

P.A.C. O'CONNOR ~ INTRODUCTION TO JOURNALISM

WEEK 7

RADIO, PRESS AND TV JOURNALISM IN FILM



The War of the Worlds (1938)



Citizen Kane (1941)



All the President's Men (1976)



Network (1976)

Journalists play well in fictional genres because their work overlaps with so many roles: spy, detective, crusading hero, washed-up failure, drunk, victim, hack, mercenary, cynical observer, maverick, oracle (with eyeshade), blackmailer, tyrant. This week we'll look at the role of journalists and their masters in a 'reality' radio broadcast, and in three films: two based on the press, one on broadcast television news.

1. HALLOWEEN RADIO PANIC: ~ OCTOBER 30 1938

Trenton Evening Times NJ: October 31 1938

In October 1938, CBS radio broadcast a Mercury Theatre performance of the H.G. Wells novel 'War of the Worlds', directed by Orson Welles. The programme set off one of the greatest media panics in modern history.* As the voice of the newscaster Carl Phillips, actor Frank Readick gave an all-too-convincing performance as a bewildered reporter, culminating in the exclamation "Good Lord! They're turning into flames!" and an announcement over background screams: "Ladies and gentlemen, due to circumstances beyond our control..." Broadcast live, without a hitch, by a dozen people acting to a single microphone with alien SFX and an entire orchestra cued bang on time, this was a sensation and a disaster in one.

Around 8.12 p.m. on October 30, Halloween, listeners began 'dial twisting' (the 1930s equivalent of channel-hopping), between radio stations. Few initially tuned into CBS for Welles's 'live newscast' reporting a 'meteorite landing at Grover's Mill', New Jersey. Those who did shared reporter Carl Philips' worry and puzzlement: "...doesn't look much like a meteorite to me. At least, not the meteors that I've seen. Looks more like a huge cylinder..." As the 'cylinder' took on a life of its own, screams and gasps rang out and tentacles were 'seen'. Around 6 million listeners tuned in nationwide, of whom about 1 million put a handkerchief over their head to protect them from 'poison gas' and left home. Some prayed for divine intervention but from whom? Had aliens really landed? Had the Germans invaded, as expected ~ or was it the Japanese?



2. **CITIZEN KANE, (1941) DIR. ORSON WELLES**

One reason *Citizen Kane* has always been such a critical success is that it lays into the type of person critics never get to criticize: the people who employ them. Another reason is that it shows an extremely wealthy man living an extremely unhappy life: this is always a satisfying and popular notion to most people, simply because most people are poor. The idea that wealth makes you happy has never been a winner.

Citizen Kane is undeniably a great movie, highly rated on all points – acting, direction, pioneering cinematography (Gregg Toland), expressionistic lighting, sound techniques, and the overall assurance of its director, star, and producer: all of whom were Orson Welles, then aged 25, who also co-scripted the film on a middling budget of \$800,000. However, *Citizen Kane*'s critical success was not matched at the box office due to limited distribution and delays engineered by one of the models for the character of Charles Foster Kane, William Randolph Hearst. Both film and director himself were subject to newspaper smears and FBI investigations because of the parallels with Hearst, and Orson Welles was never allowed to build on his early success and promise.

CITIZEN KANE	WILLIAM RANDOLPH HEARST
Son of poor boarding-house proprietors.	Born into wealth
Owner: New York <i>Inquirer</i>	Owner: San Francisco <i>Examiner</i> ; New York <i>Journal</i>
Multi-millionaire newspaper publisher, and wielder of public opinion, a “Kubla Khan” living in “Xanadu” (from the Coleridge poem)	Press lord, “yellow journalist,” influential politico, living in “Hearst Castle” at San Simeon, Calif.
Aspirant for Presidency: runs as independent candidate for New York State Governorship	Political aspirant to Presidency: tries and fails to win gubernatorial race for New York State.
Bitter affair/marriage with dud performer Susan Alexander (Hollywood’s Hays Code forbade references to extra-marital affair)	A beloved mistress - a young, and successful silent film actress Marion Davies
Kane bought Susan an opera house, although her ambition was to be a light singer	Hearst bought Cosmopolitan Pictures to promote Marion Davies as a serious actress.

Hearst became convinced that he was being slandered by RKO and Orson Welles’ film when it was first previewed, hence the pressure. In fact Charles Foster Kane is a composite of quite a variety of influential Americans including *Time Magazine*’s Henry Luce, Chicago press lord Harold McCormick, financier J.P. Morgan, and Tammany Hall (NYC) boss Charles Murphy. At the start of the film, the *News on the March!* sequence is based on Time Inc’s 1930s “March of Time” cinema newsreel series. *News on the March!* is authentically grainy and archival and Kane’s life-story is similarly ‘authentic’, but *News on the March!* tells us nothing, only adding to the mystery of Kane’s experience: in itself a fundamental criticism of journalism – that journalism only scratches the surface. *News on the March!* kick-starts Orson Welles’s investigation of Kane’s life in the newsy style that permeates the film. The newsreel signals an examination not only of journalistic values,

but of the relationship between journalism and society: how much does journalism really tell us about ourselves? How much do we want journalism to tell us? And does it have the capacity to tell us anything we didn't already know, especially when its practitioners are themselves so flawed?

Orson Welles came from a comfortable background. In *Citizen Kane* he turns his unsparing vision on his own kind, his own social group. the film is not only about the corruption of power but about the failure of wealth, power, eminence, importance – any of the long list of things that people want out of life – to mean anything beyond contemporary esteem.

In Kane himself, Welles embodies the limits of journalism and the journalistic world-view. Kane has everything going for him. He's witty, decisive, good-looking, urbane and influential and he has pots of money. But Kane is ultimately a hollow creature: the film is thus a chronicle of Kane's desperate attempts to evade his awareness of his own spiritual failure. Herein lies Kane's most painful flaw: not only is he empty, but he is acutely conscious of his emptiness. This is the curse of insight and Kane does his best to distract himself. He employs mediocrities. His mistress is a moody airhead. He tries to keep it light, become a man of the people, but his politics don't stand up to scrutiny either in the media or in electioneering.

Kane makes his fortune by championing the 'nobodies' who buy his newspapers, but he wants more than their awe. He wants them to like him and vote for him. He dreams of projecting himself onto the national political stage but when a rival newspaper exposes his 'love nest' with a second-rate singer, his political career comes to an end. Then comes the 1929 crash. Kane's sure touch seems to desert him. He begins to self-destruct: a business failure, a political failure, a marital failure. Even his mistress is a failure. Kane's final years are morose and regretful. He dies alone, with the word "Rosebud" on his lips ~ providing the "McGuffin" that gives the film its ostensible purpose: a reporter's enquiry into the meaning of "Rosebud" and why Kane should have said it. The 'anti-McGuffin', i.e., the fact that almost makes the investigation pointless, is that Kane was alone when he said "Rosebud" with his dying breath: nobody heard him say it except the cinema audience.

3. ***ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN* [1976] ROBERT REDFORD, DUSTIN HOFFMAN**

WILLIAM GOLDMAN'S SCRIPT: http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/all_the_presidents_men.html

After the press broke the Watergate story, other institutions of the Government joined in the investigation and were instrumental in bringing Nixon's lieutenants to justice and forcing Nixon from office. They included: the Watergate Special Prosecutors, Archibald Cox and Leon Jaworski, U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica who required that the burglars, particularly James McCord, cooperate with the Special Prosecutor or face heavy sentences, and the U.S. Congress, whose televised impeachment hearings led to the vote of the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives to recommend that Nixon be impeached. Facing impeachment, Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974.

THE EX-JOURNALIST Paul Schindler,* sees *All the President's Men* as the greatest journalism film of its day: 'well-written and meticulously researched and loving in its depiction of its journalist heroes, due, it seems certain, to the fact that Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward wrote the film. Veteran Alan J. Pakula then realized their vision with care and aplomb.

For those too young to recall, Woodward and Bernstein were a pair of *Washington Post* reporters who covered Watergate when it appeared to be just what President Richard Nixon said it was, "a second-rate burglary." Their tenacity broke the case open and brought down a president.

This movie is one of the few journalism films in history that had a perceptible effect, both on the field of journalism and the public perception of journalists. In combination with the book of the same name, it made heroes of journalists – and goats and liars of most public figures depicted, and so by implication, most public figures. It affected the field of journalism in two ways. First, it brought an entire generation of fresh, eager recruits into the field. Alas, it also taught them that there was scandal everywhere. As a result, journalists have uncovered 13 of the last 10 scandals in Washington. That is to say, they see scandal everywhere, even in innocent mistakes.

The film itself was a masterpiece of recreation. Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford spent time at *The Post* and with Woodward and Bernstein, and it shows in their lifelike portrayals, which capture the nuance of journalism. Amazingly, for a Hollywood film, it manages to capture some of the slogging and monotony, the combination of luck and persistence often required for good journalism. *The Post* newsroom in the film was a precise copy of the original – so precise that it included “desk litter” imported from Washington.

Reporters have never looked better, smarter, more noble – or more handsome (well, at least in the case of Redford). Whether *All The President's Men* has been a net positive for American journalism remains to be seen.” ** <http://www.schindler.org/movie.shtml>

4. **“I’M MAD AS HELL AND I’M NOT GOING TO PUT UP WITH IT ANY MORE!”**
NETWORK [1976] DIR. PADDY CHAYEFSKY, STARRING PETER FINCH, FAYE DUNAWAY



IMAGINE: YOU’RE WATCHING THE EVENING NEWS AND THE ANNOUNCER SAYS THAT HE’S BEEN SACKED AND THAT HE’S GOING TO COMMIT SUICIDE ON TV IN A WEEK’S TIME. **Intrigued, you return to the same news channel the following night and find the same announcer still on air,**

but now he's really telling it like it is. Suddenly you and millions like you start tuning it to someone who isn't following the script, who appears to have a hot line to truths you never thought you'd hear on a commercial news station but who, at the same time, appears to be, not exactly insane but, maybe, one or two sandwiches short of the full picnic. That's more or less the story of *NETWORK*, surely one of the best films ever made about the broadcast news industry battle for ratings, audiences and advertising airtime. The newscaster in question, Howard Beale of UBS, used to be a big-time anchorman until his wife died and he let himself go. Eventually, he loses his audience, gets sacked, and then in one of his last scheduled appearances threatens to kill himself in prime time. Then he starts hearing voices and speaking like a messiah and because he's getting higher ratings than ever, is kept on as an anchorman with a difference...