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## **top 10: best movies about media**

by MiHi Ahn

Picking the top ten anything is a pretty daunting task, and selecting ten top media movies proved to be more of a challenge than I was expecting. I'm no Pauline Kael, only a humble media worker and Media Alliance board member, and off the top of my head, I could only come up with about four movies. I ended up polling journalists, friends, movie buffs, and the aggressively opinionated for suggestions. This got me a list of about 50 recommendations, ranging from illuminating to bizarre. I happily shuffled off to my local video store and indiscriminately selected movies from my master list. At first it was an unfamiliar thrill to go into a video store and not agonize for an eternity before selecting a flick. But after a few weeks my eyes began to bug out, my roommate's VCR started to smoke, and late fees began to seriously eat into my burrito budget.

There was no way I could possibly view the entire list, so I eliminated movies in which media is a peripheral theme, movies about advertising, and any movie in which a reporter named Scoop gets canned. I stuck with the classics (which hold up pretty well) and threw in some personal choices to round out the list. I don't know about "best," but the following, in no particular order, are ten pretty darn compelling media movies and documentaries.

### **The Killing Fields**



Sam Waterston plays an American journalist who faces the fall of Cambodia and the terrifyingly violent new regime in order to get *the story*. Pretty standard war movie fare. But this ain't no Oliver Stone flag-waving, heart-thumping paean to American testosterone set to a Doors soundtrack. In this case, our *New York Times* reporter forms a compelling relationship with intrepid local journalist and translator Dith Pran (Haing S. Ngor), who is left behind to fight for his life against the Khmer Rouge when all the Western correspondents are air-lifted to safety. Unlike standard Hollywood pap, which would focus on the nebbish Waterston crusading to save his little Asian side-kick buddy, this story

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becomes Dith Pran's. We follow him through devastating circumstances as he bides his time and plots ways to survive. *The Killing Fields* does not make being a war correspondent look fun or glamorous. I rolled my eyes at the Hollywood ending, but then found out that it was a true story. OK, Hollywood wins this time.

## Broadcast News

I always suspected that it was better to be pretty than smart, and *Broadcast News* proves it. If scrappy little Holly Hunter can fall for vacuous, John Tesh-like pretty boy William Hurt over obviously intelligent, funny, if a tad frumpy Albert Brooks, then I'm not so crazy to think that underneath Keanu Reeves's blank, deer-in-the-headlights facade lies the mind of a Rhodes scholar. Right? *Broadcast News* is amusing on many levels and revealing as much for what it says about the personalities involved in television news as for what it says about television itself: style wins over substance and superior reporting doesn't guarantee you the anchor desk.



## Citizen Kane

I know *Citizen Kane* is supposed to be a thinly veiled characterization of William Randolph Hearst, but Hearst was a little before my time, and what I kept thinking about were the remarkable parallels with the life of Michael Jackson. Charles Foster Kane comes from humble beginnings and becomes impossibly wealthy. He creates a fantastic estate called Xanadu, complete with a zoo, and becomes a publishing powerhouse whose political aspirations are brought down after his affair with an aspiring singer is revealed. Michael Jackson comes from humble beginnings, builds a fantastic estate called Nevernever Land, complete with a zoo, and becomes a media phenomenon whose plans for musical domination are brought down after his affair with Webster is revealed. It's not a perfect correlation, but you get the gist. I don't know about best movie ever made, but *Citizen Kane* is an interesting story of how one wealthy man with vision can impact media.



## All The President's Men



This movie is a must-see for any aspiring print reporter. It's not only the anatomy of a certifiable scoop, it's the anatomy of *the* scoop of the century (that is, before Bubba started getting all Susie Bright on us with cigars in the White House). I don't think I've ever before seen Robert Redford in a movie in which he wasn't flashing those big white teeth at a sweet young thing quivering with love. No soft-focus Vaseline lens here, no sappy romance to drive the story. And this is from the days when Redford didn't suffer from a nice tight shot. The movie is remarkable in its ability to make the mundane drudgery of journalistic legwork fascinating without hyping it too much. Redford and Dustin Hoffman do admirable jobs of portraying nervous young turks with noses for news and a hunger for the big story. Watergate is a great hook, and it's easy to get sucked into the rhythm and politics of the newsroom as Woodward and Bernstein chase the story that rocks the nation.

### **Absence Of Malice**

This movie could also be called *Gidget Blunders onto the Set of 'All the President's Men' and Makes Every Rookie Mistake in the Book*. But that probably wouldn't fit on a marquee. Sally Field plays a nervous but spunky reporter (like Holly Hunter in *Broadcast News*--is journalism really populated with feisty dwarfish women who cry?). Among other goofs, she writes a story that results in the suicide of an innocent bystander and sleeps with the subject of a story. Granted, the subject is Paul Newman, but even so, she's awfully quick to hit the sheets with a potential murderer with Mafia connections. Great newsroom speeches from the paper's lawyers about all the news that's fit to print. I hear this movie is required viewing at some J-schools.

### **Network**

*Network* is so twisted I don't know which deranged subplot I love most. First, there's the respected news anchor who loses his job because of low ratings and basically goes nuts. His kooky behavior during his last on-air appearance gives the network a huge ratings win, so the nasty numbers-driven institution that fired him in the first place converts the network's news hour into a wacky evangelical game show hosted by the now certifiably crazy proselytizing former anchor. Then there's Faye Dunaway's character, the head of network programming (yet another tough

broad, but at least she's not dinky and doesn't cry). She's beautiful, tall, ruthless, and prone to screaming. She suggests programming like "*The Dykes*--a show about housewives hopelessly in love with their husbands' mistresses." She wrenches the network news away from the considerably older news producer, a former mentor and the only character with anything approaching integrity, then seduces him, exploits the crazy anchor, and "has orgasms like a man" (which she demonstrates by popping one off in about six seconds). This movie takes the critique of television as an evil medium to an extreme--or so it seems until you start to think about it, and then you realize that the scenario is not really extreme at all. Scary.

### **The People Vs. Larry Flynt**

Magazine start-ups are notoriously hard to make profitable, but take a guy with a vision of a new mass audience, clear editorial direction, and the First Amendment on his side, and you give new meaning to the phrase "money shot." Larry Flynt (Woody Harrelson), smut peddler and budding publisher, finds a niche untapped by *Playboy's* "highbrow" content and in the process becomes a crusader for free speech. The movie convincingly argues that the First Amendment is a beautiful thing even when it allows disgusting pigs like Larry Flynt to wrap themselves in the flag. Flynt is portrayed as a devoted husband to his underage, blue-haired, emaciated, drug-addicted wife (played by Courtney Love), and you can almost see redemption for the old pervert. Love here resembles the Courtney of pre-Hollywood-makeover days, and you gotta wonder how much acting is really involved. Bonus: James Carville in the same movie with Crispin Glover--I kid you not.

### **Manufacturing Consent**

Every freak with a conspiracy theory sounds the same, and they all seem to sit next to me on the bus. They drone on and on about things like how the media is owned by a handful of elites who use it to create a perception of the world that satisfies sellers and buyers of products. While the essence of what they're saying isn't preposterous, I recoil from their diatribes and find myself lulled into a catatonic stupor by their aggressive delivery. After seeing *Manufacturing Consent*, I know what all those loons lifted their monologues from--but this is the way the ideas were meant to be presented. Noam Chomsky, linguist, scholar, anti-war activist, and media gadfly, inspires and illuminates as he expounds on media as a propaganda tool in

democratic societies. *Manufacturing Consent* is two tapes long, and I was fully prepared to hook up a caffeine I.V. to stay awake, but this documentary is masterfully done and absolutely fascinating. I watched both tapes in one sitting and was so agitated I couldn't sleep well. The next day a co-worker asked me what I had done the night before. I heard my voice rising to a hysterical pitch as I described media complicity with the U. S. government in ignoring the genocide in East Timor, and saw my startled colleague go glassy-eyed and start edging toward the door.

### **Fear And Favor In The Newsroom**

It's a wonder that any investigative story ever gets published. If you want to ratchet up your disgust with the way media operates, and the censorship that occurs because no media outlet is ever truly free from the insidious influence of big business and big government, then you should watch this documentary. *Fear and Favor in the Newsroom* is a disheartening tale of journalists who get demoted and fired by major media organizations such as *The New York Times* because their reporting conflicts with the interests of their corporate employers. This is not a David and Goliath story in which David is vindicated for his inquisitive impulses. Rather, the lesson is that no individual, no matter how wily, can battle institutions and win. After efforts to expose sacred cows are squashed repeatedly, the passion for truth-telling inevitably gives way to self-censorship, and domination by powerful interests, the impulse for self-preservation, and filthy lucre combine to render freedom of the press an empty conceit. (Available from California Newsreel, (415) 621-6196.)

### **Tell The Truth And Run: George Seldes And The American Press**

I've learned that life isn't fair, that you can bump heads with powerful institutions only so many times before you retreat into disillusioned and cynical curmudgeonhood, and that we're all probably doomed to die in a global tribal war. But thankfully, the world isn't populated by a bunch of sullen, easily discouraged Mission dwellers. George Seldes, outspoken media critic and muckraking journalist, butted heads with newspaper censorship, tobacco money, and fascist regimes for nearly a century. He didn't let a little squabble with Mussolini get him down and he didn't let anyone shut him up. He reported the news that wasn't being printed in the mainstream press, filing

stories on corporate malfeasance, consumer fraud, and issues of social justice, and reaching the rank and file as well as the egghead liberal elite. But this documentary isn't a David and Goliath story either--just the tale of one man who remained independent, relentless, and uncompromised, and made a mark on American journalism. (Available for \$44.95 from Kovno Communications, 2600 10th Street, # 104, Berkeley, CA 94710. For rent from Reel.com, Movie Image, and The Video Room.)

*MiHi Ahn works at Mother Jones Magazine. She could be described as dwarfish but she's only cried at work once.*

*Photos courtesy of the Film Arts Foundation Library*

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