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ENTERTAINMENT FEATURE

Court TV's 15 Most Memorable Movie Journalists

It's a little easier to make a movie about journalists. Since the stereotypical reporter is witty, driven, direct and yet flawed, they are usually pretty interesting characters. They have appealing jobs which allow them plenty of time out of the office and in contact with a variety of fascinating characters. They are always digging to uncover some fantastic mystery. And because there's always a deadline to meet, tension is forever just around the corner.

Since charismatic reporters have the lead roles in the recent "Capote" and "Good Night, And Good Luck," it got us thinking about other compelling cinematic newshounds. We took a look at some of greatest movies ever made about the business (we recently did the same thing about lawyers in film) and tried to determine which journalists have been the most memorable.

1. Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein (Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman) in "All the President's Men" (1976)

By now, everyone knows the story of how Woodward and Bernstein took a small story about a "two-bit break-in" at the Watergate Hotel, and, with great effort, wrote a series of articles that exposed corruption in the White House and helped force Richard Nixon to resign as President. Though the film takes some dramatic license, "All the President's Men" is fairly true to the real story.

And it's taken as gospel that the film turned investigative journalism into a hot topic among the nation's college students.

But more than its historical impact (Watergate was probably the biggest news story in America since World War II), the movie does a wonderful job of showing the real world of journalism: the endless phone calls, dead ends, rejections, stonewalling, sources, note-taking, and editorial hierarchy.

The two main characters are so good because they are relentless and smart, but flawed too. Woodward, whose job is to cover the Capitol, admits to an editor that he has no idea who Charles Colson, special counsel to Nixon, is. Like all good reporters, they know how to tailor their mood to convince sources to talk: Bernstein, for example, can be flirtatious when chatting with a young female assistant, compassionate when he tries to persuade Nixon reelection committee treasurer Hugh Sloan to disclose information about the party's illegal actives, and tough when dealing with a state attorney investigator who may be stonewalling some information

The film is also memorable because the whole story is about the journalism: no romance, no silly back story, no Hollywood gun fights or car chases. The film was so good it didn't need them.—Daniel Green

2. Howard Beale (Peter Finch) in "Network" (1976)

Beale is a washed-up anchorman whose ratings have dropped so low that the UBS network fires him. He responds on his next broadcast by threatening to commit suicide live on TV. His bosses are mortified by that promise, and he is given one chance to apologize to viewers. Instead, he strays from the script and tells the world that everything is "bullshit."

But an ambitious UBS executive (played by Faye Dunaway) realizes that Beale's straight talk is drawing viewers and publicity. In the film's most famous scene, a disorientated Beale tells viewers to open their windows and scream, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!"

When the nation does as they are told, Dunaway's character creates a whole show around Beale's newfound prophet persona, and the nightly news becomes an entertainment show, adding segments like the one with "Sybil the Soothsayer," who tries to predict tomorrow's news. His ratings continue to soar, but when he exhorts his audience to call the White House to protest a deal to sell UBS to an Arab conglomerate, the network's stockholders have had enough. He is intimidated into going back on the air and asking his audience to forget about quashing to sale. The audience loses interest in the defanged prophet, his ratings drop, and the network has him killed on live TV.

A madman on a mission, Beale reminded the people to hold their government to high standards and to stand up for their rights. He was attuned to the sick state of the world, where a network would kill for ratings (literally). Former CNN executive producer Robert Wiener, whose experiences covering the Middle East were made into the film "Live from Baghdad," (see below) says, "Although 'Network' was a work of brilliant fiction, I believe most journalists harbor a secret desire to vent against the 'bullshit' as Beale did."

Deborah Norville, anchor of syndicated newsmagazine "Inside Edition," told Court TV in an email interview that the ideas in "Network" still ring true. "From the hard charging network executive who insists on ratings at all costs [Dunaway] to the long suffering newsman who laments the death of what matters [Beale], the themes of 'Network' have been proved thirty years later." In fact, George Clooney has just announced plans to remake "Network" as a live movie on CBS. -Erika Waddell

3. Marcello Rubini (Marcello Mastrorianni) in "La Dolce Vita" (1960)

No film has better captured the ennui of writing about the mundane. Rubini doesn't cover important stories and he doesn't exude an iota of passion about his work. Handsome, cool and well-dressed, he is bored by the gossip items he publishes, yet too distracted by beautiful women and the fun nightlife of Rome to write about much else or dedicate himself to become a "serious" writer.

In the end he is feckless, impotent and to inert to change. In the last scene, a pretty girl tries to talk to him on a beach, but he is too far away and keeps yelling, "I can't hear"—probably the worst thing a journalist can admit to.

The Fellini film famously created the term "paparazzi": one of Marcello's friends, a photographer who is always around the precipice of trouble and tragedy, is named Paparazzo. -D.G.

4. Walter Burns (Cary Grant) in "His Girl Friday" (1940)

Tennessee Williams said "The Front Page" "took the corsets off American theater," and ever since 1928, whether on the stage or screen, it's been the best portrayal of the reporter as a wisecracking smart aleck. Written by Chicago newspapermen Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, "The Front Page" is a comedy about big city journalism, the Red Scare, and an innocent man sentenced to hang because of election-year politics. But at the heart of all the antics is the determination of ruthless managing editor Burns to keep ace reporter Hildy Johnson from getting married and leaving the paper.

The reporters of "The Front Page" are, without exception, lazy, dishonest, irresponsible and slovenly but hysterically funny and, in the urban screwball comedy tradition, lovable scamps. New York Times publisher Adolph Ochs was so angry at that portrayal that he ordered up an editorial denouncing the play's coarse language and depiction of the press. Journalism takes the backseat to poker for the play's jailhouse reporters, who only seem to take time out between hands to phone in their (invented) tips to rewrite.

The first filmed version of the play, which came out in 1931, was a smart, crackling early talkie, distinguished by lively camerawork at a time when most dialogue-heavy productions were weighted down by static cameras dictated by new sound recording processes.

In 1940, director Howard Hawks adapted the film, changing the title to "His Girl Friday" and making the more significant change of turning Hildy Johnson into a woman, played by Rosalind Russell. (There was also a 1974 version with Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau).

Of all the characters in all the versions, Grant sparkles the most. If there were an award for fastest talking in any film, it would probably go to him, and Hawks figured out a way to make him even faster. In "His Girl Friday," the director perfected his technique of overlapping dialogue in which actors constantly speak over other actors' lines, creating an impression of even more rapid-fire conversation a technique that has influenced filmmakers ever since. -Paul