5 movies that get the newsroom right

By John P. Avlon, CNN contributor
updated 4:02 PM EDT, Sat June 23, 2012

Editor's note: John Avlon is a CNN contributor and senior political columnist for Newsweek and The Daily Beast. He is co-editor of the book "Deadline Artists: America's Greatest Newspaper Columns" and won the National Society of Newspaper Columnists' award for best online column in 2012. He is a regular contributor to "Erin Burnett OutFront" and is a member of the OutFront Political Strike Team. For more political analysis, tune in to "Erin Burnett OutFront" at 7 ET weeknights.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

John Avlon: "The Newsroom" debuts this Sunday, a modern depiction of journalism

He names 5 good journalism movies that carry a sense of purpose, are entertaining

They include "Network," "All the President's Men," "Broadcast News," "Good Night and Good Luck," "His Girl Friday" a retro classic

"All the President's Men" (1976), Dustin Hoffman, center, plays Carl Bernstein and Robert Redford is Bob Woodward.

(CNN) -- With the debut of Aaron Sorkin's new show "The Newsroom" on HBO this Sunday, I've been thinking about the best film depictions of journalism in American history. Any "best-of" list is inherently subjective, but you definitely don't need to be a journalist to appreciate the sense of purpose these classic films provide.

So without further ado and just for fun on a summer weekend, below are my nominations for the top five journalism films of all time.

"Network": Paddy Chayefsky's satire is still razor sharp after almost 40 years, offering a prophetic look at what would happen when news desks started answering to entertainment divisions.

The film also managed to anticipate the rise of Reality TV, with one surreal side plot in which a self-styled "liberation army" gets its own television show and immediately goes from talking about the proletariat to negotiating net versus gross contracts. But in the end it is a morality play, featuring William Holden, Faye Dunaway and Peter Finch as Howard Beale, a network anchor over the edge of a nervous breakdown who shouts the immortal line "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it any more!!!!"
I'm not gonna take it anymore!"

During the meteoric rise and fall of Glenn Beck, I was half convinced that he'd announce he was punking us by trying to make Howard Beale come alive.

Entertainment: What Aaron Sorkin learned from CNN for "Newsroom"

"All the President's Men": The genius of this dramatic depiction of Watergate is that the movie keeps you in suspense even when everybody knows how the story is going to end.

Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman are a perfect pairing as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, with Jason Robards playing Ben Bradlee, all capturing the chase of a great story as it unfolds.

The film was made just a few years after Nixon's resignation, but somehow it does not sacrifice the film's sense of perspective on a time when journalists uncovered a corrosive conspiracy at the highest level of the government and toppled a president who only 20 months before had won a 49-state landslide.

"Good Night, and Good Luck": This George Clooney-directed 2005 film is a small masterpiece, filmed in black and white. David Strathairn perfectly captures the integrity of Edward R. Murrow facing down Joe McCarthy at a time when the witch hunt for the Communist enemy within was ending careers and creating an atmosphere of fear.

The film is funny and smart, with tight construction and an ensemble cast that includes Robert Downey Jr. and a chubbied-up Clooney as Murrow's producer Fred Friendly. The opening scene speech, taken from Murrow's own words, should be regular required viewing for anyone in the news industry. Key line: "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful."

"Broadcast News": Armed with a perfect cast of Albert Brooks, William Hurt and Holly Hunter, "Broadcast News" is a brilliant comedy that captures the outsized influence of the anchorman -- played by Jack Nicholson -- back in the days of the Big Three. Adding depth are cutaway scenes depicting the characters as neurotic children.

It is ultimately a story about ambition and unrequited love, offering a useful, if not particularly uplifting, meditation on the unsteady boundary between infatuation, love and trust.

"His Girl Friday": Howard Hawk directed this 1930s slapstick comedy, which is based on the Ben Hecht-penned screenplay for The Front Page. Cary Grant plays editor Walter Burns trying to woo his ex-wife and fellow journalist Hildy Johnson (Rosalind Russell) back to the world of the newsroom, with its roll-top desks, three-martini lunches, rotary phones and manual typewriters clacking away. In a nice bit of symmetry, the film debuted the overlapping dialogue technique that Aaron Sorkin later perfected.

Honorable mentions: Falling outside this list include "The Year of Living Dangerously," "Ace in the Hole," Will Ferrell's epic, hilarious performance as Ron Burgundy in "Anchorman," and the fifth season of "The Wire." Buy them, rent them, download them - but most of all, enjoy them.

Follow us on Twitter @CNNOpinion.

Join us on Facebook/CNNOpinion.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Jon Avlon.
IMO we no longer are treated to the news, we are treated to entertainment. I cannot tell you how many times I have had to turn the station from CNN because of many of their self permoting wind bags. I don't turn on the news to see "bubbly" "pretty" "exciting" people, I turn on the news to see the news. My god, today the news networks spend more time with "teasers" than the real news. "And after the break we will tell you about the 2000 terrorist who have surrounded the white house," and then after the break... "Now here is a happy story about how Fido walked 2000 miles to find his old family." (run video) "Now, speaking of 2000... thats the number of terrorist that have surrounded the white house... now stand by and get the news right after this break.”

My main options for TV "news" to accompany breakfast:
- Several local or regional broadcast stations: Like CNN/HLN with a regional accent.
- CNN/HLN: Vacuous, bubbly, self-promoting, chattering.
- Fox News: Jarringly opinionated. Clogs my filters. (And I'm a bit conservative, but I would much prefer information over agitation.)

What else is there?

Can't get BBC or Al-Jazeera on my cable system at breakfast time. Stuck with SpongeBob.
If you haven't seen "Network", (the top one on this list) you need to see it. It was written almost 35 years ago, yet it seems just as relevant to today's audiences. It's kind of scary how relevant it is.

Bozobub
Gas Predictor, pretty much you're stuck with the BBC and AL-Jazeera =/ ...

mrtweedy
burnout: You sound like you're mad as hell and can't take it anymore. Calm down, "Vox Populi" will be on in a few minutes.

oddjob3422
It has always been that way. The only difference is in the preferences of people on how they want to be entertained.

burnout321
I watch reruns of "The Mary Tyler Moore Shoe" to remind me what is really happening behind the scenes, and then I get online and read my local paper.

cpc65
All The President's Men is one of my favorite movies. If you are the type who can watch a film without car chases, gun battles, CGI effects, meaningless nonsensical plots and pop music sound tracks give this one a viewing.

Oddjob3422
Unfortunately, you just described the modern movie goer's preferences.

cpc65
Yup

Charlie1951
If only network and cable news execs would read "and follow" Ed Murrow's advice. But recently the news programming with the least bias, one way or the other, seems to get the lowest ratings. People don't want news, they want to be reinforced in their preconceptions.

The Punisher
Where is Citizen Kane?
This list is worthless without the AFI's #1 movie. I can also think of several others that do justice to the newsrooms ( NOT INFOTAINMENT ) of their days.

This guy never set foot in a REAL NEWSROOM, just an INFOTAINMENT SET.
I remember the lyrics to " Dirty Laundry " . That song does a better job on exposing today's
INFOTAINMENT SET ( not a real " newsroom ).

Bozbob

Good point. While any list like this IS subjective, it's hard to believe there's no mention at all of CK.

Angry Deuce

We could use a real-life Howard Beale these days, and no, that sycophant Glenn Beck, either.

If only we had a modern-day Walter Cronkite...

Guest

Unfortunately Walter Cronkite would never get on the air today. He is not what people want to see on the news these days. They want pretty young faces telling them just what they want to hear. Americans don't want to be well-informed, they want to be well-entertained. And the last thing they want is to have their biases or beliefs challenged in any way. Unfortunately the media is just giving us what we ask for.

Gas Predictor

Guest, I wish I could "like" your reply more than once. Your statement is everything that is wrong with "news" today.

I, for one, would like to be informed. Walter Cronkite would get my vote over the vacuous yuk-yuk self-promotion that passes for a "news" report any day of the week and any time of the day.

Hint 1: Tell me what happened, don't tell me how you feel about it. If I feel anything about it, that's my business (and an indication that you did a good job reporting it). I really don't want to hear about how some reporter fresh out of high school feels about the news. (And yes, most of you look to me like you're fresh out of high school.)

Hint 2: I don't want to eavesdrop, I want to be addressed. When a reporter in the field makes a report,...

show more

Gas Predictor

I rather suspect that Glenn Beck knows how full of crap he is, but he knows that it sells. Yes, he crashed rather hard, but he's not selling pencils on the street corner. He has simply whittled his empire to its undyingly loyal core. (I'm a conservative, and I consider Glenn Beck a minor embarrassment. I might consider him a major embarrassment if I paid more attention to him.)

Angry Deuce

Yeah, right. He doesn't know his *** from a hole in the ground. The guy's a Birther for Christ's sake...

enfilmegult

"In a nice bit of symmetry, [His Girl Friday] debuted the overlapping dialogue technique that Aaron Sorkin later perfected."

Oh ouch. I liked the article, but come on. Howard Hawks perfected it all by himself, Aaron Sorkin imitated it well.

ClarkMN
Totally agree

ibusurfing

A CNN contributor thinks he knows what a NEWS room looks like???? LOL!!!! I'll be giggling about that one for quite a while.....)

Masta1978

The news mwdia is bought and sold by the government!!! The media is just as corrupt as the Obama administration!!!

Bozbub

OK, I might buy that, once you explain what "mwdia" is.