

# New paper explores America's obsession with Steve Jobs

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"Culture is not just on our screens, but also in the circuitry and institutions that make those screens work," says UVM sociologist Thomas Streeter. His new paper examines why the story of Apple CEO Steve Jobs is so important in American culture. Credit: Universal Pictures

A new paper in the *International Journal of Communication* investigates America's obsession with stories about celebrity CEO's like Steve Jobs, suggesting it says more about our culture than the man. The Steve Jobs movie, opening in theaters on Oct. 9, helps us imagine capitalism as

being humane and having moral integrity as opposed to the speculative, predatory kind that reared its greedy head in 2008, according to the paper's author.

Thomas Streeter, professor of sociology at the University of Vermont, writes in "Steve Jobs, Romantic Individualism, and the Desire for Good Capitalism" that Jobs' story fits perfectly with the romantic individualist story that American culture can't seem to get enough, despite being yet another romanticized story about a well-known business celebrity.

"Jobs is an interesting character, but if we were choosing whose story to tell based on the importance of their inventions or business innovations, we'd be telling stories about other people like computer scientist Dennis Ritchie, who was central to the development of the software and concepts that made the internet possible, along with much of what makes your desktop computer, smartphone, and tablet work; or Douglas Engelbart, who re-conceptualized what computers could be used for back in the late 1960s, and who was the inventor of the mouse and the windowing interface. Either of them could be said to have invented more important things than Steve Jobs. But where are all the major Hollywood movies, documentaries, and best-selling biographies about Ritchie or Engelbart and the dozens of other key inventors whose contributions were as or more essential than Jobs?"

There has to be another reason that the Steve Jobs story has been told over and over again since the 1980s instead of about men like Ritchie or Engelbart, says Streeter. "I think the reason is in our culture: we love the story of Jobs because we love the story of the guy who bucked convention, pursued his passions, and got rich doing so."

Stories like Jobs' are perpetuated by a capitalistic machinery that infuses romantic ways of thinking into all areas of society, according to Streeter. "Culture is not just on our screens, but also in the circuitry and

institutions that make those screens work," he says. "Markets, property, and corporations are now infused with variants of romantic ways of thinking, alongside more traditional ways of thinking. Capitalism has gotten Byronic. The current Steve Jobs craze, which took off in a big way after he stepped down from Apple in 2011, seems to prove my point about Byronic capitalism. Jobs' story nicely fits the romantic individualist story that American culture is in love with. We love the story, and the case of Steve Jobs gives us a chance to tell that story over and over."

The institutional machinery devoted to producing celebrity CEO's is in response to populist criticisms of modern corporations in hopes of making people feel good about a more moral Capitalistic system, writes Streeter.

"For more than a century, American society has been arguing with itself about big corporations. Are they good or bad? How should we think about them? Corporations shower us with lovely stuff like cars and microwaves, and yet they are global, faceless bureaucracies that generate pollution and create unaccountable power and wealth inequalities. The news coverage and stories put a personal face on corporate capitalism, which, deliberate or not, acted as a rejoinder to the criticisms of corporations then coming from union organizers, activists and reformist politicians. Corporations are not faceless bureaucracies that the stories implied, they are the product of unique, colorful, bold men. American media has offered a pretty steady diet of colorful stories about the lives of corporate chieftains, from Edwin Land to Jack Welch to Richard Branson and more, stories that treat executives as celebrities. Those stories don't just happen. Executives typically have publicists who cultivate these stories the same way politicians craft personal narratives about themselves when running for office. "

Unfortunately, there can be a harsh human toll taken by a global

manufacturing system required to produce the products that make business celebrities fame and fortune, says Streeter. "Reality is hard to grasp even in the best of circumstances," he says. "For me, the kicker is that your iPhone is actually just as abstract as credit default swaps. Your iPhone wouldn't exist without all the young women in southern China working for low wages who assembled it; without international agreements and government policies that organize all that labor; without the millions of lines of computer code written over decades by programmers scattered all over the planet; without the work of many thousands of engineers tinkering and experimenting both inside and outside Apple; or without complicated systems of international finance, shipping containers and so forth. It's just plain weird to think that the policies of the Chinese Communist Party are in a sense inside your iPhone. It's hard to talk about on a popular level. But I think we should."

Streeter's advice for how to view the movie: "Remember that the movie is not about how to run a corporation any more than Hamlet is about how to run a country. And then enjoy the performances, which I hear are excellent."

**More information:** *International Journal of Communication* Vol 9 (2015) [ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4062/1473](http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/4062/1473)

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