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Newspaper movies still on front page

Journalism source of compelling stories for filmmakers

By [Bill Thompson](#)
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File/MCT

In 'State of Play,' Russell Crowe stars as an investigative journalist embroiled in a case of seemingly unrelated, brutal murders.

Traditional newspapers may be having their struggles in the real world, but as fodder for the movies, they are still hot off the presses.

Movies old and new capture the camaraderie and cacophony of the newsroom. Using a whole lexicon of inside terms, screenwriters still savor the notion of reporters and editors crusading for justice, investigating the corrupt and revealing nefarious government cover-ups. Not to mention solving a crime or two.

Just out on DVD is one of the better examples of the form, "State of Play," featuring the powerhouse pairing of Russell Crowe and Helen Mirren. The latest in a long line of ink-stained comedies and melodramas, director Kevin Macdonald's thriller involves a brash reporter (Crowe) who risks life and limb unearthing a murderous corporate plot.

Best known for "The Last King of Scotland" (2006), "Touching the Void" (2003) and the Oscar-winning documentary "One Day in September" (1999), Macdonald is no rookie. But he had big eye shades to fill, considering that the great newspaper movies have been directed by such cinema icons as Lewis Milestone ("The Front Page"), Orson Welles

("Citizen Kane"), Howard Hawks ("His Girl Friday"), Frank Capra ("Meet John Doe," "It Happened One Night"), George Stevens ("Woman of the Year"), William Wyler ("Roman Holiday"), Alexander Mackendrick ("Sweet Smell of Success") and Alan J. Pakula ("All the President's Men").

Copy!

Like most movie characters, newspapermen and women can be reasonably true to life, or laughable exaggerations. Do movies romanticize newspapering? Often. Do they portray reporters as ruthless, career-crazed bloodhounds hot on the scent, concerned chiefly with beating the competition to the story with nary a concern for the source? Or, alternately, as too-noble warriors for truth, justice and the American way? Frequently. And they still do.

In 1930s and '40s films, did every reporter above the rank of gofer have his or her own office? You bet.

And editors were uniformly gruff, irascible, routinely demanding the impossible as if it were their birthright. Well, OK, so that much was true, notwithstanding the occasional soft center.

Somehow, the idea of making a compelling hero out of a solitary blogger who never leaves his keyboard seems less than inspiring.

Of all the depictions of newspapers and their denizens, some insist the closest to reality (albeit glamorized) remain "All the President's Men" and TV's "Lou Grant," the mostly serious "spinoff" of the "Mary Tyler Moore Show." But for all their nuts-and-bolts looks at procedures, none have completely captured the gritty, oft mundane, reality.

The original "Front Page" (1931) was the seminal movie, shaping the public's notion of the newspaperman and spawning a batch of remakes, not least "His Girl Friday" (1940). The latter, with Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell, may be the most frenzied and entertaining of them all, with repartee rivaled only by the Tracy-Hepburn pairing in "Woman of the Year" (1942). "All the President's Men" (1976) certainly was the most topical, "The Big Clock" (1948) the most suspenseful and "The Killing Fields" (1984) the most horrific. "Citizen Kane" (1941) arguably is history's best film in any genre.

Yet many might vote for Richard Brooks' "Deadline, U.S.A." (1952) as the most authentic of newspaper movies. Humphrey Bogart stars as an old-school editor trying to fend off the sale of his paper to the competition by the founder's heirs, all the while conducting an expose of a crime empire and, oh, yes, saving his foundering marriage. You can almost smell the sweat and feel the metallic clatter of the linotype machines.

In more recent years, the American cinema has mined newspapers only sporadically, with such pictures as "Never Been Kissed" (1999), "I Love Trouble" (Charles Shyer, 1994), "The Paper" (Ron Howard, 1994) and "The Pelican Brief" (Alan J. Pakula, 1993). Only Howard took matters seriously enough to attain an agreeable level of black comedy.

That said, the finest film about journalism of late, "Shattered Glass" (2003), centered on an actual magazine scandal.

Should we give TV equal time? Quick, name 10 great films about television. There's "A Face in the Crowd" (1957), "Network" (1976) "Broadcast News" (1987) and ... and ... case closed.

Putting it to bed

Now, here's the best of the rest:

"The Final Extra" (1927), "Big News" (1929), "Copy" (1929), "Five Star Final" (1931), "Scandal Sheet" (1931), "Platinum Blonde" (1931), "Blessed Event" (1932), "I Cover the Waterfront" (1933), "Front Page Woman" (1935), "Libeled Lady" (1936), "Inside Story" (1939), "Foreign Correspondent" (1940), "Confirm or Deny" (1941), "Nine Lives are Not Enough" (1941), "Ace in the Hole" (1942), "They Got Me Covered" (1943), "It Happened Tomorrow" (1944), "Night Editor" (1946), "Call Northside 777" (1948), "Big Town" (1950), "The Big Carnival" (1951), "Come Fill the Cup" (1951), "The Captive City" (1952), "It Happens Every Thursday" (1953), "Front Page Story" (1953), "Slander" (1956), "Teacher's Pet" (1958), "Deadline Midnight" (1959), "The Front Page" (1974 remake), "Between the Lines" (1977), "Superman" (1978), "The Journalist" (1979), "Absence of Malice" (1981), "Continental Divide" (1981), "City News" (1982), "The Year of Living Dangerously" (1982), "Under Fire" (1983), "A Case of Libel" (1984), "Not for Publication" (1984), "Mean Season" (1985), "Fletch" (1985), "Jack and Mike" (1986), "Salvador" (1986), "Newsies" (1992) and "Madman of the People" (1994).

Those needing a serious hit of newspaper movies can check out Richard R. Ness' "From Headline Hunter to Superman." This 808-page tome, published in 1997, catalogs 2,100 feature films dealing with journalism.

Reach **Bill Thompson** at bthompson@postandcourier.com or 937-5707.

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