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02:20 PM - December 30, 2014

The Interview reinforces a negative view of US journalists

The history of kidnapped journalists is filled with tragic tales of reporters being mistaken for spies

By Peter Klein

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The Interview is a dangerous movie. The first victim was Sony, which had electronic files hacked in an intrusion **that revealed shocking details**: like the fact that one of its executives wanted to cast a black actor as James Bond, and that many people at Sony can't spell. But another more serious group of victims haven't yet been mentioned: journalists who work in dangerous parts of the world.

The film, which was released over the Christmas holiday, depicts two goofy journalists, played by Seth Rogen and James Franco, who score an interview with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and who are recruited by the CIA to kill him. Rogen's character, the producer of a television interview program, was supposedly educated at my alma mater, Columbia School of Journalism, but seemed to have no qualms about crossing what I recall was one of the most indelibly-inked lines of journalism ethics: don't do the bidding of the CIA.

Why make a big deal of a movie that's clearly fiction? Because it plays right into the farcical notions of the world's tyrannical leaders - that journalists are secretly working for the CIA, an assumption which carries tragic consequences.

Reporter James Foley, who was beheaded by ISIS earlier this year, was accused of working for MI-6. *Newsweek* correspondent Maziar Bahari was arrested in Iran on suspicion of being a spy. *Washington Post* reporter Jason Rezaian is still in an Iranian prison, accused of espionage. *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl was accused of working for the CIA before his execution. The history of kidnapped journalists—from Terry Anderson in Beirut, to Bob Simon in Baghdad, to David Rohde in Serbia—is filled with tragic tales of reporters being mistaken for spies.

It doesn't help when pop culture reinforces the false image of reporters-turned-special agents. Or agents posing as reporters. The critically acclaimed TV show *Homeland* this past season had the CIA station chief in Pakistan, Carrie Mathison, pretending to be a reporter in order to convince a young man to reveal information about his terrorist uncle.

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Mathison is a rogue agent, and the mission is not authorized by Langley, but the perception of spies posing as reporters is there for viewers all over the world to see.

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#1 Posted by **Jonathan** on Tue 30 Dec 2014 at 03:15 PM

Another float in the seemingly endless parade of ridiculous, blowhardy, harumph-filled arguments based on the notion that the movie itself should be taken seriously on any level -- as "propaganda," as a political statement, or as a "dangerous" depiction of anything.

"Why make a big deal of a movie that's clearly fiction?"

Because it's not just "fiction." It's a dumb Seth Rogen comedy. I haven't seen it, but it's probably pretty funny - and pretty dumb. And not to be taken seriously in any way.

The lunatic comment from Jonathan is altogether perfect, too, assuming it isn't a joke.

#2 Posted by **Dan Mitchell** on Tue 30 Dec 2014 at 03:32 PM

Spies using journalistic cover is an old established custom.

Here is an excerpt from the obit of Austin Goodrich (note that no less than 22 U.S. news organizations provided cover).

Austin Goodrich, Spy Who Posed as Journalist, Dies at 87
By BRUCE WEBER
Published: July 10, 2013

Austin Goodrich, an American spy who used credentials as a journalist, including from CBS News, to establish his cover during cold war postings abroad, died on June 9 at his home in Port Washington, Wis. He was 87.

The cause was Alzheimer's disease, his daughter Kristina Goodrich said.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Mr. Goodrich was far from the only journalist doubling as a secret agent. Several who did so, along with some top news executives, later said that during the cold war the separation between the news media and the government was considerably more negotiable than it subsequently became.

However, it was not until the 1970s, after the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence investigated the Central Intelligence Agency, that reports by Rolling Stone magazine and The New York Times revealed that journalists from myriad news organizations had served the agency in various capacities, sometimes with the full knowledge of their employers. Mr. Goodrich became one of the first examples of a journalist-spy to be publicly disclosed.

The Times reported that at least 22 American news organizations, including CBS News and Time, Life and Newsweek magazines, as well as The Times itself, "had employed, though sometimes only on a casual basis, American journalists who were also working for the C.I.A.," and that "in a few instances the organizations were aware of the C.I.A. connection, but most of them appear not to have been."

One case involved an AP reporter (name forgotten) who holed up in an embassy in Budapest for many years after he was unmasked. .

The, of course there were Brits such as Kim Philby who used journalistic cover.

Brney Kirchhoff, Paris

#3 Posted by **barney lirschhoff** on Tue 30 Dec 2014 at 04:24 PM

This assumes the Rogen and Franco characters are journalists; at least the first part of your article does. Rogen's may have been educated at CJS, but he was obviously not a practicing journalist. More a sensationalist.

This does not, however, negate the danger you bring up later in the article.

#4 Posted by **Michele Emrath** on Sun 4 Jan 2015 at 09:15 AM

I agree - another instance of spying activities that have besmirched important public functions was the CIA looking for bin Laden under the guise of healthcare workers giving vaccinations - this one with tragic results ...

#5 Posted by **Aquifer** on Thu 8 Jan 2015 at 01:38 PM

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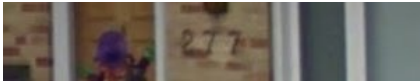
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