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Who was that robed man?

March 3, 2005

On Feb. 4, *NewsCenter* reporter Shelley Walcott stood outside the Franklin County courthouse, doing a live report on the arraignment of John Hobday, who was accused of firing six shots at a car parked at a house on the Northwest Side.

That's when the Grim Reaper appeared behind her.

As a serious-looking Walcott told Channel 6's noon news audience about Hobday's case, a man wearing a black robe and carrying a sickle removed his hood to unveil a plastic mask with an oddly out-of-place grin.

Was the Reaper's appearance a senior prank? The work of a bored housewife? A dare?

Nope. It was social commentary, courtesy of Newsbreakers, a gaggle of goofy but sincere media critics.

Newsbreakers describes itself as a "nonpartisan media watchdog organization that offers comment and critique on the role of TV news." It last made headlines in January, when "Invisible Suit Man"—a guy wearing a flesh-toned bodysuit with a sign that says "Invisible Suit"—got onto two live broadcasts in Rochester, N.Y.

Buck Owens, the group's founder, said he and the other Newsbreakers members don't like how TV news is done. There's too much emphasis on bloody crime and not enough actual news. He has a special distaste for Sinclair Broadcasting, which operates both ABC6 and Fox 28 in Columbus.

"It blows me away that people would tolerate one company owning both the ABC and the Fox affiliate in town," he said.

So the Reaper came to Columbus.

"The Grim Reaper is a pretty direct commentary, we thought, on the nature of local television news," said Owens—who, frankly, overestimates how clear his message is. Without his explanation, it just looked like a guy in a bad costume screwing around. Not that it wasn't funny.

Owens said no harm was meant to the reporter or crew.

"Unfortunately, some regular people who are doing our jobs incur our wrath sometimes," he said. "Our beef is, of course, not with them."

The group's beef is with Sinclair bigwigs. That's why, after the Grim Reaper horned in on the camera shot, Invisible Suit Man delivered a bouquet to the local *NewsCenter* folks.

A card accompanying the flowers said, "With deepest sympathy." Owens wouldn't say whether that was a reference to the stunt or the fact that the people have to work for Sinclair.

"We left it ambiguous."

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