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Frank Rich

Happy Talk News Covers a War

By FRANK RICH

UP to a point, it's fun to howl at Will Ferrell's priceless portrayal of Ron Burgundy, the fictional local TV news star at the center of "Anchorman." The movie is set in the prehistoric era of the 1970's, when such infotainment inventions as Action News and Eyewitness News were still in their infancy. With his big ego, big lapels, big ties, big hair and pea-sized brain, Ron is every newsman who's ever told us "This is what's happening in your world tonight!" while remaining clueless about anything happening beyond his own teleprompter. Ron Burgundy has only one flaming passion: to end up in the big time of network news.

You have to laugh — until you realize that he and countless others like him have made just that leap in the three decades since. The local news revolution nailed in this movie — the dictum that the popularity of a news "personality" with the viewers, not the story, must always come first — has long since overrun most of both network and cable news. (The occasional holdout, typified by "Nightline," must often fight for its life or be subsidized at PBS.) No sooner do we rejoice at the demise of much of the 70's cultural detritus lampooned in "Anchorman," from polyester leisure suits to unembarrassed on-camera sexism, than we start wondering if TV news may be even more farcical now than it was then. But these days the farce isn't so funny. The worst damage committed by Ron Burgundy at the movie's mythical News Center 4 of San Diego is to overlay the pregnancy of a panda at the San Diego Zoo. Our news culture, and not just TV news, muffed the run-up to a war.

Watching Mr. Ferrell go on TV to promote "Anchorman" on the eve of its premiere, you had to notice just how plausibly his buffoonish, supposedly anachronistic, fictional persona fits into our "real" news. He turned up in his Burgundy blazer on the "Today" show the same morning The New York Post broke its front-page exclusive on John Kerry's choice of Dick Gephardt as his running mate. "This is an excellent journalism periodical," said Mr. Ferrell while thumbing through the offending tabloid before the crowd of "Today" show groupies in Rockefeller Center. Thus we watched a fictional anchorman mocking a fictional story from a real newspaper on a real news program — but was it so clear which was which? Only a week earlier, "Today" had committed its own equivalent of The Post's gaffe by failing to broadcast the live story of Saddam Hussein's court appearance in Baghdad. It stuck instead with an interview in which Robert Redford promoted a new movie in which he does not play Bob Woodward.

When Mr. Ferrell turned up on "The Daily Show" the next night, Jon Stewart ribbed him for not basing his characterization of Ron Burgundy on the fake anchorman Mr. Stewart himself plays on TV. But such is the vacuum now often left by the real news that Mr. Stewart's fake anchor is increasingly drafted to do the job of a real one. One recent instance occurred after Dick Cheney appeared on CNBC on June 17. The CNBC interviewer, Gloria Borger, asked the vice president about his public assertion that a connection between the 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta and Saddam Hussein's government was "pretty well confirmed." Not once but three times Mr. Cheney said that he "absolutely" had "never said" any such thing. But Ms. Borger had been right. And it was left to Mr. Stewart, not her actual TV news colleagues, to come to her defense by displaying the incontrovertible proof on "The Daily Show": a clip from "Meet the Press" in December 2001, in which the vice president flatly told Tim Russert "it's been pretty well confirmed" that Atta met with "a senior official of the Iraqi intelligence service."

Then again, maybe Mr. Cheney thought he could lie to Ms. Borger because he mistook CNBC, home to Dennis Miller, for a fake news outlet. That isn't hard to do. In another stop on his "Anchorman" promotional tour, Mr. Ferrell crashed the set of that network's "real" business news program, "Power Lunch," where he spewed false headlines ("Kenneth Lay likes to wear makeup as a woman!") and repeatedly kissed its normally staid female anchor, Sue Herera, on the lips. Far from disowning this invasion of fiction into its journalism, CNBC turned the incident into a constantly replayed promotional clip. The real anchor hardly seemed to mind, telling Jacques Steinberg of The New York Times that she enjoyed showing viewers "a

different side of me." You can't get much more Burgundian than that.

If each generation gets the Hollywood treatment of TV journalism that it deserves, then "Anchorman," however hit-and-miss its humor, is our "Network" and "Broadcast News." "Network" (1976) satirized a network news operation's willingness to offer any sensationalized spectacle, even an anchor's televised suicide, to win the ratings war. "Broadcast News" (1987) showed us how slick looks and telegenic charm can trump reporting talent and integrity as assets in the race to the top of TV news stardom. "Anchorman" grandfathers in the concerns of the other two but shows how the desperation of would-be news stars to create likable on-screen personas (to be a "newsonality," as The Washington Post critic Tom Shales labeled one pioneer of the breed, Kelly Lange of KNBC in Los Angeles, in 1977) can mean forsaking journalism entirely.

"Anchorman" gets its history right: this toxic element was first injected into the media bloodstream by innovations in local news at the dawn of the 70's. One of its earliest sightings was in New York, where Al Primo, a news director at WABC, brought Eyewitness News in late 1968. Looked at today at the Museum of Television and Radio, the early on-air promos for this then-novel brand of news are revelatory of what was to come and even funnier than the parodies of them in "Anchorman."

In one, the young Geraldo Rivera brings the fellow members of his news "team" to a Puerto Rican wedding so that his ethnic "friends," seemingly played by actors, can get to know his WABC "friends." The next thing you know, one of the anchors, the grim Roger Grimsby, is shedding his sports jacket and hitting the dance floor with a sizzling Latina mama. The commercial's sell line: "The Eyewitness News Team: The reason people like them so much is that they like people so much." In 13 months, WABC doubled its ratings at 6 and 11, starting a nationwide stampede by local stations to ditch their authority-figure anchors for happy-talking surrogate news "families" of their own.

The format officially crossed over into network news in 1973, when ABC hired Frank Magid, a consultant who specialized in these theatrics, to develop the morning show, "AM America." Built around a surrogate TV family and outfitted like a suburban home, it begat "Good Morning America" two years later. The rest is metastasis. "By the nineties, the tail was wagging the dog," wrote the critic Steven D. Stark. "Now, local news was setting the journalistic standard for the networks."

Some of this influence is merely a matter of style: that faux familial intimacy is now visible on any TV news show, national or local, with more than a single anchor. (Even the once Audio-Animatronic anchors of CNN's "Headline News" simulate husband-and-wife banter these days.) More crucially, the premium placed on likability affects the content of the news. Since 9/11, this has meant wearing and hawking the flag (as long as it's not draped on a coffin) — even to the point of dressing the NBC on-screen peacock icon in the stars and stripes for weeks. It has also meant not challenging a president as long as he's riding high in the polls.

In the now legendary White House press conference of March 6, 2003, not a single reporter, electronic or print, asked a tough question about anything, including the president's repeated conflating of 9/11 with the impending war on Iraq (eight times in that appearance alone). To some critics on the left, this Stepford Wives performance indicated a press corps full of conservatives, but I doubt it. This lock-step spectacle was at least in part an exercise of the Burgundy principle of pandering: don't do anything that might make you less popular with your customers. In that same month, Frank N. Magid Associates, still a major player in the news consulting business, released a survey telling its clients that war protests came in dead last of all topics tested among 6,400 viewers nationwide. In other words, if you're covering the news based on what's happening as opposed to what your viewers like, you're taking a commercial risk. Given that the ownership of local stations, networks and cable news alike is now concentrated in far fewer hands than it was in the 1970's, such thinking quickly becomes orthodoxy in much of the American news business.

In the new documentary "Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism," Robert Greenwald unearths some juicy documentation of Fox News Channel's manipulations on behalf of its political agenda. But Fox isn't exactly pursuing a stealth strategy: anyone who can't figure out that it's in the tank with the Republican party must be brain dead. It's more insidious when some of its more fair-and-balanced competitors blow-dry the news not to serve an ideology but to tell the public what they think the public wants to hear. That's why the networks have been reluctant to show casualties in Iraq. That's why we rarely see on American TV the candid video Michael Moore unveils in "Fahrenheit 9/11," whether of the president or of the grievously wounded, sometimes embittered soldiers who've returned from his mission in Iraq.

Even now, as the entire press, including The Times, copes with the reality that it wasn't skeptical enough about the administration's stated case for war, the desire to gladhand the public can overcome news judgment, especially on television. Otherwise Americans wouldn't have found it such a novelty when the Washington correspondent for RTE, the Irish network,

took on Mr. Bush in a TV interview last month, challenging him repeatedly about the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and his claim that the war in Iraq has made us safer. The RTE reporter, Carole Coleman, wasn't pretending to be any viewer's family or buddy or lover. "I felt I did my job," she said when American journalists questioned her about her audacity. Maybe so, but next to the Ron Burgundys in her profession, she seemed less like a visitor from a different country than an alien from a distant planet.