

December 30, 2014 COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REEVIEW

***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](#)

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. 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.

There is good reason for the confusion, since CIA agents did, indeed, use the journalism cover for many years, posing as agents using fake media credentials. And throughout several decades of the Cold War, the agency recruited hundreds of journalists to do their bidding as well. The cleverly-named Operation Mockingbird was run by top agency officials, including Richard Helms, the future CIA director who started his career as a reporter and famously interviewed Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Olympics. There's no doubt that Helms and others at the CIA realized how the work of journalists is similar to that of spies—getting close to important sources and gathering information from them. In the hyper-patriotic post-war era, it was apparently easy to recruit some of the top news organizations in the US to participate.

The Church Commission hearings in 1976 put an end to these practices, and that year then-CIA director George H.W. Bush announced: "Effective immediately, the CIA will not enter into any paid or contract relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station."

That would mean that Rogen and Franco's characters, with their plot to poison the North Korean leader, would have been subverting the law.

The FBI hasn't helped matters. In 2007, an agent posed as a reporter with the Associated Press and emailed the teenaged suspect in several bomb threats at a Seattle high school. Appealing to the bomber's narcissism, the fake reporter asked him to review an article, and by clicking on the link, the high school student revealed his location, leading to his arrest.

In *The New York Times*, FBI director James Comey wrote a [letter to the editor](#) arguing that the tactic was legal and appropriate, since it did not result in any actual work of journalism. But Comey missed the point. By blurring the line, the FBI added fuel to future suspicions that any journalist could be an undercover agent.

It is a sad fact that there will surely be more detentions, kidnappings and executions of journalists in the future, and some will likely be accused of being spies. The blame for those attacks will be squarely on the terrorists, but there is no reason for Hollywood to give them any more reason to be confused about what reporters do abroad—report, not spy.