



### Real Reporters on the Screen? Get Me Rewrite!

All the News That's Fit to Screen: Movies About Journalism



New York Public Library

Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant in "His Girl Friday" (1940).  
By DAN BARRY  
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BACK when paper and ink still mattered, I fell into a job as a nightside reporter at The Providence Journal, in the habitually newsworthy state of Rhode Island. This was many years ago, before exercise, sobriety and good hygiene had ruined the misanthropic bonhomie of the typical newsroom — or so the romanticizing journalist in me likes to think.

#### Trailers & Clips

- VIDEO: [Ace in the Hole \(1951\)](#)
- VIDEO: ['Deadline U.S.A.' \(1952\)](#)
- TRAILER: ['Sweet Smell of Success' \(1957\)](#)
- VIDEO: [':-30-' \(1959\)](#)
- TRAILER: ['All the President's Men' \(1976\)](#)
- TRAILER: ['The Paper' \(1994\)](#)

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Here was the tough-guy cop reporter who owned a bar called Hope's, named in honor of the proprietor of the dead-end saloon in "The Iceman Cometh." Here, in the newspaper's library, was a file for Charlie Zabluski, who for years provided eyewitness accounts of various fires and accidents, even though he had sprung fully formed from the fevered imagination of a reporter in need one day of a pithy quote.

And here was a challenge among some reporters to slip a deliciously nonsensical phrase — "As if by the wave of an occult hand" — into the newspaper. We wondered whether the harried editors would ever notice if, say, a story began: "As if by the wave of an occult hand, the

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United Artists  
Tony Curtis and Burt Lancaster in "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957).

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Warner Brothers Pictures/Photofest  
Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman in "All the President's Men" (1976).

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20th Century Fox via New York Public Library  
Humphrey Bogart, center, portrays a crusading editor in "Deadline U.S.A." (1952): "That's the press, baby. The press!"

Woonsocket zoning commission voted last nightto. ...”

This is what I tend to remember, all those stock characters and inside jokes that made for great storytelling at Hope's after the last deadline and before the last call. What I choose to forget, of course, are the less than thrilling ways in which I spent the other 98 percent of my time: telephoning, photocopying, typing.

Lots and lots of typing. And trust me: the tap of each key did not echo like gunfire aimed at a corrupt Mr. Big. It was decidedly less cinematic than rat-a-tat-tat. More like: Tap. Tap. Backspace. Tap.

This goes a long way toward explaining why reporters and editors love movies about themselves. The films tend to add style to their khakis and wit to their whining. Their ordinary workday world suddenly seems so exciting, so glamorous and, very often, so unreal.

Denizens of newsrooms past and present, then, may well be among those attending [All the News That's Fit to Screen](#), a free weekly series of movies about journalism that runs through June 28 at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. On Thursday, for example, the program will present ["Sweet Smell of Success"](#) (1957), starring Burt Lancaster as a gossip columnist whose name is pronounced Hunsecker but spelled W-I-N-C-H-E-L-L.

Now that actual newspapers are beginning to flicker and fade, like the tail ends of old movie reels, these films may one day define how the newsroom culture is remembered

— from the kill-for-a-story obsession of the [reporter Kirk Douglas](#) in "Ace in the Hole" (1951) to the closing words of the editor Humphrey Bogart in that stop-the-presses classic from 1952, ["Deadline U.S.A."](#):

"That's the press, baby. The press! And there's nothing you can do about it. Nothing!"

The closest I ever heard an editor say anything like this was: "Get me a coffee! Black! No sugar!" But what journalist's heart does not beat faster at the sound of Bogart's corny declaration, and at the sight of thousands of newspapers with a gotcha headline rumbling off those gritty, beautiful presses.

Gritty, beautiful presses? Better get me rewrite, since I can't stop romanticizing.

Hollywood has never tried too hard to convey a typical reporter's work life because so much of it involves bearing witness to the actions of others. This may include trying to stay alive on a battlefield, of course, but a reporter is more often trying to remain conscious during that zoning commission meeting in Woonsocket.

Imagine the pitch to producers:

A reporter in khaki pants and a white shirt is working on an investigation that could blow the lid off this town. But his editor keeps sending him to cover daily news events: a house fire, a court hearing, the unveiling of the new sewage-treatment plant. This is how it goes, day in, day out. And every night he cracks a beer and reassures himself that Hemingway started this way. The end.

Too romantic?

Reporters and editors who study and collect newspaper movies will argue about the



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truest, the best, the worst. And some will surely complain that I didn't mention their favorite. ("[The Paper](#)," 1994. Happy now? Or is it "[While the City Sleeps](#)," 1956?) They will dismiss "[It Happened One Night](#)" (1934), with Clark Gable playing a cocky reporter, as peripheral to newspapers and question whether a self-respecting journalist would ever behave like Sally Field in "[Absence of Malice](#)" (1981). They will take delight in citing the genre's lesser-known films, from "[Five Star Final](#)" (1931), with Boris Karloff as the worst kind of reporter, to "[-30-](#)" (1959), with Jack Webb playing — Jack Webb. They will debate the exact but fleeting moment when Hollywood elevated the job of reporter from everyday gig to sacred calling (1976: "[All the President's Men](#)").

And they will invoke the name of the barely remembered actor Lee Tracy, whose film work in the early 1930s all but cemented the cinematic model for the fast-talking, anything-for-a-story newsman. "I'm running this column, and I'm taking orders from nobody, see!" he snarls in "[Blessed Event](#)" (1932). "Go on, blow."

I have never said this; I have never even thought it. Still, I recognize the bits of newsroom truth in "Blessed Event" and other newspaper movies. After all, plenty of newsroom escapees found refuge in Hollywood, including Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, the authors of "The Front Page," the 1928 Broadway play that spawned several movie adaptations.

Few newspaper reporters have written articles that led to the exoneration of a [wrongfully convicted](#) man. But all reporters understand the tedious legwork and weary irritation of Jimmy Stewart as he trudges through a grudging re-examination of an old murder case in "[Call Northside 777](#)" (1948).

Fewer still have worked on a story on which nothing is riding except the freedom of the press and maybe the future of the country, as Jason Robards Jr., channeling the Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee, says in "[All the President's Men](#)" (1976). But all reporters recognize certain experiences of Woodward/Redford and Bernstein/Hoffman: the door slams, the telephone hang-ups, the interviews that turn out to have nothing to do with anything.

And, of course, the exhilaration from unearthing a startling fact that just may lead to another startling fact, and another.

But for all these glimpses of authenticity one of the very best movies about newspapers — the 1940 classic "[His Girl Friday](#)," a twist on the Hecht and MacArthur play — could not be further from the truth. Its newsroom resounds with lightning-quick banter. Its editor, Cary Grant, is suave and handsome. Its reporter, Rosalind Russell, is bright and beautiful. Everyone is witty, well groomed and dressed to the nines.

As if. As if by the wave of an occult hand.

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