

Network: Still "mad as hell" after 30 years

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UBS is bought by the Communications Corporation of America (CCA), the new executive senior vice president of UBS, the dictatorial Frank Hackett (Robert Duval)—whose sole personal ambition and professional drive is to increase network ratings—plans to make some changes. One of them is to fire the once-revered but now over-the-hill news anchorman Howard Beale (Peter Finch) because of his low ratings. It falls to Max Shumacher (William Holden), the respected "old school" news division executive, to tell his friend Howard the bad news.

In an early scene, we see Max and Howard late at night in a bar, quite drunk. At one point, Howard says that he is going to kill himself on the air. The following humorous, macabre dialogue transpires:

Max: You'll get a helluva rating. I'll guarantee you that. A 50 share, easy.

Howard: You think so?

Max: Sure. We could make a series out of it.

"Suicide of the Week." Ah hell, why limit ourselves? "Execution of the Week."

Howard: "Terrorist of the Week."

Max: I love it! Suicides, assassinations, mad bombers, Mafia hitmen, automobile smash

ups. "The Death Hour!" A great Sunday

night show for the whole family.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the release of the film *Network* (Lumet, 1976), and to commemorate the occasion a two-disk DVD has been released. It has also been reported that CBS and George Clooney are planning a live TV remake of *Network* (de Moraes, 2005). When the remake airs, it will certainly be viewed by millions, many of whom will eventually seek out the film version, either to view it for the first time or to enjoy it again. Though many fine films exist that critique the roles that media are often made to play, *Network* is, for me, far and away the best. It is also a film that holds great potential for being taken up as part of a critical media literacy pedagogy. What I mainly wish to do in this column is pique the interest of readers who have never seen *Network* and encourage those who have to see it again. I will not summarize the entire plot and describe all the major scenes. Rather, I will explain the film's basic premise, discuss a few key scenes, and suggest ways that *Network* can be taken up as an important text to engage students in thinking critically about media—particularly television.

Now that's entertainment

Network is set in 1975 (before cable TV had become omnipresent) and concerns the United Broadcast System (UBS)—a television network that has been finishing last in the ratings. When

Schumacher, and she persuades Hackett to keep Beale on the air to capitalize on the rising ratings.

Howard is kept on the air, but he acquires a "prophetic" persona when one night he experiences a life-altering spiritual vision—or mental breakdown. (The movie brilliantly plays on Howard's mad/sane ambiguity.) Howard de-

scribes this vision on the air, explaining that he heard "a Voice" that commanded him to use his presence on television to "tell the truth" about the world. He believes that he is channeling the truth about the world through the Voice. In one of the most famous scenes, we see and hear Howard muttering in the rain and then making his way into the UBS building and onto the set where, drenched, bleary-eyed, and dressed in pajamas and a raincoat, he goes on the air and delivers a thundering tirade about the sad, crazy state of the world. After describing job losses, rampant crime, environmental pollution, and so on, he tells viewers that for anything to change in the world, they will first have to get mad. In a ranting delivery, he yells into the camera:

I want you to get mad! I don't want you to protest. I don't want you to riot. I don't want you to write your congressman because I wouldn't know what to tell you to write. I don't know what to do about the depression and the inflation and the Russians and the crime in the street. All I know is first you've got to get mad. You've got to say "I'm a human being, goddammit! My life has value!" So, I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window, open it, and stick your head out and yell, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any more!"

After Howard's tirade, viewers are presented with a classic scene depicting a multistoried building where dozens of people gradually end up yelling repeatedly from their windows and on fire escapes, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this any more!"

Of course, the ratings of the "news" program go through the roof, reports reveal that in cities all across the United States thousands of

The scene cuts to the next evening's news broadcast. After a reporter's story about the second assassination attempt on U.S. President Gerald Ford, the camera focuses on Howard, who announces that he is retiring in two weeks "because of poor ratings." He then says,

Since this show is the only thing I had going for me in my life, I have decided to kill myself. I'm going to blow my brains out right on this program a week from today. So, tune in next Tuesday. That should give the public relations people a week to promote the show. We ought to get a hell of a rating out of that. Fifty-share, easy.

It was still the era of live broadcasting (no time delays like now), so millions saw the broadcast, as well as the ensuing efforts to pry Howard physically from his desk until a "technical difficulties" screen finally appears (but not before Howard lands a solid left hook to someone's jaw).

Pandemonium breaks loose in the UBS building. Reporters converge outside. Phones ring off the hook. The other three networks immediately report the Howard Beale story. Frank Hackett is furious and threatens to take control of the news division from Max Shumacher. It appears that UBS is about to sink even lower in the ratings.

A star is born

Appearances, however, are often deceiving. Howard Beale's on-air lunacy sends the ratings sky high, and that strikes Diane Christenson (Faye Dunaway) like a bolt of profit-potential lightning. Diane is Hackett's vice president of programming, and audience share and ratings are the alpha and omega of her existence. She's young, beautiful, completely straightforward, honest, and ruthless. She is obsessed with shaking up the network's programming and creating a hit that will pull the entire network out of the hole, and Howard Beale seems to be a godsend. Through a series of plot twists and turns, Diane manages to usurp control of the news division from Max

people have been yelling out of their windows, Frank Hackett and Diane Christenson are ecstatic, and a (mad as hell) star is born.

Fast forward: Back to the future

Howard stays on the air, and his "news" show evolves into what we now call "infotainment." The format mirrors that of a late-night talk show, with an orchestra, a live audience, an elaborate set, sidekicks (such as Sybil the Soothsayer, who predicts the news), and an announcer who enthusiastically introduces Howard as "the Mad Prophet of the Airwaves." Howard dresses in a black tuxedo and delivers his gospel of "truth" about the state of the world in a ranting monologue that always ends when he whips himself into such a frenzy that he collapses unconscious onto the stage as the audience cheers (in response to "applause" signs).

Diane Christenson capitalizes on Howard's popularity by creating other sensationalistic programs, such as one that features the exploits of The Ecumenical Liberation Army (ELA), an "insurrectionary sect" that is much like a radical group of the time, the Symbionese Liberation Army, infamous for the Patty Hearst kidnapping. The ELA has also committed the same kind of crime, kidnapping a young heiress, brainwashing her, involving her in a bank robbery, which they filmed as it was happening. Howard Beale's "Network News Hour," however, continues to be the main attraction, but as Howard settles into his role as the Mad Prophet of the Airwaves, his critique of what's wrong with the world finally focuses on what he envisions to be the prime source of most of the problems of contemporary life: television. During one tirade, he tells his viewers, "So, you listen to me. Listen to me! Television is not the truth. Television is a goddamned amusement park. Television is a circus, a carnival, a traveling troupe of acrobats, storytellers, dancers, singers, jugglers, sideshow freaks, lion tamers, and football players."

ers. We're in the boredom-killing business. We deal in illusions, man. None of it's true. But you people sit there day after day, night after night, all ages, colors, creeds—we're all you know. You're beginning to believe the illusions we're spinning here. You're beginning to think the tube is reality and that your own lives are unreal. You do whatever the tube tells you. You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube, you even think like the tube. This is mass madness, you maniacs. In God's name, you people are the real thing. We are the illusion. So turn off your television sets. Turn them off now. Turn them off right now. Turn them off and leave them off. Turn them off right in the middle of the sentence I am speaking to you now—turn them off! [Howard then collapses as the audience cheers at the performance.]

This scene marks a turning point in the film as Howard's critiques gradually become more threatening to the very network that broadcasts his news program.

At this point, I will use that most classic of "book report" maneuvers and recommend that if you wish to find out what happens in the rest of the film, you'll have to see it for yourself. As I mentioned earlier, my intent here is to pique your interest, and I have vigilantly avoided including any "spoilers" in what I have described.

Paranoiac or prophetic? (And is there any difference?)

At the beginning of this column, I said that I think *Network* holds great potential for being taken up as part of a critical media literacy pedagogy, and now I would like to give an example of what I meant. One way to use the film with students is to have them view it and discuss whether or not they think the film was prophetic or paranoiac in its critique of the future of television programming. For this question to make sense, however, a context has to be created. In other words, this is a film from 1976, and students would need to know how the film was received in its day. This could be accomplished by finding reviews (on the Web) to discover the film's critical

Along with discovering how *Network* was critically received in its time, students might also be engaged in a process of reading current interpretations and reactions to the film by analyzing "reviewer comments" to the film on the Internet Movie Data Base website (www.imdb.com). What students would discover is that nearly everyone who posted a review (over 150 people) expressed the opinion that the film was prophetic, and most of the reviews are 9 or 10 stars (out of 10). Students could also be directed to more recent articles that refer to *Network* (e.g., Dowd, 2001; Ebert, 2000; Hirschberg, 2005; Howell, 2006; Jessell, 2000; Shales, 1995).

Once students understand how sensationalistic and popular the film was in its time, they can be asked if they think it was indeed prophetic. For example, students could focus on the scene that I described earlier in which Max and Howard imagine programs for "The Death Hour." They could be asked about how farfetched these macabre ideas seem in the context of today's fare of "reality" shows and what appears on the nightly news. Students could also be asked if they agree with some of the critiques that Howard Beale makes in his tirades. (For example, do students agree that most people who watch television "dress like the tube," "eat like the tube," "think like the tube," and so on? Do they believe television exerts such power over most people?)

I have merely scratched the surface of the dozens of activities that can be designed around *Network*, and I would like to end this column with an invitation to you, the readers. I hope I have piqued your interest in this great film. Now, I'd like to hear from you. I'd like you to e-mail me at jtrier@email.unc.edu with your suggestions for how the film could be taken up as part of critical media literacy practice. When I receive enough suggestions from readers, I will write another column based on those ideas. (Include in your e-mail if you wish to keep your identity anonymous or if I can quote you directly.)

Involving students in searching with LexisNexis is itself a fine media literacy activity.)

What students would discover is that *Network* (1976) opened to mixed reviews. For example, Michener (1976) observed that advanced airings of the movie "provoked cries of 'Impossible!' from TV biggies." Michener speculated that "many neutral observers may well dismiss the movie as the raving of [movie writer] Paddy [Chayefsky] at his most paranoid and poetically licentious" (p. 107). Eder (1977) called *Network* a "foolish film" with "cardboard ducks" for characters, and in his opinion the film portrayed the general public as "sheep" (p. 11). Shales (1978) reported that Paul Friedmann, then the producer of NBC's *Today Show*, called *Network* "outrageous and heavy-handed" and declared that television as a medium "is simply not as powerful as Paddy Chayefsky thinks it is" (p. E1). Canby (1976) thought *Network* offered "wickedly distorted views of the way television looks, sounds, and indeed, is" and, because of these "distorted views," Canby predicted "that a lot of people will sniff at the film on the grounds that a number of the absurdities Mr. Chayefsky and Mr. Lumet chronicle so carefully couldn't happen, which is to miss the point of what they're up to" (p. 39).

Some critics did not miss Chayefsky and Lumet's point and reviewed the film favorably. For example, Michener (1976) went on to give his own opinion of *Network*. He saw the film as "a barrage of violently funny shocks of recognition" that blended "realism with farce, reality with fantasy" (p. 107). Shales (1978) also praised the film, describing it as "ferociously entertaining" and stating that "it has to be regarded as a seminal film in the new media-consciousness of the 70s" (p. E1). Shales expressed a reaction that has become the most common one to the film, finding it to be "prophetic on a number of points" and giving as an example a contemporary (1978) TV *Guide* story about CBS's "plans to do a series, *Voices of Guns*, based on the exploits of the Symbionese Liberation Army."

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LITERACY SKILLS FOR LIFE (AND HEALTH)

If you'd like to help your students understand the value of literacy skills, a short lesson on food labels might be useful. Learning to read the nutrition facts labels on food packages can be an education in itself.

For instance, the labels will tell you that there are three servings in a bag of popcorn, and four servings in a pint of ice cream. The number of servings per container is printed in regular text and separated from the information about the number of calories in a serving by a thick, black line. The nutritional information about what is in each serving is printed below that thick, black line in bold text. It's what draws your eye on the package.

In order to understand how many calories are consumed when you eat a whole bag of popcorn or lean against the fridge eating ice cream from the carton, you need to multiply the number of calories in a serving by the number of servings in the container. Some people may not realize that the number of calories or amount of fat that appears prominently at the top of the label is far less than the actual amount they consume if they eat the entire contents.

The way the text is presented would make an interesting critical literacy lesson, and could lead to discussions on many other topics where the presentation of the information influences understanding.