

[Home](#) > [Entertainment](#) > [Film](#)



When the news is bad for women

By Malcolm Johnson
June 10 2002

Television's talking heads, though often blonde, seldom have the spun-sugar hairdo sported by Angelina Jolie in *Life or Something Like It*, the new romantic comedy about a rising, Seattle reporter. But time was when an important manifestation of a liberated working woman was less about hairstyle than having the skills to scoop her cocky brothers. Perhaps the most famous embodiment of the struggle is Lois Lane, who considered herself a better news-hawk for the *Daily Planet* than that fumbler Clark Kent.



Nicole Kidman won plaudits as a woman willing to kill to make it in television, but Gus Van Sant's 1995 *To Die For* was not much interested in the medium.

But the movies of the 1930s, '40s and even the '50s presented more authentic female reporters.

Probably the best of the female scribes was originally a man. Hildy Johnson was the ace of Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur's *The Front Page*, played by Pat O'Brien in the 1930 version of the Broadway hit. But in 1940, Hildy became a woman in Howard Hawks' *His Girl Friday*, played with great verve by Rosalind Russell.

Bette Davis battled George Brent for the story in the 1935 *Front Page Woman*, and Jean Arthur made a

first-rate reporter in Frank Capra's *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (soon to be revised as *Mr Deeds*, with Adam Sandler in the title role and Winona Ryder as a tabloid dirt-digger).

Barbara Stanwyck took over the reporter's role in a 1941 piece of Capra populism, *Meet John Doe*, starring Gary Cooper.

Even Katharine Hepburn got into the news business in George Stevens' 1942 *Woman of the Year*.

The female reporter was a staple of major releases and B-pictures in the black-and-white era, and Glenda Farrell landed her own series beginning with *Smart Blonde* in 1936. Farrell, a classic, wisecracking type, made seven Torchy pictures, with Lola Lane and Jane Wyman taking the part for one picture each (*Torchy Blane in Panama* and *Torchy Blane ... Playing With Dynamite*, respectively).

Farrell also excelled as the tough-talking reporter investigating strange doings in 1933's classic *The Mystery of the Wax Museum*, directed by Michael Curtiz.

But with the growing power of television, movies about hotshot, female, print journalists would almost disappear.

In 1981, Sally Field played a print reporter who discredits an innocent man played by Paul Newman in Sydney Pollack's *Absence of Malice*. In 1994, Julia Roberts played a junior reporter to Nick Nolte's senior columnist in *I Love Trouble*. But, despite the powers of these stars when otherwise employed, neither picture fared well financially. And *Brenda Starr* with Brooke Shields sat unreleased from 1986 to 1992, when it bombed.

The women who loom large in journalism today are in television, not print, but few movies about starry anchors or gritty war correspondents have scored. The best is James Bridges' 1979 *The China Syndrome*, with Jane Fonda as a features reporter striving to break into hard news.

Somewhat less penetrating was Fonda's go at playing another television reporter in Pollack's 1979 *The Electric Horseman*, with Robert Redford as a fallen rodeo star.

Redford also co-starred in the film about TV reporting with the most potential, Jon Avnet's 1996 *Up Close and Personal*, with Michelle Pfeiffer as the ambitious nobody who rises from secretary to weather woman to reporter and beyond, surpassing her mentor. But the screenplay by Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, based on the rise and fall of Jessica Savitch, was softened to pulp.

Switching Channels, the 1988 remake of *His Girl Friday*, with Kathleen Turner as a top TV reporter about to marry outside the business, was nothing but a bust.

Nicole Kidman won plaudits as a woman willing to kill to make it in television, but Gus Van Sant's 1995 *To Die For* was not much interested in the medium.

Probably the best depictions of women in television came in Sidney Lumet's 1976 *Network* and James L. Brooks 1987 *Broadcast News*, but Faye Dunaway and Holly Hunter played producers, not newswomen.

Katrin Cartlidge is a fierce, British network reporter in Danis Tanovic's Oscar-winning *No Man's Land*, but it's not the main story.

The life of a woman such as CNN's top-rate Christiane Amanpour is waiting to be told.

-Los Angeles Times

 [Printer friendly version](#)  [Email to a friend](#)

Copyright © 2002 The Age Company Ltd