

the goofballs that say, 'Hey, pay attention to this. Media criticism. It's over here.'"

But whether people who love the barking will spend the intellectual cost to enter that tent is uncertain. Landon said hijacking live shots will does not directly change the way media functions, but it introduces an important idea. "You can make fun of television news directly. You can talk back to television. And for most people that's an alien idea," he said.

The Newsbreakers are planning future actions other than disrupting live shots, although they stopped short of revealing the covert details. Rozz said the group would be welcoming to a legal battle, similar to what almost came as a result of their first bust. "If the precedent is set that we can't shove microphones in their faces, what does that do to their industry?" he said. "[Television news media would be] cutting their own throats. What they're accusing us of, they do every day."

The Newsbreakers are considering aiding others who want to talk back to television. The group has received requests for busts in several cities from Edmonton to Tampa. "We don't have this New York City dream where if we can make it there we can make it anywhere," Landon said earlier this year. "Mid-size markets, I think right now, are our target because they are more susceptible to being infected with our message." However, a few weeks later the Newsbreakers busted two major television news stations in New York City.

Finances aren't an issue, said Landon, who is responsible for nearly 90 percent of the group's funding. "I've positioned myself so I can do it for the next 14 months," he said. "Then at that point, my financial situation improves greatly. I've gone all in on this thing. I can keep going."

Samuels said that he and his fellow news directors in Rochester have discussed how to handle the Newsbreakers, and their crew's contingencies to keep the group out of their shots. "We tapped Rochester for everything we could," Rozz said. "There's nothing more to achieve."

But for the hundreds of other stations around the country, beware. The Grim Reaper or Invisible Suit Guy may be lurking behind the anchor person, holding a mirror to the barren landscape of TV news and injecting little sparks of dialogue on the public's glowing screens.

For more on the Newsbreakers, go to www.newsbreakers.org



A Citizens' Win Over Fake News

When Americans finally heard the truth about VNRs (Video News Releases), they got mad. And rightly so. The public generally expects news to be created by fair observers who may present their work through either objective or advocacy journalism. It is essential that reporters refrain from persuading or marketing to their audience on behalf of an undisclosed third party, especially when that party is the federal government. Over the last four years, the Bush Administration has frequently used paid print columnists and TV commentators as well as VNRs expertly disguised as genuine news stories (though the use of VNRs started back in the early 90s, during the Clinton administration). But after a grassroots campaign to stop fake news spearheaded by several media activist groups, the Federal Communications Commission was forced to act.

In mid-April, after receiving a petition from Free Press, a media reform organization, which was signed by more than 40,000 people, the FCC issued a public notice to broadcast licensees stating that "listeners and viewers are entitled to know who seeks to persuade them with the programming offered over broadcast stations and cable systems." Failing to disclose the nature, source, and sponsorship of broadcast news material is, according to the FCC, a violation of federal law.

Here are just a few of the cases that prompted this action:

- PR executive Karen Ryan was paid by PR firms to produce VNRs on behalf of the departments of Education and Health & Human Services. She ended the segments with: "From Washington, this is Karen Ryan reporting."
- The Ketchum PR firm paid conservative pundit Armstrong Williams \$240,000 to promote the "No Child Left Behind Act" on behalf of the Department of Education.
- Syndicated columnist Maggie Gallagher was paid \$21,500 by the Department of Health and Human Services to promote the Bush marriage initiative.
- At least 20 federal agencies - including the Pentagon, the State Department, and the USDA - produced and distributed hundreds of VNRs over the last four years, according to an in-depth report last March in the *New York Times*.

Unethical? Anti-democratic? Covert propaganda? The General Accountability Office has ruled that in at least three cases, the government violated a law restricting the use of appropriated funds for publicity or propaganda purposes by soliciting and paying for VNRs that failed to disclose their source. However, in the April FCC notice, that agency stopped short of ruling on the legality of the federal government actively using VNRs, stating it is out of their jurisdiction.

Nonetheless, the FCC is seeking further public comment until July 22, 2005, on the nature and use of VNRs by stations. The agency says it will issue a report on its findings or begin more formal proceedings about how to change FCC regulations to make licensees more accountable. In the meanwhile, media activists say public pressure on individual stations is also needed to demand more responsible policies and, ideally, more meaningful and accurate news and information.

For more information:

Read the 4/11/05 FCC Press Release on VNRs at www.fcc.gov
www.freepress.net
www.stopfakenews.org
www.startchange.org
www.prwatch.org

-Catherine Komp and Kristian Knutsen