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Media Activists Who Smile and Throw Cheese

By MARK LASSWELL

AS soon as he heard about the Arthur Chi'en incident last month - in which, at the end of a live report, that WCBS-TV reporter in New York was caught on camera cursing out a prankster sent by the "Opie & Anthony" satellite radio show - Chris Landon, 33, and his fellow Newsbreakers jumped online to find the video.

A group devoted to monkey-wrenching live reports on local news, the Newsbreakers have a standing interest in media mishaps. But in this case their interest was personal: just a month before, an "Opie & Anthony" producer had approached them about joining in its Assault on the Media campaign of on-air stunts. And now one of those stunts, staged by one of the show's interns, had cost Mr. Chi'en his job. "We looked at each other," Mr. Landon recalled, "and said, 'That could have been us.'"

Well, yes and no. The Assault on the Media stunts are essentially a bid for free publicity, in the loutish tradition of Howard Stern fans calling television stations during breaking news events and blurting out references to Mr. Stern. The Newsbreakers, Mr. Landon said, are something else entirely.

Since Jan. 6, when the five-member Rochester-based group executed its first bust, as it calls them, of a live remote in their hometown, viewers in Boston; New York City; Manchester, N.H.; Columbus, Ohio; and several other cities have seen their local news briefly hijacked by elaborately planned vignettes that are more likely to baffle or alarm reporters than make them curse on the air.

The Newsbreakers' repertory of characters includes Cheese Ninja, who cavorts in the background of live news broadcasts, derisively tossing slices of processed cheese, and Jiminy Diz, a supposed newspaper reporter, wearing a loud jacket and a hat with a "Press" card in the band, who is angry with local television news for lifting reports from the morning paper.

During the busts, one Newsbreaker watches and records the newscast, telling the Newsbreaker provocateur through a hands-free cellphone earpiece when he is in the camera frame and when to make himself scarce for a while if the report switches over to a taped segment. The group sends its own cameraman to record a Newsbreakers'-eye view of the bust, tape that is then mixed into the actual newscast tape, along with music and graphics. The results are then posted online at newsbreakers.org.

Sometimes the on-air stunt is not the first encounter between the Newsbreakers and the news outfit they are bedeviling. On Feb. 3, Bobby Maville, 29, who uses the name Dizzy Monk as a Newsbreaker and plays many of the on-camera characters, approached a crew for the Sinclair Broadcast Group's news operation in Columbus, Ohio, pretending to be a college student pitching an idea for "happy obituaries." The next day, Mr. Maville, dressed as the Grim Reaper but wearing a mask that bore a large smile - a sort of Grin Reaper - showed up at another Sinclair live report, looming behind the reporter, Shelley Walcott, as she described an arrest in a shooting incident. "I turned around after the shot was over and saw this person dressed as the Grim Reaper," Ms. Walcott said. "I flipped. It was scary."

She remains mystified by the encounter. "I've visited their Web site, and it's just gibberish to me," she said. "To this day, I'm not sure what their point is." Ms. Walcott now works at WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee. "I hope they don't follow me here," she said.

The Newsbreakers idea was born of what Mr. Landon described as his disillusionment with television news while working as a part-time assignment-desk assistant for Time Warner Cable's R News operation in Rochester. The blurred lines between the cable company's business concerns and its news side - as when management asked to be notified by the news staff when local officials were being interviewed on the premises, Mr. Landon said, so the company could lobby them - prompted misgivings about media consolidation and "vapid and banal" local television news. "I said: 'You know what? I'm not going to take part in this beast any longer,'" Mr. Landon said.

Keith Coccozza, senior director of Time Warner Cable corporate communications, said Mr. Landon "obviously had an issue with some standard noncontroversial business practices."

"We have since parted ways," he said.

Having witnessed how entertained television newsrooms are by the sight of other stations' live remotes being disrupted by, say, an uninvited stalker, Mr. Landon struck on his idea for Newsbreakers. He cites the Situationist International artist-provocateurs of the late 1950's and 60's as an inspiration, though he seems more taken with their contention, as he described it, that "we live in this mediated reality where we don't have authentic experiences" than with their role in the violent student riots in Paris in 1968.

"If you can somehow throw a wrench in the works, and somehow startle people out of their - in this case, television-induced - coma and force people just for a moment to say, 'My goodness, what is happening on television?,' then you begin the process by which people question what they are consuming on the media front," Mr. Landon said. "That, and the fact that it's a heck of a lot of fun. For us to do, and for people to watch."

He approached a few friends last year with his scheme. "I thought he was a little nuts," said Mr. Maville, an aspiring actor who nonetheless also thought being a Newsbreaker sounded like a nice change from wearing animal costumes at a children's theater. "And it seemed like it could make a difference," he said. "I have my own dissatisfactions with the media."

Other Newsbreakers, who use pseudonyms and did not want to be identified for this article because of concerns about jeopardizing their jobs, work in financial services, the recording industry and for a film and video production company. Mr. Landon, whose wife, with whom he has a 6-year-old daughter, is an obstetrician and gynecologist, now works as a freelance photographer after one of his Newsbreakers pranks cost him his television

job.

The industry's feelings about the Newsbreakers are decidedly mixed. Lee Eldridge of WROC-TV, the news director of one of two stations in Rochester busted by the Newsbreakers, said his station considered filing an assault complaint against the group for jostling its reporter (the Newsbreakers say their video proves they did not), but later dropped the idea so as not to give them publicity.

The Newsbreakers say they have at least some fans in television newsrooms: the group says it has received tips from station employees about where to find reporters in the field.

In the middle ground is the stoicism of Paul Conti, news director of WNYT-TV in Albany. After another Albany station was hit by Cheese Ninja during a live remote in April, a WNYT technician took professional umbrage, leaving a highly indecorous message on the Newsbreakers' phone line.

Others at WNYT heard about the call and "got kind of worked up about it," fearing a retaliatory on-air strike, Mr. Conti said. He sent a memo to his staff instructing it simply to cut away from the live remote in the event of an incursion, apologize to viewers and move on.

"The same laws which give you the right to be out on the street doing a live remote give them the right to be out there to disrupt it," he wrote. (The station remains unscathed.)

While defending the Newsbreakers' free-speech rights, Mr. Conti said in a telephone interview that he was "not exactly sure" what the group was trying to say.

The Newsbreakers offer an explanation. "Newsbreakers is a nonpartisan media watchdog group," their Web site says, that "offers comment and critique on the role of television news in informing the public" by using "parody and nontraditional media interventions and transformations."

There is no detectable partisanship during the group's on-air eruptions. But Mr. Landon, who calls the Newsbreakers "Merry Pranksters for the digital age," acknowledged posting "a certain number of bumper-sticker messages" on the group's Web site. In a Newsbreakers video of a bust of an NBC affiliate, for instance, a graphic points out that NBC's parent company, General Electric, manufactures military hardware and the engines of Air Force One. Mr. Landon said that he had originally intended to let the Newsbreakers' efforts speak for themselves, but that "we quickly learned that the people we are targeting don't necessarily make these connections without some cues."

The reporters that are the Newsbreakers' targets may be starting to take some cues of their own. A recent bust of WMUR-TV in Manchester, N.H., introduced Tiger Lady, a female friend of Mr. Landon's walking her pet "tiger" - a Newsbreaker wearing a tiger headdress - into camera range. As he does sometimes, Mr. Landon conducted a brief post-bust interview with the nonplussed reporter involved. Mr. Landon was winding things up, saying, "Reporting for Newsbreakers," when the freshly victimized reporter seized the moment.

"He went nuts in the background, like a drunken football fan," Mr. Landon said. "It was a nice twist. We appreciated it."

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