

Lisa Tant Unbridled • Scott Taylor Tortured • Stephen Shaw Remembered

# RYERSON REVIEW OF Journalism

Ryerson University Spring 2005 \$5.95

## THE BET OF HIS LIFE

KEVIN NEWMAN'S BOLD BID  
TO RESHAPE NETWORK NEWS



**ON EDGE** COVERING THE MID-EAST FROM CANADA **ONLINE** WHO LET THE BLOGS OUT?  
**ON TOP** SOFT-CORE PORN AND THE GAY PRESS **ON SALE** HAVE SHOPPING  
MAGAZINES SOLD OUT? **ON CALL** A TRIBUTE TO THE TORONTO STAR SWITCHBOARD



7 72006 86114 4



# CHILL

Take some  
chances. Break  
a few rules.  
Why journalism  
needs more  
pranksters



PHOTOILLUSTRATION: ERIKA JACOBS



BY VANESSA MILNE

# OUT

**T**hrough our baby-friendly software," reads the press release, "infants are making friends all over the world and learning valuable job skills sure to aid them in the new-economy job market." The subject of this praise is a website — *babyspeak.com* — empowering Canadian infants to communicate with Japanese, Australian, and German tots. "Why allow your toddler to fall behind? Computer skills are just as crucial to their success as language ability or toilet training — maybe more!"

Bob Benedetti, the host of *Tech Talk* on local Montreal news station CFCF12, covered the story when it broke eight years ago. Babyspeak's offices were not complete in time for the interview, so he arranged to meet one of the founders at an Internet cafe. Benedetti and his cameraman arrived to find a young woman with her two-year-old son, Nathan. They sat him in front of the computer, where the toddler batted at the mouse a few times, lost interest, and started wandering around the room. Benedetti tried to get him to sit still. He went out and bought a juice, let Nathan take a sip, took it from him, and put it next to the computer. "The juice is over here," he said. "Do you want to be on TV? Why don't you come get some juice?"

But Nathan had other ideas, like running around while screaming at the top of his lungs. After an hour, Benedetti gave up, but the story aired that week, with the original shot of Nathan smacking the mouse. After it ran on the 6 P.M. news, Babyspeak's CEO, Jesse Brown, left a message on CFCF12's answering machine, explaining it was a fictional company. The real story was that a fake website and a hired model was all it took to dupe the station.

Brown isn't the only one faking it. Journalists occasionally stage the news, becoming at once the event and the observer: *Frank* sneaks journalists into Parliament Hill offices to test security; *Saturday Night* explores the nature of pain by having writer Bruce Grierson remove half of his wisdom teeth without anaesthetic;

the *Toronto Sun*'s Mike Strobel tries to insure his writing hand.

Any conversation about stunt journalism is almost sure to start with, "I've never really heard that term." Well, why shouldn't it? A makeshift phrase, stunt journalism encompasses stings, experiential articles, and pranks. The common aspect is that the writers put themselves at the centre of the stories. These articles are surprisingly memorable and informative, and often more revealing than straight reporting. As Jay Teitel, senior editor of *Saturday Night*, argues, "It can be funny, it can be eye-catching, and it can give you an entree into sides of life journalism doesn't ordinarily get."

One of the most notorious recent examples of stunt journalism involved *The Globe and Mail*'s Jan Wong boarding an airplane with a box cutter and 12 other sharp implements. Security personnel X-rayed her bag and asked her to hand over a corkscrew and a pair of scissors. Halfway through the flight, she pulled out her clear pencil case, which contained the box cutter, and put it on the edge of the tray. It took 90 minutes before a flight attendant noticed. "I don't know how you got that far with that, but you shouldn't have," he said. After some discussion with flight attendants, Wong volunteered the box cutter. They repeated that she should never have been able to get sharp objects on the plane, which she promptly did — again without incident — on her flight home.

Few people were bold enough to suggest Wong's work crossed a line, because of the value of the information uncovered. Nevertheless, stunt journalism has many critics. Defenders of the craft of reportage denounce it, and patiently explain that journalists are supposed to reflect events, not create them. This didn't used to be such a sin. During the 1950s, any method to get a front-page story or attract a reader was applauded. Journalists were pragmatic, and rules differed from newsroom to newsroom. But then things started to change; the number of journalists with bachelor's degrees in the newsroom grew, and so did their salaries. Once Woodward and Bernstein's exposure of the Watergate break-in led to President Richard Nixon's impeachment, the image of the journalist received a makeover. The journalist became glamorous, exciting, and morally superior. Reporting wasn't simply a job, as it was in the old days — idealistic journalists were now vigorously defending society against corruption and evil in the highest corridors of power.

In the late 1970s, the formation of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (which later became the Canadian Association of Journalists) reflected this change. Although the CIJ never played a gatekeeping role the way many professional associations do, it did later, as the CAJ, create guidelines — including ethical standards — for journalists. More importantly, it became possible for unethical reporters to damage their reputations in the eyes of their peers and the public. "Just as doctors or teachers accept certain standards and obligations when they enter their professions, journalists cannot



ignore their duties to serious and accurate informing of the public,” says Stephen Ward, an associate professor of journalism ethics at the University of British Columbia. “Journalists, as professionals, are responsible for the informational well-being of the public, as health officers are responsible for the physical well-being of the public.”

The problem with standards, though, is maintenance. You have to expel the rebels, and you must do it consistently, publicly, and forcefully. Hence, the bilious outrage directed at the likes of fabricators Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass — it is journalism’s righteous indignation in the name of the reader.

And that indignation extends to stunt journalism. The rebellious punk of the family, it is the bastard child of journalism and entertainment. It is frowned upon by its school elders, who deliver the first-day sermons about journalism’s sacred purpose. They follow up on the second day with a close study of the rules — rules that stunt journalists, like ill-behaved children, meticulously break.

### **RULE #1: NOTHING BUT THE FACTS**

Imagine being Vince Carter. Gare Joyce did when he wrote a profile of the ex-Toronto Raptor for the winter 2004 issue of *Toro*; he went as far as including a personality test he wrote, pretending to be Carter. The piece goes from hilarious to insightful. “I started ducking as I walked through doorways. Instead of plodding about, I began sauntering. Now, when I parallel park on the first try, I get out of my car and urge people on the sidewalk to raise the roof.” When Joyce reaches Carter’s most recent trials, including the loss of his agent, media scorn, and his former teammate Tracy McGrady’s betrayal, he writes, “For days, for every waking moment, I tried not to look wounded.” Joyce mocks the moralistic tendency in sports writing to assume it knows and understands Carter’s character, and instead asks for empathy on Carter’s behalf.

Stories where the writer pretends to be someone else stretch back to over a century ago. Nellie Bly, actually Elizabeth Cochrane, earned her fame by pretending to be crazy, and writing about the deplorable conditions in insane asylums in New York City. Working in investigative journalism’s infancy in the 1890s, Cochrane and other women took advantage of the public’s fascination with the new, daring-lady archetype. Canadian Faith Fenton went into a Toronto woman’s shelter for *The Empire* in 1894, and Elmira Elliott, later Atkinson, disguised herself and worked as a servant in upper-class homes. These stunts were considered extreme, and these women were warned that their antics would earn them reputations that would follow them for the rest of their careers.

Working against them was the idea, originating in the Enlightenment, that the purest form of knowledge is an objective account of the truth. But contemporary media-savvy audiences know everything is spun — hence their trust of TV footage over reporters’ words. Stunt journalism offers the reader a different kind of truth: not straight reporting of the facts, but transparency of the writer’s bias and methods. It plays in the grey area between the so-called truth of hard news, and the apparent fiction of self-created stunts — writing about the meaning of events that never would have existed without the observer.

With the question-everything ethics of the 1960s, the idea of objectivity began to fall apart. The culture of rebellion fostered journalism that was first-person, experiential, and novelistic — New Journalism. The ’60s obsession with society and the meaning of life provided a perfect context, as did the backlash against the media for being slow to report on social-justice movements. New Journalism was supposed to break all the rules, allowing writers to use personal experience and fictional techniques to immerse the reader in a subject. This, in turn, created another rule: “Show, don’t tell.” Tom Wolfe, who wrote the book on the subject, compares it to “louder music, more wine.” Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* plays with the fundamental aspect of New Journalism: technique. The other aspect of New Journalism was its first-person, experiential style. The late Hunter S. Thompson’s gonzo journalism was the epitome of this, revealing his personal feelings and thoughts. Some of Thompson’s writing was stream of consciousness and verged on fiction. George Plimpton not only wrote in the first person, but also did work that was purely for the experience, including, among others, playing football, baseball, hockey, tennis, bridge, and golf against professionals, and flying in a jet fighter. His self-deprecating humour allowed him to act as a proxy for the reader.

### **RULE #2: YOU ARE NOT THE STORY**

In 2003 when British Columbia premier Gordon Campbell tried to explain away his drunk-driving charge in Hawaii, he said he’d misjudged the potential effect of six drinks. Skeptical *Globe* reporters decided to test his claim. “It turns out it takes much more alcohol than you might think to reach the point where you are smiling in a police mugshot,” wrote Erin Anderssen, the sober overseer.

Four *Globe* staffers, including Victor Malarek, sit in a small, windowless room in the back of the police department in Whitby, Ontario, and imbibe next to a breathalyzer. They drink three one-shot martinis, followed by a steak-and-wine dinner. Malarek declares that his face is numb after two glasses of wine. His colleague, Mark Kubas, has five drinks and announces that a monkey could do 60 per cent of his job. Malarek has another martini and four more glasses of wine, takes the Breathalyzer, complains about wanting to go to sleep, then blows 0.107 — slightly under Campbell’s 0.149. He promptly forgets he has taken the test. Kubas, meanwhile, has been cut off. He’s close to Campbell’s range, and he’s swearing and hitting on female police officers walking by in the hall. This was a fun, bubbly look at the controversy, and every reader would know after reading the story that the only possible reason Campbell may have thought he could drive, was because he was too drunk to know better.

Journalism is not the only thing drowning in the first person. We are growing increasingly comfortable with psychology’s idea that everyone has a “personal truth.” News coverage is also becoming more self-reflexive, from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* to Rick Mercer’s *Monday Report*. Reality is in, and being self-critical is mandatory. At the same time, rising education levels, increased advertising and media awareness, and a continued dissatisfaction with objectivity have led to a growing distrust



of the media; people think it's just big business. "You don't often hear people say, 'Well, I read it in the papers, it must be true,'" says Klaus Pohle, a journalism professor at Carleton University. "That used to be very commonplace."

Though stunt journalism is, by nature, personal, there are times when self-reference turns to self-indulgence. When an officer zapped Sarah Crosbie for a story, the shock value rewarded her with a front-page piece in *The Kingston Whig-Standard*. It ran next to a news story that included a police officer being shocked, and then recovering. "This Taser was going to kill little ol' me," Crosbie commented, "and then my mother would kill me all over again, because this is the first year in a long time that I planned to go home for Thanksgiving." This was personal journalism pretending to be experimental, exemplifying ex-*Saturday Night* editor Matthew Church's observation that newspapers don't have the length to properly examine a subject through personal experience. Journalism professor Vivian Smith, who once judged the humour section for the National Magazine Awards (NMAs), has a simpler

## Stunt journalism, the rebellious punk of the family, is the bastard child of journalism and entertainment

objection — that stunt journalism is juvenile. "It has a froshy, adolescent feel — like a smash-and-grab thing to do. It's like court jester stuff, only more intellectual."

### RULE #3: ALWAYS IDENTIFY YOURSELF AS A JOURNALIST

"Sex... low-impact, high-pleasure positions that let you gratify her without breaking a sweat," announced the *Stu* magazine mockup, the magazine "for the adequate man." The feature was just below a picture of a man with a receding hairline and glasses, grinning next to an article on "Four Guinea Pigs Who Quit the Rat Race." Brown's experiment with his fake magazine *Stu* was shockingly successful. As *It Happens* ran a piece, Rebecca Eckler wrote a column in the *National Post*, and *Masthead* magazine announced its arrival. It was the second time both the *Post* and the CBC had fallen for one of Brown's stunts.

When it discovered the hoax, *As It Happens* had Brown on to explain the prank, and Eckler wrote a humorous column admitting to being fooled, but missed his point entirely. "I'm not going to suspect every email or press kit I get now is an elaborate ruse. Who has the time? I still have faith in humans," she wrote. Brown responded, "When I read that, I thought, 'You're a fucking journalist! Your job is to question everything that comes across your desk.'"

According to Nick Russell, the author of *Morals and the Media* and a contributor to the CAJ code of ethics, Brown isn't exactly an avatar of journalistic standards, either. "If you're playing a prank on an individual or a corporation, there has to be a really good reason, because that's not what journalism is about. I'm not comfortable

doing things just for the sake of entertaining the reader." Church argues that it wasn't merely entertaining — that the *Stu* piece revealed valuable information about the lax fact checking in most media. "That was an interesting revelation, the number of media outlets that were hoaxed," he says. "It's galling to think that you're reading something on the front page of a newspaper, and tomorrow they might tell you, 'Oops, sorry, we goofed.'"

### RULE #4: SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE

When *Saturday Night* editors decided to do a cold-themed section, they went looking for someone to stand in a T-shirt in Winnipeg in January. Mike Randolph did them one better and offered to get hypothermia. Dré Dee, the front-of-book editor for *Saturday Night*, says, "Mike phoned me up and said, 'I've got this idea.' And I said, 'You're nuts, but okay, go ahead.'" The story, titled "Just Chillin'," is a series of humiliations and the definition of tenacity. Randolph went to a military lab in Toronto, stripped to his underclothes, and sat in a zero-degree room until he became hypothermic. "[The scientist] turns on the fan and the blast of wind hits me like a bus," Randolph writes. "This, I think to myself, is fantastically stupid."

The novelty is the appeal, explains Randolph, who dislikes the term "stunt," and prefers to call his piece experiential journalism. "If you were sitting on a plane somewhere and flipping through a magazine, you would stop at that article, just because it's unusual. At the end of the day, it is entertainment — nobody is going to reach for that article to learn anything about hypothermia. They're better off going to the Encyclopedia Britannica for that."

Teitel suggests it is the entertainment value that's addictive in stunt journalism pieces. "They're like a car crash — you can't look away." He jokingly compared *Saturday Night*'s willingness to publish stunt journalism to *Fear Factor* and the *X-Games*: "It's like the X-stories. If you want to jump off a building without a parachute and write a story before you hit the ground, we'll print it — assuming you have a reasonable chance of survival."

It is this entertainment aspect that journalists rally against. "[Stunt journalism] is an oxymoron in its own right, because journalism is all about truth and accuracy and stunts are all about entertainment," says Russell. "They don't really go together in one sentence any more than stunt accounting or stunt gynecology."

When *Stu* magazine won a silver in the humour category at the NMAs, it was a meeting of two worlds. "I feel like a visitor among these journalists," says Brown, who prefers to be known as a satirist. "I'm not trying to win a Pulitzer." But stunt journalism is certainly doing fine as far as NMAs are concerned. The piece that won for humour in 2003, "I Can Do That," by Ken Hegan, ran in *BC Business*. In it, the writer told people, including the lieutenant-governor of British Columbia, he could do their jobs and they should quit. His letters and emails to them — and the responses he got back — were hysterical.

Perhaps the truth lies in a grey area. Some stunt journalism is straight humour, and some of it is journalism. Or perhaps it's calling our bluff, and stunt journalism is a combination of the two — no category required.

RRJ