The McNeal Perspective: *NewsRadio*'s Most Lovable Egomaniac

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Abstract

*NewsRadio's* Bill McNeal is a pompous, overpaid, coddled and self-absorbed radio anchor who manipulates his co-workers into doing what he wants them to do. He has little work ethic compared with other members of the station's staff, but receives the highest salary. He is also inept at writing stories and editorials and relies on others to do that for him. The few times he tries to write his own editorials, they are in poor taste, ill informed or just downright idiotic. In short, he lives up to what *NewsRadio's* viewers might expect from a fictional news anchor. McNeal is a radio host, but his behavior is best explained by looking at fictional television anchors because he displays many of the same characteristics. McNeal differs from other anchors in film and television because his raging egomania is an obvious mask for many latent psychological wounds inflicted during his traumatic upbringing.
**Introduction**

Bill McNeal, played by Phil Hartman, is more than just the host of the fictional WNYX-AM 580 on the NBC sitcom *NewsRadio*. He's also a stereotype of the pompous broadcast journalist who cares more about himself than anything else in the world. Although he is a radio anchor, McNeal is modeled on other fictional television news anchors in that he receives the station’s highest salary, does the least amount of work and has an ego twice the size of the New York City skyscraper where the station is located. But where other fictional news anchors are somewhat one-dimensional, McNeal has a hidden side shredded with emotional scars from his painful upbringing. Throughout the four seasons he serves as host, it becomes obvious that McNeal's overblown exterior is his way of covering up his traumatic past. Not that anyone is expected to feel sorry for him--the extremes of McNeal's raging egomania combined with his damaged psyche actually counter each other. Once viewers start to feel sorry for him, he goes into a self-serving tirade that blocks any pity that might be coming his way. Still, he is very likable, and even the staff he torments for years still care about him. After Hartman was killed in real life between the fourth and fifth seasons, McNeal dies suddenly of a heart attack and is mourned by the staff during the first show of the fifth and final season.¹
Bill McNeal

McNeal was born on March 1, 1950. McNeal, whose real name is Evelyn and pronounced Eve-elyn, had a complicated childhood that left him with crippling emotional disorders he hides under his bloated ego. Regardless, McNeal still recounts these painful moments as though they were treasured family memories, full of "love and nurture" and "good-natured ribbing."

"I remember one time," reminisces McNeal, "my father came home from a night on the town, which of course had turned into a week, and my mother said, 'John, is there anything you won't drink?' And my father shot back, 'Poison! I'm saving it for you!' McNeal often concludes such disturbing stories by laughing nervously and slowly exhaling the phrase, "Ah, good times."

His mother was equally distant. McNeal says he likes to eat the old sandwiches in the station's vending machine because they remind him of the ones his mother used to make. "She'd make a month's worth at a time and leave them for me in a box on the porch. She was quite a woman."

When McNeal's mother was around, she wasn't very supportive. McNeal was cut from the high school football team, which prompted his mother to announce in front of his peers that "Central's lost a fullback, but the McNeals have gained a daughter."
McNeal also had trouble growing up with his now-alcoholic brother. Despite the fond manner in which McNeal talks about his brother's sadistic behavior, the stories he tells are shockingly, yet laughingly, disturbing. One time he was mouthing off to his brother, who then punched him so hard he was knocked out for a half hour. "When I woke up I was on the bus, completely nude, of course." During one family Christmas, his brother again stripped McNeal naked and locked him outside just as carolers were arriving. "Talk about a Merry Christmas!" laughs Bill, followed by "Ah, good times."

McNeal got his first taste of radio when he hosted a rock-music show from midnight to 6 a.m. at the University of Cincinnati, where he was the self-described "bad boy of WFIB." McNeal reveals that spent most of his college days and nights drunk and goofing off.

After justifying why hazing is a good thing, McNeal pours coffee and hot sauce on an intern's head as he remembers a story from his fraternity days. McNeal laughs about the time he and his frat brothers got a pledge drunk, locked him in a car trunk and left him at a junkyard. When McNeal's boss asks him how the pledge got out of the trunk, McNeal says he has to leave.

While trying to write his autobiography, McNeal laments that Dan Rather was the youngest AP photographer at age 19. McNeal's news director, Dave Nelson, asks what he was doing at 19. "Drinking," retorts McNeal. Later in the same episode, McNeal recounts his memories of the riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention. He would have been about 18. He says he witnessed the riots from his dorm-room TV while drinking.
In fact, McNeal owes his professional career to his alcohol abuse. He actually says radio is boring and that he only got a job in the business because his aunt owned a radio station. "She only hired me to try to get me to stop drinking," he says.\(^{14}\)

In his professional life, McNeal is best known, or at least he thinks he is, as the golden-voiced anchor of New York City's second-ranked news radio station. He loves smoking cigarettes almost more than anything, and often says he's most relaxed while not wearing pants. He's even done both at the same time while in the office.\(^{15}\)

Despite a review that once called him “adequate,” McNeal has an excellent voice.\(^{16}\) That’s probably why he is allowed to keep his job despite being otherwise inept as a journalist. He sounds and acts like a television news anchor, but he could never make the switch because he looks terrible on camera.\(^{17}\) While McNeal mostly reads what’s handed to him, he occasionally writes his own editorials in such segments as “The McNeal Perspective” and “The Real Deal With Bill McNeal.” McNeal never writes a decent editorial, as his segments are often poorly constructed and lead to unintended consequences. During one “McNeal Perspective,” the host chides another radio station for using the word *penis* because he says it is offensive. He even suggests whoever says the word *penis* on the air should be punished regardless of the context, not realizing that he is saying the word repeatedly on the air.\(^{18}\)

During one of his later “Real Deal With Bill McNeal” segments, he says that foreign diplomats who don’t have to pay parking tickets “should be dragged from their cars and beaten.” After that actually happens, he pens another editorial saying that the only person who should be beaten is “Joe Vigilante,” who, as it turns out, is a real person who ends up in the hospital.\(^{19}\)
McNeal often tells strangers that they probably recognize his voice from the show, but they never do. Not even the security guards in the lobby of the station's building know who he is, despite the fact they know everyone else in the office. That doesn't mean McNeal doesn't have his share of admirers. In one episode, he fears for his life because he thinks he is being stalked. It turns out to be a worker from the coffee shop across the street who merely wants McNeal's autograph. A few months later, a psychotic Santa Claus tells McNeal he's going to kill him, but later says it was just a ruse to get the anchor's attention because the Santa is actually an audition-tape-wielding journalism student. As it turns out, his tape contains a threatening message to McNeal after all. Co-worker and reporter Matthew Brock also has a long-running infatuation with McNeal, who returns Brock's admiration with nothing but insults.

McNeal likes to think of himself as a smooth-talking ladies man. But he's seen dating only one woman, and she thinks he's British because he spoke in a fake accent when she met him at a party. He's afraid she won't like him if she finds out he's really not British, so he keeps it up, even when she comes to visit the office and meets the staff.

McNeal's biggest brush with fame comes when he repeatedly impersonates President Bill Clinton on the air. The fake interviews become such a hit that McNeal is greeted in the street by strangers wanting to shake his hand. McNeal's impersonation brings in the highest ratings the station has seen since 1987. He also appears before a televised Senate committee, defending his right to hold fake interviews and not be censored. But this fame is inexplicably short-lived, as his national popularity is non-existent in subsequent episodes.
The WNYX Staff

Catherine Duke

At WNYX, McNeal co-hosts the daytime news broadcasts with Catherine Duke, played by Khandi Alexander, a sassy and strong-headed woman with whom McNeal once had a brief affair. Since then, the two spend most of their time trying to one-up each other, most often through insults and pranks. McNeal starts doing ads for a malt liquor brand called "Rocket Fuel" and tries to speak in a "frank street patois," while doing so, but just sounds like an idiot trying to talk street. Strangely enough, McNeal actually loves rap music—"it speaks to me in places I didn't know I had ears"—but only until he gets his stereo fixed and finds out the genre has words. After that, he hates rap music. That attitude could explain his inability to accurately mimic the lingo.

Duke, who is black, is annoyed and offended by McNeal's pathetic and exploitive attempts to sound street. She gets back at him by offering to update him on all the new slang words. McNeal writes them down feverishly and comes up with the following ad spot he reads on the air: "'Giziza dilznoofuses, Bill McNeal saying get with the crizappy taste of Rocket Fuel malt liquor. Rocket Fuel’s got the upstate prison flava that keeps you
ugly all night long. So you wanna get sick, remember—nothing makes your feet stank like Rocket Fuel malt liquor. Damn, it’s crizappy!" The malt liquor's advertising director shows up at the station immediately afterward and promptly stops McNeal from promoting the drink.27

Despite their feuds, McNeal is still attracted to Duke, who herself is disgusted with the thought of sleeping with her co-host again. McNeal thinks he has another shot with Duke when she leaves WNYX for a job in London because she invites him to her apartment before she leaves for the airport. But Duke never shows. Instead, McNeal is greeted by a nude Joe Garrelli, played by Joe Rogan, the station's electrician who also yearns for Duke, whom she also tricked into meeting her before she leaves.28

Duke returns after McNeal's funeral. In a note he had given to his lawyer in the event of his death, McNeal writes, "I'm sorry we only slept together that one time. I found your lovemaking technique delicious."29

**Dave Nelson**

McNeal spends a great deal of his time ribbing his boss, Nelson, played by Dave Foley. The host often says the news director looks like a 14-year-old. In turn, Nelson has a difficult time keeping a lid on McNeal's frequent outbursts and self-serving uprisings. When Nelson and billionaire station owner Jimmy James, played by Stephen Root, eliminate the free snacks in the kitchen to cut budget expenses, McNeal galvanizes the hungry staff, who have resorted to digging in the freezer to find old gum. "We should be working and enjoying free snacks," he says, "not foraging for frozen morsels like an ice-bound Brazilian soccer team." He then compares Nelson to Genghis Khan and calls him a
pharaoh. The rest of the staff says they'll support Bill in his fight to get the snacks back. Instead, Bill twists the situation to his own favor by demanding the station buy him a massage chair.  

Nelson is understandably shocked when McNeal doesn't protest another set of budget cuts that forces the station to get rid of nearly all its furniture. In fact, McNeal says everybody should stand behind Nelson and tough it out. Nelson says he remembers McNeal once said he'd rather drink water from a toilet than have to pay for soda. His suspicion aroused, Nelson discovers the station is making the cuts to help pay for McNeal’s raise that will pay him 16 times more than the station’s lowest paid employee.  

Although Nelson says he respects McNeal as a host, he doesn't have nice things to say about him as a person. That makes it tough for Nelson when McNeal tells him that the news director will be introducing him at a reception. Understandably, Nelson doesn't know what he'll say or how he'll say it, but McNeal happily steps in to coach Nelson to be sure he has nothing but the most glowing things to say. Nelson becomes frustrated when McNeal berates him while he's practicing the speech, prompting Nelson to say that McNeal is the "most selfish, egotistical person I've ever had to work with." Seconds later, Nelson introduces McNeal at the reception with nothing but flowery praise.  

But Nelson also takes shots back at McNeal. One day, McNeal struts back into the office from lunch sporting a fancy wooden cane topped with a brass knob. "Great cane weather," he tells Nelson, who says this is just a sad cry for attention. When McNeal refuses to get rid of the cane, it mysteriously disappears. McNeal later finds that Nelson stole it and taped it to the building outside a window. McNeal is happy to find it, but then
Nelson breaks the cane over his knee. Not to be outdone, McNeal has already bought dozens more canes and has the secretary toss them to him through Nelson's office door.

**Lisa Miller**

McNeal constantly hits on Lisa Miller, WNYX's overachieving star reporter played by Maura Tierney. While this is highly inappropriate, Miller's multi-season affair with Nelson is also very unprofessional, as well as a constant source of gossip for McNeal. But the relationship between Miller and Nelson never stops McNeal from trying to move in on the reporter.

McNeal asks to see her naked on several occasions, although that's no anomaly for the anchor. McNeal hits on nearly every woman in sight. After his death, the staff discovers that on the back of every card in McNeal's Rolodex is a sketch of what he thinks that person looks like naked. He is especially persistent with Miller. He calls her at home several times after digging through the dumpster in the building's loading dock. In his personal note to Miller that she reads after his death, McNeal writes, "I'm sorry I was so obsessed with what you looked like naked. I'm much more sorry I never actually got the chance to see you naked. Please think of me the next time you're naked because if it is at all possible to become a ghost, I will be there appreciating you in all of your naked splendor."

Miller, of course, is disgusted with McNeal's feeble attempts to get her into bed. One day, when McNeal is especially persistent with her, Miller tells him she wouldn't sleep with him if they were the last two people on earth. She says she would rather kill herself than spread his genes.
Matthew Brock

McNeal’s love of the station’s female staff could probably never be matched by reporter Matthew Brock’s love of McNeal. Brock, played by Andy Dick, is an innocently dim-witted reporter that is constantly falling down, slipping or breaking office equipment. Brock often sings nonsensical songs about elves and unicorns and owns two cats named Chew Chew and Mit Mit. He is also infatuated with McNeal. When the staff is giving one another their performance evaluations, Brock tells Beth, the station’s secretary whose last name is never revealed, that McNeal is great and that she should focus on dressing like the host. Nelson cuts in to tell Brock that McNeal isn’t a god. “Time will tell,” responds Brock. McNeal is always mean back to Brock, often calling him "spaz" and making fun of him. One day during a staff meeting, McNeal is especially vicious with Brock, prompting the reporter to run into Nelson’s office and cry. There, Nelson tells Brock that McNeal might respect him more if he stood up for himself. Brock responds by punching McNeal in the face, which actually wins him McNeal’s temporary respect.

Beth

Although McNeal lusts after all three female members of the staff, he probably spends the least amount of time hitting on Beth, the station’s wardrobe-daring secretary and self-described spunky redhead, played by Vicki Lewis. In fact, she kisses him after he takes her to a broadcaster’s lunch in a limousine, and he doesn’t kiss her back, saying that he’s afraid to be alone with her now. Instead, he spends most of his time
commenting on how little money she makes. After he gets a huge raise that nearly bankrupts the station because it pays him 16 times more than Beth earns, he says that 16 times “next to nothing” is practically nothing. When he is stuck at an airport in St. Louis with Dave, McNeal put Beth in charge of watering the plants in his apartment. She arrives with Brock, only to discover that the apartment is a sex den, complete with furry, rotating bed, clap-on music and a fully stocked hideaway bar that disappears behind a sliding wall. Brock doesn't understand why the apartment is set up the way it is but finds himself strangely attracted to Beth. She must explain to the dimwitted reporter that McNeal needs his apartment set up like this because he needs people to love him "only for short periods of time." McNeal later leaves a message on the apartment's answering machine, asking the real tenant, Barry, who is a busy gigolo, to water his plants because he knows Beth will go to the wrong apartment. Beth and Brock hear this and walk out.

Joe Garrelli

Garrelli is the station's electrician who uses duct tape to fix everything and never buys electrical devices, instead unsuccessfully rigging them up himself. His jury-rigged wiring often shorts. He is paranoid, he often shares with the staff several of his conspiracy theories and he's also a tough guy with lot of muscles. But Garrelli is smart. McNeal often underestimates the blue-collar electrician's intelligence. When Duke is out sick one day, McNeal brings Garrelli into the booth as a fill-in to make both him and Duke look better. To McNeal's surprise, Garrelli is a superb host and McNeal runs to Nelson to say he no longer thinks Garrelli is any good. McNeal then quizzes Garrelli on the air about the minor details of elements from the day's stories, but Garrelli gives
McNeal then snatches away a page of the script from Garrelli, who then recites the story by memory.44

McNeal often secretly comes to Garrelli when he needs help finding a specific electronic device. When McNeal thinks he has a stalker, he asks Garrelli where he can buy a taser. Garrelli tells McNeal he shouldn't waste his money. The electrician builds a taser out of a garage door opener. McNeal doesn't believe the contraption works, but electrocutes himself while testing it out, rendering himself immobile. That's when the so-called stalker walks in, and turns out to be just a fan looking for an autograph.45

When McNeal wants to get a voice modulator in the broadcast booth to give his delivery more resonance, he asks Garrelli where he can buy a piece of equipment to do that. On cue, Garrelli says he can just make one himself. Garrelli’s homemade “Voice-Mo-Tron 3000” doesn’t work right and also shorts out. It turns out that McNeal doesn’t need a modulator to give his voice a booming echo because he can do it without the aid of a modulator. “I don’t pretend to know the physics of it,” says McNeal. But he also says that if he does it for too long he gets intense headaches and blackouts.46

Jimmy James

McNeal has a generally positive relationship with the station's owner, billionaire eccentric Jimmy James. The owner often tells stories that go nowhere or anecdotes that don't make any sense. But he truly cares about McNeal and the rest of his staff, once declining to sell the station for a huge sum because he says the people who worked there meant the world to him.47
James lets McNeal get away with pretty much anything, so long as the host delivers good ratings. James sees how valuable McNeal, or at least his voice, is to the station. It's revealed in one episode that McNeal consistently receives a $4,000 bonus every year while the rest of the staff gets about $400 each.\(^{48}\) James also is willing to nearly bankrupt the station by giving McNeal a monstrous secret bonus. But after Nelson protests, James solves the problem by assigning McNeal an additional position in another one of his companies to split his salary. But it's more than a paper title--he makes McNeal clean his pool and serve him snacks while the rest of the staff enjoy the pool party.\(^{49}\)

**Conclusion: The 'Real' Deal With Bill McNeal**

Real-life critics look past McNeal’s ineptitude as a journalist, often citing him as the driving force behind *NewsRadio*. *Slate*’s Jessica Winter said Phil Hartman was “unsurpassed,” and that McNeal was “*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s Ted Baxter all the way: brashly incompetent, operatically pompous, missing a superego and slightly befuddled for the lack of it.”\(^{50}\)

Although Baxter portrayed a television news anchorman, many of his characteristics fit McNeal’s: pompous, self-obsessed, coddled, clueless and lacking any real journalism skills. News anchors are commonly portrayed this way in pop culture, whether that’s a justified portrait or not. Characters like Baxter and McNeal, as well as the film *Anchorman*’s Ron Burgundy, *The Simpsons*’ Kent Brockman and countless bit parts in movies and television throughout the past four decades have splashed the role of an anchorman with an indelible stain of egomania, arrogance and occasional
incompetence. In fact, McNeal, Burgundy and Brockman all derive much of their character traits from Baxter. All of these newsmen fit the "mold for the cheesy, vain, intellectually vacant, superficially self-confident but ultimately insecure newscaster."

Viewers have seen so many portrayals of these types of buffoon anchors that "larger than life fictional characters" like McNeal "overwhelm their less vivid real life contemporaries." In other words, viewers expect a character like McNeal to be arrogant because that's what they've been used to seeing in other movies or television shows.

At the same time, broadcast journalists are much more visible than print journalists, and so are their mistakes. If a finely coiffed and news anchor donning makeup flubs a line or misses a cue, he might be caught staring into the camera for a little too long and do a good enough job of parodying himself. So while viewers are bombarded with images of fictional news anchors acting like idiots, they are also exposed to images of real anchors that somewhat validate viewers' preconceptions.

McNeal's pompous act is also a blatant attempt to cover up his utter lack of self-confidence stemming from his traumatic childhood. McNeal’s painful memories are so over-the-top, they are often funny. Other fictional anchors have demonstrated that their egos are covering up inner feelings, such as Brockman’s jealousy over his sister being a big-shot CNN correspondent or Burgundy’s secret longing for someone to love. But none seems as traumatized, or as hilarious, as McNeal. “There's a good deal of flamboyant rage pent up inside Bill McNeal,” wrote Edmonton Journal TV critic Richard Helm. “But rage is funny.”

Regardless, McNeal works as a singular character because he fills two distinct categories at once--the blowhard egomaniacal news anchor that viewers love to hate, and
the emotionally crippled man-child hiding underneath a blustery exterior whom viewers feel sorry for. By straddling this fine line, McNeal pays homage to the negative image of the pompous news anchor while also adding a new twist to the stereotype.

**Endnotes**


5 Episode 41: "Led Zeppelin Boxed Set," *NewsRadio*.


7 Episode 41: "Led Zeppelin Boxed Set," *NewsRadio*.

8 ibid

9 ibid


13 ibid

14 ibid


54 McCullough, Michael. “Decoding an anchorman: The vain, vacant (think Ted Baxter) TV news reader disappeared years ago, replaced by the intelligent, informed journalists
we see on the screen today. But the caricature persists.” *The Vancouver Sun* 10 July 2004: C1.


56 ibid, p. 3.


Bibliography

Bill meets the station's new news director, Dave.

Bill throws Catherine an unwanted birthday party.

Bill discovers smoking's no longer allowed in the office.

Bill tells Dave how to cover a subway accident.

Bill guns for the office's big bonus.

Bill takes Beth to a journalist's luncheon where she kisses him.

Bill meets Dave's ex-girlfriend, who is crazy.

Bill peeks at naked photos that Beth took of herself.

Bill thinks someone is stalking him.
Bill eulogizes the office rat.

Bill teases Catherine on her birthday but won’t tell her when he was born.

Bill buys his own cubicle so he can smoke and take his pants off at work.

Bill lost his building ID and the guards won’t let him in.

Bill tries to write his autobiography.

Bill torments Matthew after the reporter is promoted.

Bill gets a new cane, which annoys Dave.

Bill thinks the lobby Santa Claus is stalking him.

Bill protests a station sale.

Bill makes fun of Dave when he thinks he's out for the day.

Bill coaches Dave on how to introduce the host at a dinner in his honor.


Bill mourns the loss of the sandwich vending machine.

Bill contemplates his mortality when a psychic says he will die soon.

Bill wins an award.

Bill daydreams about affairs with the office women.

Bill says James Caan is his friend and invites him into the office.

Bill wants Jimmy to give him stock tips.

Bill leaves work early for the holidays.

Bill joins a gym.

Bill is turned off by rap music's lyrics.

Bill reveals his painful past after Matthew punches him in the face.

Bill submits fake complaints into the new complaint box.


Bill interviews a jumper on the office's ledge.

Bill auditions for a TV news job.

Bill starts playing piano in the office.

Bill fears for his job after an efficiency expert is brought in.

Bill's editorials incite violence.

Bill does fake interviews with Bill Clinton on the air.

Bill tries to get in bed with Catherine before she moves away.

Bill tries to coach Beth in singing.

Bill hires a butler.

Bill wants to adopt a child.

Bill makes fun of Dave for his college a cappella group.


Helm, Richard, “Rage becomes new rage for comedian” (The Ottawa Citizen, August 31, 1995).

Leopold, Todd, "And Now, the News" (CNN.com, July 9, 2004).

McCullough, Michael, “Decoding an anchorman: The vain, vacant (think Ted Baxter) TV news reader disappeared years ago, replaced by the intelligent, informed journalists we see on the screen today. But the caricature persists.” (The Vancouver Sun 10 July 2004).

Nerland, Emily, Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy.

