

stand-alone station in a small market with a singular personality, a unique voice, a quirky and

even risky format will be absorbed, forgotten, or left to public funding."

Up in Flames

"It Didn't Start with *Dateline NBC*" by Walter Olson, in *National Review* (June 21, 1993), 150 E. 35th St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

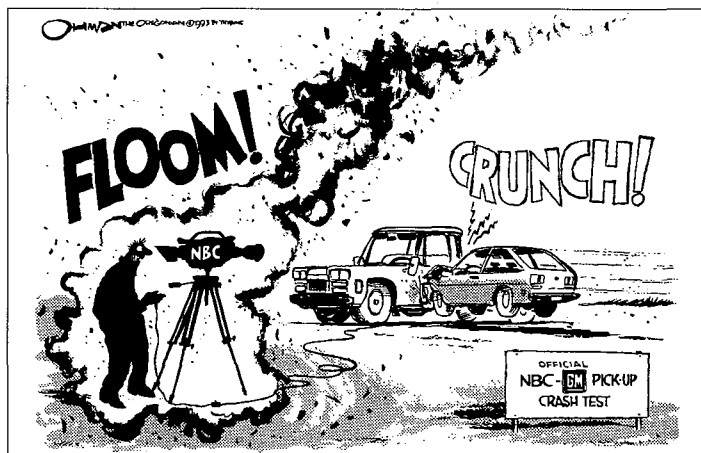
When NBC News admitted earlier this year that the dramatic crash test shown on a "Dateline NBC" broadcast last November had been rigged, the fiasco was widely portrayed as, in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*, "an unprecedented disaster in the annals of network news." The use of hidden toy-rocket engines to ensure that the GM truck burst into flames was "not something anybody at '60 Minutes' would do," declared Don Hewitt, executive producer of the long-running CBS news show. Olson, a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, maintains that in fact the same sort of thing *has* happened on "60 Minutes" and other network news shows.

Fourteen years before the "Dateline NBC" broadcast, viewers of ABC's "20/20" saw a crash fire and explosion—and were not told it was started with an incendiary device. It was June 1978 and the outcry about the Ford Pinto was at its height. "20/20" reported "startling" evidence that many full-size Ford models could also explode when hit from behind. Film was aired from "secret" tests done at UCLA in 1967 by researchers working under contract to the automaker, and it showed "a Ford sedan being rear-ended at 55 m.p.h. and bursting into a fireball." Viewers were not told that in a published report 10 years earlier the testers explained that they had wanted to study the effect of a crash fire on a car's passenger compartment and, since crash fires happened very rarely, they had used an incendiary device to produce one.

"Perhaps the best-known

and best-refuted auto-safety scare of recent years," Olson says, was a "60 Minutes" attack in 1986 on the Audi 6000. "The Audi, it seemed, was a car possessed by demons. It would back into garages, dart into swimming pools, plow into bank-teller lines, everything but fly on broomsticks, all while its hapless drivers were standing on the brake—or at least so they said." The Audi's accelerator and brake pedals were closer together and farther to the left than those in many American cars, but "60 Minutes" investigators did not think that drivers were simply hitting the wrong pedal. Film was shown of an Audi mysteriously accelerating while reporter Ed Bradley told viewers to "watch the pedal go down by itself." The demonstration had been prepared by a man who testified as an expert witness against the carmaker and who was quoted by "60 Minutes" as saying that "unusually high transmission pressure" could build up and cause problems. Bradley did not tell viewers, however, that the expert "had drilled a hole in the . . . car's transmission and attached a hose leading to a tank of compressed air or fluid."

That was not the only time "60 Minutes" stooped to conquer, according to Olson:



NBC News was ridiculed when it was revealed that a "Dateline NBC" crash was rigged. But NBC was the last network to get into "dubious safety journalism in a big way," Olson says, and the only one to apologize.

• In March 1981, "60 Minutes" "reveal[ed] how the most common type of tire rim used on heavy trucks can fly off, killing or maiming tire mechanics and other bystanders." Film showed an exploding rim shredding two dummies, but viewers were not told that the rims' locking mechanism had been shaved off for the test.

• In December 1980, "60 Minutes" disclosed that Chrysler/AMC's small "CJ" Jeep was apt to roll over, "even in routine road circumstances at relatively low speeds." Footage of tests was shown which appeared to support the conten-

tion. Viewers were not told, Olson says, that testers had to put the Jeeps through 435 trials to get eight rollovers. (Chrysler says the repeated skids wore down the tire tread and contributed to the rollover.) Nor were viewers told that the testers had hung weights in the vehicles' corners, inside the body and out of camera view. An investigative engineer at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration later concluded that the tests were of "questionable" validity. The same, it seems, might be said of some TV "news" shows.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Robbing Bakhtin's Grave

"Prosaic Bakhtin: Landmarks, Anti-Intelligentsialism, and the Russian Counter-Tradition" by Gary Saul Morson, in *Common Knowledge* (Spring 1993), School of Arts and Humanities, Univ. of Texas at Dallas, Box 830688-JO 31, Richardson, Texas 75083-0688; "Bakhtin and the Present Moment" by Gary Saul Morson, in *The American Scholar* (Spring 1991), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), perhaps the leading Russian literary and cultural critic of this century, has suffered a strange fate in America, according to Northwestern University's Morson, co-author of *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (1990). He was hostile to structuralism, Marxism, and some forms of relativism—yet American proponents of these doctrines have claimed the great thinker as one of their own.

Bakhtin, who apparently "spent the better part of his life hiding from the [Communist] Party to escape arrest," wrote a great deal but published very little. Although *Dostoevsky's Creative Art* came out during the 1920s and was a success, Morson says, it was not until a collection of Bakhtin's work "for the drawer" appeared in 1975 that "his range and greatness" was revealed. Various tribes of American academics then began "an intense and unseemly competition" to "package" this new find.

"Despite his unremitting attacks on formalism and structuralism, followers of Roman

Jakobson—who had been active in both groups—initially claimed Bakhtin for both." Then, as structuralism began to fall out of fashion, Morson says, "a new poststructuralist, postmodern, deconstructionist Bakhtin was born. Thus, a thinker who spent his life trying to understand personal ethical obligation was presented as an antinomian or nihilist."

In two essays that Bakhtin wrote about Tolstoy, Morson acknowledges, he did "ape Marxist rhetoric"—but "so unsuccessfully that it is uncertain whether they are merely his worst work or an attempt at parody and oblique political critique." Marxism is conspicuously absent from his early essays on ethics and aesthetics, Morson says, yet Michael Holquist, the editor of most American translations of Bakhtin, "labors [in an introduction to those essays] to render the great thinker acceptable" by giving him Marxist credentials.

Most of Bakhtin's intellectual career, Morson writes, "was devoted to developing the contrast of theory and daily life, of abstractions and particulars, of philosophical systems and what he called 'prosaic intelligence.'" Wary of the narrowness and sense of superiority that often afflict the intelligentsia, Bakhtin belonged instead to a Russian countertradition that included Anton Chekhov. In the eyes of Bakhtin and the countertradition, Morson says, "systems [of thought] at best mislead and at worst justify cruelty in the name of a higher ideal."