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From the Newsroom to the Television screen: the blurred line between news and entertainment

By Randy Minkoff · September 26, 2019

In 1974, the Mary Tyler Moore Show aired an episode that became one of its most iconic moments. The classic episode featured inept anchorman Ted Baxter, played by Ted Knight, finally meeting his long-time hero, CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite, whom at the time had been known as the “most trusted man in America.” Their meeting sparked big laughs and even bigger ratings.

Could something like that have happened today, in an era where journalists are under attack from the administration for contributing to the spread of “fake news?” Was it ethical for Cronkite to slide from news to entertainment for that appearance?

Since that time, numerous print and broadcast journalists have appeared in movies, mini-series, dramas and sitcoms. They play themselves – or something resembling their role as a reporter, interviewer or news anchor – some recent examples being CNN anchor Christiane Amanpour in “Iron Man 2,” MSNBC host Brian Williams in “30 Rock” and CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer in multiple movies including the James Bond movie “Skyfall.”

Possibly the most frequent use of this integration of real television anchors and narrative TV storytelling came from Netflix’s acclaimed [“House of Cards,”](https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/house-of-cards/cast/512896/) (<http://:%20https://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/house-of-cards/cast/512896/>) a satirical look at America’s political scene. The show features CNN’s Ashleigh Banfield, Soledad O’Brien and John King,

NBC's Kelly O'Donnell, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, Fox News Sean Hannity and "60 Minutes" correspondent Morley Safer as themselves.

Does that compromise their image? Did it make them more like Will Ferrell's "Ron Burgundy" than Bob Woodward?

Ross Werland, a former editor at the Chicago Tribune, admitted seeing current reporters portraying themselves on the big screen is risky.

"I get very uncomfortable at seeing reporters and anchors playing themselves on screen," said Werland in an email interview. "It leaves an impression that journalism is for sale, that a reporter will sell out to a commercial enterprise. And, that is not an impression we would ever want news consumers to have."

Werland makes an important point: how can a journalist be taken seriously by the public if one day he or she is grilling a city official for corruption and then the next is seen pressing Iron Man for answers in a news conference?

Nate Jones, [for Vulture \(https://www.vulture.com/2016/03/journalists-should-not-play-themselves-in-movies.html\)](https://www.vulture.com/2016/03/journalists-should-not-play-themselves-in-movies.html), made some strong comments particularly in the critically-planned Batman vs. Superman movie where CNN's Anderson Cooper played a reporter.

"These reporters, who hold themselves as stewards of the public trust, sold themselves out for a movie that turned out to be the comic book equivalent of *The Room*. That's right, they sold themselves out. As much as the dignity of the profession is repeated and outrageously violated every day (if not every hour). At least in theory, remains an institution with a moral commitment to the public: To report the news, fairly and honestly; to expose injustice; to offer readers insights into a world they may not know. Is it naïve to think that, by signing on to read fake news reports about rampaging aliens threatening a fictional city, these reporters have subsumed those noble goals in order to promote their own personal brands?"

Larry Shainman, currently a speechwriter for the Department of Transportation, and a former TV reporter in Cleveland and Washington D.C., recalled he was hired to play an extra in Bob Fosse's "Lenny" in 1973.

"I actually got hired before I got my first TV job," recalled Shainman in an email interview. "My news director at the time was not happy when he found out. He asked, 'What if a fire broke out on the set when two people died. Would you be an extra or a reporter?'"

Shainman, who also worked on the staff of former Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kan., posed a more modern scenario. What would happen if you had been hired to work on a Harvey Weinstein-produced film; would that make it unethical for a reporter to cover the “Me Too” story?

Former WGN radio news director Tom Petersen noted he never worked at a broadcast outlet where reporters were banned from doing movies. But, he agreed it is a “credibility” issue for journalists, particularly those on television.

“I think it detracts from their credibility and tends to make them more showbiz than they already are. The line between entertainment and news is already a little fuzzy on TV,” Petersen said in an interview.

It also raises questions regarding on or off the record information. Suppose a reporter/actor heard inside information about a problem on the set? Would confidentiality apply or would you be ethically mandated to report it to your station, website or newspaper? Why invite that kind of dilemma into your life unless fame and money are your overriding factors?

Itay Hod and Anita Bennett, [writing for *Wrap.com* \(https://www.thewrap.com/why-tv-newscasters-are-hollywoods-latest-casting-obsession/\)](https://www.thewrap.com/why-tv-newscasters-are-hollywoods-latest-casting-obsession/), said directors and producers want authenticity in the portrayals. But they noted when a real journalist is hired, it is taking money out of the wallets of SAG/AFTRA actors. “Reporters aren’t trained actors,” they quoted former SAG vice president Anne-Marie Johnson. “Often they come off as stiff and awkward.”

Johnson’s complaint opens up a more general issue. Most cinematic efforts exaggerate and distort reporting. It dates back to the Ben Hecht-Charles MacArthur movie, “The Front Page,” first done in 1931 (and remade several times) where journalists are stereotyped as unscrupulous and egotistical, striving for the “scoop” at any cost. Subsequent portrayals often have reporters shouting questions, mostly inane, at news conferences and interviews, falling over one another to get an answer. For every film like “All the President’s Men,” the Oscar-nominated film adaptation of the Woodward-Bernstein best selling account of their Watergate work, there are stinkers like “Up Close and Personal” or “Bonfire of the Vanities.”

That issue has former wire service reporter Dennis O’Shea, who ran the Johns Hopkins University (JHU) relations department for more than 20 years, taking an opposite view.

“I appreciate the effort to make the depiction of journalists more accurate. Lord knows many movies and TV shows get what a reporter would do – and not do – or what one would say completely wrong,” said O’Shea, noting JHU has never had a policy prohibiting faculty and staff appearing in movies or television.

But O'Shea quickly added he agreed with Werland's sentiment.

"I do get very uncomfortable at seeing reporters and anchors playing themselves on screen," he added in an email interview. "It leaves an impression that journalism is for sale and will sell out to a commercial enterprise."

The fable "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion" applies here. Reporters should strive to be non-partial, factual and non-biased. That is compromised when they appear in fictional settings. A [line from the Peabody award-winning TV show "West Wing \(https://www.quotes.net/mquote/934277\)](https://www.quotes.net/mquote/934277) sums it up best: Communications director Toby Ziegler is asked how pregnant his ex-wife is: "As I understand it, it is a binary state. You either are or you aren't." You are either a reporter or an entertainer. Those who claim both are fooling themselves.

In the Trump era, journalists must be "above suspicion", particularly at a time when safeguards like editors are vanishing and reporters file directly to the internet without anyone checking their copy for factual mistakes.

Case in point: Larry King. The former CNN host would often shift back and forth when pressed about his recurrent roles in TV and movies -- [IMDb's database \(https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005092/\)](https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0005092/) reported he had appeared in more than 60 shows and movies. When quizzed about the ethics, he would say he was more of an entertainer than a journalist. But when was asked why his interviews of Ross Perot should be taken seriously, he would claim he was a journalist, not a performer.

Referring back to Cronkite, the show he hosted in the late 1950s "You Are There," where re-creations of historical events were featured, brings up questions regarding the ethics of this behavior. In this case, yes, because he was involved in an educational as well as entertainment project. In 1993, Cronkite joined the list of other journalists appearing in the fictional "Murphy Brown." But that was 12 years *after* he stepped down as anchor of the CBS Evening News.

Journalists are in a unique, if not always well-paid profession. If a doctor, plumber, or computer technician wants to earn extra pay by appearing in movies or TV, there isn't an ethical dilemma. Keep your participation in the films to home video. But if journalists want to do any moonlighting, let it be freelance articles, reports, blogs or video clips.

For those keeping score, the 80s TV show with Bruce Willis and Cybill Shepherd, "Moonlighting" did have former Chicago Tribune and now *BuzzMachine.com* media critic Jeff Jarvis in a [season 3 episode \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iv2ZsaT0qg\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iv2ZsaT0qg).

Randy Minkoff

Randy Minkoff has had several successful careers, first as a news and sports writer and broadcaster, and now as partner in The Speaking Specialists in Chicago. Minkoff conducts sessions in contemporary media and social media training, issue management, and persuasive communication for individuals and groups at the highest levels around the world. Minkoff also serves on the faculty at Loyola University Chicago as an adjunct professor in the School of Communication, where he teaches editing, ethics and sports broadcast journalism.

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