

down at the courthouse, Berkeley?" Breaun, to his credit, stays composed behind a constipated expression, though the din was easily broadcast into the homes of anyone watching channel 10.

The group caused a scene, but things didn't go as planned. The bust was a bust. Back in the limo, Buck orchestrates damage control, proclaiming his writ to everyone in the limo: "This is the story as I see it: U.S. GOVERNMENT PROTECTS MAINSTREAM MEDIA, DENIES ACCESS TO PROTEST GROUP."

The Birth of the TV News Menace

Over the past year, the guerrilla protest group has become a thorn in the paw of television news from Phoenix to New York City. They've injected the Grim Reaper into a live shot of a story about a non-death shooting, and put egg on their faces during story about a misreported lottery number. And they're expanding their scope. That night sitting in the corner of the Old Toad, an English pub in Rochester's artsy part of town, 33-year old Chris Landon talked about that morning's bust. Gone were the push-broom moustache and American flag mask - only his silver-sprayed hair connected him to his alter ego, Buck Owens.

"I think something interesting played out today," he said. "There was a line on the sidewalk, and we were allowed to occupy this side of the line while federal marshals guarded the line and the mainstream media was allowed to occupy the other side of the line. Symbolically, it creates a very telling picture."

The mission was to have dozens of phony reporters helping cover a story the Newsbreakers felt was too saturated - and too trivial - in the Rochester market. Counter-intuitive to the group's seemingly frat-guy antics, the Newsbreakers are five professionals ranging in age from late 20s to late 30s. Their disguises and phony names are an effort to keep those worlds separate. Only Landon's name is on public record. "It creates this disconnect that regular people are doing something that is somehow deviant behavior," Landon said. "That is the initial response: that this is not socially acceptable behavior, but these are regular people doing it. I'm married, I have a child, I pay a mortgage, I pay taxes, I'm regular."

The group started as an idea for a television pilot in the fall of 2004. All the members of the group were united by a central idea: that television needs to be a lot better. "There was this idea that that would be the sweetest form of revenge," said Landon, who worked for a television news station in Rochester at the time. "That we could somehow make the structure that we were fighting pay for its own medicine. What if you could make people

stand around and talk about how much they hate television news?"

The idea was to start by disrupting "dog-lick live shots," what television media uses to describe an unnecessary live shot employed to give the illusion of breaking news.

"I understand their point," said Chuck Samuels, news director at WHAM-TV in Rochester. "But I don't understand the point of protesting it. There are a lot of pointless live shots on television. We try not to do the live shot at city hall at 11. Research comes back and says that viewers like live coverage." Samuels believes the Newsbreakers argument is weak. "Are there meaningless live shots? Sure. [But] I think there are much bigger issues out there."

Perhaps Samuels, as a target, is missing the point. The Newsbreakers say they are concerned with other more important issues. They have focused busts on stations owned by major media conglomerates, and stories they feel have failed to serve the public interest.

The Newsbreakers' Religion

After the Newsbreakers began taking shape, Landon came across Guy Debord, a French Situationist whose goal was to disrupt mediated reality in all its forms. In Debord, Landon found a vocabulary for what he and the other Newsbreakers felt all along. "I came to [Debord's philosophy] after the Newsbreakers idea gained momentum. I didn't have a formal philosophy, in quotes. I had a lot of personal experience that showed me that there are corrosive powers in corporate news business that just did not sit right with me." The more he read, Landon said, the more he realized that the Newsbreakers had a traceable lineage in the Situationists.

"We inhabit a social system where there is family, there is church, there is government, there is media, there are norms and all of a sudden, for just a blip, the world takes on this idea that there are possibilities," he said. At this point, Newsbreakers became social protest. "We all got a little religion and realized that it can be more serious than a zany show."

Their first successful bust was Jan. 6, 2005. A Newsbreaker wearing a flesh-colored body suit and a sign that read "Invisible Suit" walked into two separate stations' noon live shots about a morning power outage at a Highland Hospital in Rochester. The reaction was bigger than expected.

An altercation with WROC reporter Elizabeth

Harness resulted in the police detaining three of the Newsbreakers. WROC aired a story that evening claiming that the group was nothing more than pranksters looking to disrupt local media from getting news and information to its viewers. Harness said in the story one of them could face prosecution, but legal action was dropped after it became clear that the Newsbreakers had exonerating footage of the incident posted on their Web site. "It was too successful for our first bust," said a Newsbreaker who goes by the name JD Rozz. "If we'd had a chance to get us up to speed, we would have been more ready for things." For Landon's role in the bust, he was fired from his job.

New Wave of Media Criticism?

The incident created flurries in the blogosphere, from college kids titillated by Invisible Suit Guy to media critics wondering what the group was about.

Brad Weaver, broadcast communication instructor at Westminster College in New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, was one of the latter. "They've tapped into the Daily Show kind of thing," Weaver said. "I love the idea of mocking the news because it's so mockable. There's so much truth in that satire."

Weaver says the Newsbreakers have succeeded in grabbing the public's attention, but questions what they're going to do with it, if they're going to use the opportunity to stimulate the debate and take it in a different direction. "If they're just going to hijack live shots that's cute and novel," Weaver said. "But are they going to go any further?"

The group has only disrupted live television shots thus far. Landon said Newsbreakers are not media reformers, but likened them to carnival barkers, calling people into the tent of media reform. "We're not the hard thinkers of media criticism," he said. "We're

Newsbreaker Dizzy Monk, right, waits to get into News 10 reporter Berkely Breaun's live shot in front of the Keating Federal Building in Rochester, New York Feb. 28.

