

IN BRIEF

Blurring lines between entertainment and news

NEW YORK — An on-screen NBC News identifier for a fictional debate on "The West Wing" and a "news conference" by a fake Boston Red Sox executive on ESPN show how fuzzy the lines between news and entertainment have become.

An NBC News "bug" was kept on the screen Sunday night during the live debate between presidential candidates portrayed by Alan Alda and Jimmy Smits on "The West Wing."

Meanwhile, ESPN's "SportsCenter," in an effort to juice up a segment on baseball gossip, had analyst Steve Phillips pose as Red Sox general manager answering questions about the team's offseason priorities.

The news insignia was requested by "The West Wing" episode's producer, former real-life Washington insider Lawrence O'Donnell, to help make the presidential debate seem more realistic. Jeff Zucker, the NBC Universal executive who has run NBC's entertainment division and produced "Today" for NBC News, gave the OK.

NBC News programming like "Hardball" has been depicted on "The West Wing" in the past, news division spokeswoman Allison Gollust said.

Even with all the trappings — including real-life TV newsman Forrest Sawyer as the debate's moderator — no one at NBC believed that viewers would mistake Alda's Arnold Vinick or Smits' Matt Santos for real-life politicians.

Yet Jack Myers, a media business analyst, questioned whether NBC News diminished itself by allowing its name to be used in this way.

"Is this an appropriate use of the NBC News and MSNBC News brand

equity, or does it do more damage to these news brands than the positive branding it brings to NBC's entertainment series?" Myers asked on his Mediavillage.com Web site.

The MSNBC.com site went so far as to commission a poll with Zogby International, asking 1,208 viewers of "The West Wing" who won the debate. Fifty-four percent favored Santos, the Democratic candidate, which would have been more impressive if 59 percent of the viewers hadn't favored him before the episode started.

By 2-to-1, Sunday's viewers told Zogby that they preferred watching a fictional presidential debate to the real thing.

As a ratings sweeps month stunt, the live debate was a modest success: the audience of 9.6 million viewers beat the show's season average of 8.2 million, according to Nielsen Media Research. The show was a distant third in the ratings to ABC's "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition" and CBS' "Cold Case."

Over on ESPN, fans who watched "SportsCenter" Sunday and Monday may have done a double-take: There was Phillips, a former New York Mets general manager, sitting behind a bank of microphones and before a background with the Red Sox insignia, answering questions from ESPN reporters.

Was he the replacement for Theo Epstein, who quit last week?

No, Phillips was just playing one on television.

A text "crawl" on the screen identified it as a "simulated Red Sox news conference." Yet at a time news and sports networks constantly have a barrage of text information on their screens, it might not have immediately caught viewers' eyes.

Vince Doria, ESPN's news director, said it was done to enliven what is often a dull segment: analysts like

Phillips sitting behind a desk and speculating about what teams will do.

"We were certainly aware that we needed to provide some kind of constant disclaimer," Doria said. "I would hope that we haven't gone too far. If we thought we had gone too far, we obviously wouldn't have done it."

Phillips will continue these fake news conferences for other teams, he said.

Next up: the New York Yankees, who, unlike the Red Sox, have a real general manager in place.

Cruise ship escapes attack by grenade-armed pirates

MAHE, Seychelles — Pirates who attacked a cruise ship off the coast of Somalia grinned as they aimed grenade-launchers and machine guns at the deck and staterooms, some passengers said Monday, recounting the ordeal after safely docking in this Indian Ocean archipelago.

The ship escaped by shifting to high speed and changing course, and the cruise line said Monday the crew also used a sonic weapon, which blasts ear-splitting noise in a directed beam, as it tried to ward off the attack.

"I tell you, it was a very frightening experience," Charles Supple, of Fiddletown, Calif., said by phone.

The retired physician and World War II veteran said he started to take a photograph of a pirate craft, and "the man with the bazooka aimed it right at me and I saw a big flash."

"Needless to say, I dropped the camera and dived. The grenade struck two decks above and about four rooms further forward," he said. "I could tell the guy firing the bazooka was smiling."

The Seabourn Spirit had been bound for Kenya when it was attacked by pirates armed with grenade launchers and machine guns on Saturday about 100 miles

off Somalia's lawless coast.

The sonic device that helped ward off the attack, known as a Long Range Acoustic Device, or LRAD, is a so-called "non-lethal weapon" developed for the military after the 2000 attack on the USS Cole in Yemen as a way to keep operators of small boats from approaching U.S. warships. Makers of the device compare its shrill tone to that of smoke detectors, only much louder.

The gunmen never got close enough to board the cruise ship, but one member of the 161-person crew was injured by shrapnel, according to the Miami-based Seabourn Cruise Line, a subsidiary of Carnival Corp.

Relieved holiday-makers praised the ship's captain for foiling the attack, but some said they were lucky to escape with their lives.

A woman survived an explosion in her stateroom simply because she was taking a bath at the time. Others flung themselves to the floor to avoid bullets that were zipping through the ship, Charles Forsdick, of Durban, South Africa, told Associated Press Television News.

Bob Meagher of Sydney, Australia, said he climbed out of bed and went to the door of his cabin shortly before 6 a.m. after hearing a commotion outside.

"I saw a white-hulled boat with men in it waving various things and shooting at the ship — at that stage it appeared to be rifle fire," he told Australian radio.

"My wife said, 'Look, they're loading a bazooka,' which we later discovered was called an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade) launcher."

"There was a flash of flame and then a huge boom — a terrible boom sound," he said, adding the grenade hit about 10 feet from where they were.

The liner had been at the end of a 16-day voyage from Alexandria, Egypt.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Monday that the attackers might have been terrorists. Others said the attack bore the hallmarks of pirates who have become increasingly active off Somalia, which has no navy and has not had an effective central government since 1991.

Manhunt for Texas inmate ends in Louisiana

HOUSTON — A convicted double-murderer who spent three days on the run after slipping away from a Houston jail was recaptured some 200 miles away — drunk and talking on a pay phone.

Police acting on a tip Sunday found Charles Victor Thompson, 35, standing outside a liquor store in Shreveport, La., said Harris County Sheriff's Lt. John Martin.


"You know who I am," Thompson told officers when asked his name. Asked again, he identified himself as Charles Thompson, Martin said. Police said Thompson was too drunk to be interrogated Sunday night.

The arrest ended a massive manhunt for Thompson, who was convicted in 1999 for the shooting deaths a year earlier of his ex-girlfriend, Dennise Hayslip, 39, and her boyfriend, Darren Keith Cain, 30.


"He never should have got out," Martin said. "To have him back in custody again, this is where he belongs. He was convicted of capital murder. He was twice sentenced to death. There is no scenario under which he should be free roaming around on the street."

Thompson escaped from custody Thursday using a smuggled set of clothes and a fake identification badge to get past guards. His escape resulted from "multiple errors" by jail personnel, Martin has said.

— The Associated Press





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