

ACT FOUR

10 BuzzFeed stories the company should turn into feature films



By [Alyssa Rosenberg](#)

August 11, 2014 at 12:19 p.m. EDT

CNN's [Brian Stelter](#) reported this morning that BuzzFeed, the multimedia company that got famous for its viral content and used the profits from those enterprises to fund a vigorous journalism enterprise, has raised \$50 million from [Andreessen Horowitz](#). Of particular interest to me is the news that BuzzFeed is going to sink some of that money into its video operation, including [possibly developing feature films](#).

The idea that you can pivot from journalism to the movies is hardly a new one. In 2011, [New York Magazine](#) signed with [ICM](#) with the idea that the agency, which also represents the [New York Times](#) in the same capacity, would help [New York](#) broker deals to turn its feature-length journalism into movies and television shows. Tonight, [Sundance](#) is premiering a television show based on [New York's Approval Matrix](#) feature. (The Approval Matrix was originally created by now-New Yorker television critic [Emily Nussbaum](#), who is not involved in the show.) [Condé Nast Entertainment](#) works in-house to develop projects based on that company's extensive archives from publications such as [GQ](#) and [Wired](#).

Where BuzzFeed differs from these earlier models, though, is that it appears to be vertically integrating. BuzzFeed does not need to hire someone to broker deals for it with a studio, which would then produce movies and television based on BuzzFeed content. BuzzFeed already has a video operation and studio space, so it can make its own projects and keep all of the profits from them in-house.

And while BuzzFeed does not yet have archives as deep as the [New Yorker's](#) or [Vanity Fair's](#), the company has turned out a lot of good long-form content since its turn in that direction. Here are 10 stories that would make fascinating movies, and that could help BuzzFeed differentiate itself not just from other publishers, but other movie studios.

1. **“Was An American College Student Kidnapped By North Korea?” by Leslie Anne Jones:** Hollywood’s approach to North Korea has tended to be broad at best — think “Team America: World Police” or the upcoming Seth Rogen-James Franco project “The Interview,” in which two journalists are recruited by the CIA to try to kill Kim Jong Un. Jones’s piece does not try to assuage our unanswered questions by offering up a crude caricature of a society that remains so stubbornly impervious to American understanding. Rather, the piece sits with a family’s terrible uncertainty as they try to figure out what happened to their son.

2. **“What Does Pussy Riot Mean Now?” by Miriam Elder:** Most movies about activists tend to lead up to their climactic fights or sacrifices. Elder, profiling members of the Russian dissident band who were imprisoned for a brief performance in a church, takes the opposite approach, trying to figure out what happens after they are released and leave the country where they grew up and where they tried to hard to change politics in the only way they knew how.

3. **“Jennifer Lawrence And The History Of Cool Girls,” by Anne Helen Petersen:** We have plenty of movies about aging male actors and rock stars in extremis, so why not flip the script and look at a young woman on the way up, navigating not just the expectations for what her body looks like but the opportunities to curry public affection by pretending not to care? Petersen’s look at one of the enduring tropes of Hollywood offers plenty of examples and eras to choose from. A movie could pick any one of them to look at how these contradictory ideas create brief windows for women to break out from the pack and seem more human than their fellow actresses, at least for a little while.

4. **“The Sad, Strange, True Story Of Sandy Allen, The Tallest Woman In The World,” by Sandra Allen:** Characters with physical and intellectual disabilities remain tremendously rare in American movies. And when they do, their conditions are generally presented as things to overcome, rather than aspects of their lives that make them who they are. Sandy Allen took the chance to live life on a bigger stage than might have been available to her had she been shorter, even if that chance was available to her because people found her odd. Telling her story would flip the traditional script, and it would also be a fascinating story about media culture.

5. **“Remade in Taiwan: Manny Ramirez’s Season Abroad,” by Sam Graham-Felsen:** Is there a more exhausted trope than the triumphal sports movie? I would love to see an adaptation of Graham-Felsen’s piece about the famous slugger’s exile to Taiwan. It is a story of decline rather than victory. And it is a story about the place sports occupy in the larger culture of a place, in this case, both Boston and Taiwan.

6. **“36 Hours On The Fake Campaign Trail With Donald Trump,” by McKay Coppins:** It is an utter tragedy that Philip Seymour Hoffman is not still alive so that he and P.T. Anderson could re-team to adopt Coppins’s story about the surreal world of Donald Trump, an egomaniac who has plenty in common with L. Ron Hubbard, skewered by Hoffman and Anderson in “The Master.” But even without them, American pop culture could use a movie version of this story, which is even stranger than the fantasias Shonda Rhimes spins in “Scandal” or the dour pessimism Beau Willimon shows off in “House of Cards.”

7. **“Why I Bought A House In Detroit For \$500,” by Drew Philip:** This story would make for a risky adaptation: With the wrong director and wrong script, it would be awfully easy for it to slip into saccharine “white savior” territory. But done right, maybe by a director like Richard Linklater, who cares more about capturing individual moments than crafting a convenient narrative, this could be a satisfying story about building a house that does not reach too far for neat lessons.

8. **“Looking For Tom Lehrer, Comedy’s Mysterious Genius,” by Ben Smith and Anita Badejo:** This would hardly be the first time pop culture has taken a look at a genius who withdrew from the stage of which he was master — the Bobby Fischer industry is alive and kicking. Tom Lehrer’s decision to embrace a life of intense privacy and to stop writing and performing his wickedly funny, intensely political comedy songs, is a story about the sort of inscrutable personality these movies tend to treat as supreme mysteries. It is also a story of the evolution of the American left and of American comedy culture. A movie that balanced these elements would be fascinating.

9. **“Kill Me Now: The Troubled Life And Complicated Death Of Jana Van Voorhis,” by Jaime Joyce:** I have read this feature, about a woman with imagined ailments who enlisted assisted-suicide advocates to help her die, multiple times, and it is never less disturbing. It might make a very effective horror film about the effects of social isolation, good intentions and the idea that we should believe people when they tell their own stories, no matter how much we might be inclined to doubt them.

10. **“The AIDS Granny In Exile,” by Kathleen McLaughlin:** The United States has a long tradition of embracing, even if only in a minor way, stories about political ferment in the United Kingdom. It would be nice of us to turn our attention to other countries that loom large in the world stage, particularly when the main character is not a white character in a foreign land. A biopic about Gao Yaojie would come at the AIDS crisis from a very different angle. She had to fight against Chinese government rhetoric that suggested that the disease was a symptom of foreign decadence, even as government practices in plasma collection were spreading HIV infections. The story does not have a conventional happy ending: Gao lives in the United States now and subsists on donations. That sort of honest pessimism would be a tonic.

Note: This post has been edited to clarify Emily Nussbaum’s role in creating the magazine feature, but to make clear that she is not involved with the show.