or go undercover.

So from a journalism educator's point of view, this video series is an advertisement for skipping an educational background for our industry.

On the other hand, however, there are some extremely realistic elements of the investigative crime journalists' scenario. As a former crime reporter myself, I know Tokyo Vice's depiction of the co-dependency between reporter and detective is very real. Also very real is the crime beat journalist's constant experience of viewing bodies and blood.

And of course in real life, the crime reporter does regularly get the biggest stories and investigations.

In summary, the TV series could be useful for budding journalists, but should be seen with a warning that a good journalism education would have made young Jake an even more effective crime reporter.

To be honest, if we weren't journalism educators we would agree that the cadet reporter's goof-ups and accidentally falling into huge crime stories does make for an exciting drama series.

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