

Re: TV News -- Apollo-11 'One Small Step' Shown Right/Wrong??

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Jim Oberg wrote:

- > *Tonight on the news programs -- everybody please watch to see who uses the*
- > *'One small step' audio correctly with proper video clip, and who flubs it as*
- > *described below.*

Actually, I've been flipping through the national news programs for the last 45 minutes or so. CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, FNC, CNBC, MSNBC, and 2 different PBS stations. I've practically got my finger taped to the damn Favorites button. I've seen absolutely zero mention of the Apollo 11 anniversary. The sad state of affairs you wrote about 10 years ago, Jim, looks like the good old days by comparison.

- > *Apollo-11 TV Documentary Misrepresentations*
- >
- > *James Oberg // submitted manuscript // July 31, 1994*
- > *Published in edited form in Aug 8, 1994, Wall Street Journal*
- >
- > *The recent blizzard of Apollo-11 anniversary programs was a fine tribute to*
- > *that historical achievement of the American space program. The events of a*
- > *quarter century ago came back to life in the dramatic portrayal seen on*
- > *millions of television screens. But at the same time, many of the programs*
- > *also displayed the sloppy errors, distortions and revisionist dramatizations*
- > *which have come to characterize much of television journalism.*

<snip>

- > *Clearly, none of these hypothetical cases can be considered acceptable.*
- > *Anyone trying to do so would be considered irresponsible, even unethical.*
- > *And since there are legions of history buffs, ship buffs, and sports buffs*
- > *out there, any such attempts would be immediately recognized and widely*
- > *criticized.*

OTOH all of these cases would be considered perfectly acceptable today.

The networks have all but abandoned journalistic integrity in the name of ratings and profits. It's something that's been developing for several years now. Made-for-TV dramatizations and re-enactments have

relegated anyone with a sense of outrage over this to the scrap heap. An entire generation is growing up that won't remember it being any other way.

<snip>

- > *In illustrating a Mercury splashdown, the TBS special 4-hour program "Moon Shot" used views of a Gemini splashdown instead. The difference is that*
- > *Mercury capsules landed vertically beneath a parachute while Gemini capsules*
- > *were slung horizontally from two separate lines below the parachute. On July*
- > *20, CNN showed Apollo-11 graphics of a moon-walking astronaut whose*
- > *spacesuit had red leg stripes not introduced until Apollo-13. "Space buffs"*
- > *gleefully spotted the errors, but viewers were unlikely to be misled by*
- > *these minor slipups.*

In 1969 there was a girl who lived next door to us. She was 10 and I wasn't much older. To this day I remember her whining about how put out she was that the TV stations were pre-empting Bewitched for the "stupid astronauts." I remember her standing in our back yard and saying that as clear as a fucking bell. I was appalled *then*. Tonight, wherever she is, I'll bet she's glad the reports looking back on Apollo 11 are confined to the news programs and not interrupting her weekly dose of Big Brother 5.

<snip>

- > *Some historical visual scenes are certainly "interchangeable" by even the*
- > *tightest standards, since no viewer is misled by showing one Gemini launch*
- > *for another, or one group of engineers in Mission Control for another*
- > *(unless, say, their actions are allegedly keyed to some event being*
- > *described), or one "out the window" Earth or moon view for another. The*
- > *criteria is clearly whether viewers will gain an authentic impression of the*
- > *event, or not.*

Giving authentic impressions does not add to the bottom line when there are benign ways and means available to enhance the viewing experience. Worrying about the pesky details detracts from the real job at hand. After all, they're not *really* trying to mislead anybody ;-)

<snip>

- > *To make use of a recently released Russian filmclip showing burning men*
- > *running from a rocket pad fire, Ted Turner's "Moon Shot" used the shocking*
- > *scenes to illustrate a 1969 Soviet moon rocket explosion, with a narrator*
- > *comment about reminders of the dangers of space flight. The horrible film*
- > *was actually from a military missile mishap in 1960 that killed 165 men, but*
- > *really had nothing to do with the Russian space exploration program. The*
- > *"Moon Shot" producers must have known this, yet evidently decided to*
- > *misrepresent it for dramatic effects (that is, to deceive their viewers),*
- > *even though nobody was killed in the actual 1969 Russian moon rocket*
- > *explosion which was the subject of the sequence.*

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Exactly. Rocket + explosion + run for your lives = sensational. That the film was unrelated to the incident in question is a trifling detail. It dramatizes the danger in a visually intense manner.

<snip>

> *The most egregious misrepresentation in "Moon Shot" was during the treatment of the Apollo-11 fire in 1967. As the narrator discusses the death of the three astronauts inside their burning capsule, a video is running of flames dancing behind a spacecraft window. TV critics who previewed the show called the scene "wrenching", as indeed its producers had intended it to be. But the video was actually a view from inside a Gemini capsule looking outward during the flames of reentry from space, and it had nothing to do with the Apollo fire. Instead, for emotional impact, the view was falsely described and the viewers were deliberately deceived.*

But it showed real fire through a real spacecraft window. That's good enough by today's standards.

> *Some of these Apollo-11 historical video howlers have wider national implications, beyond mere questions of TV documentary ethics and practices. At the "Space Center Houston" museum developed for NASA by Disney consultants and their contractors, the feature movie "On Human Destiny" uses the false Gemini reentry plume for the Apollo lunar burn, then falsely portrays the flight control team in an orgy of irresponsible celebration immediately after the lunar touchdown, and then inaccurately overlays the view of Armstrong's descent down the ladder with his later words about "one small step". The film was reviewed and approved by NASA public affairs officials, who evidently did not recognize the errors. But if this is the level of Disney's historical reliability, it bodes ill for any similar Disney history projects elsewhere.*

Disney = ESPN = ABC. Does anyone expect things to get better?

> *Documentaries such as these shows have presented exciting views of the dramatic historical events, but providing entertainment was clearly their primary goal. Historical accuracy was repeatedly sacrificed to do so. These*

Bingo. I trace the decline and fall of network news to the day when ABC merged its News division into its Entertainment division.

> *measures certainly are acceptable when the goals are well understood, such as in the delightfully entertaining Hollywood version of "The Right Stuff", where all pretence of respecting the book's historical accuracy is subordinated to clear-cut visual stereotypes and amusing oversimplifications. And deadline-driven TV news programs often use stock footage, not always carefully labeled as such, to "fill in" for unavailable authentic scenes. But when TV programs pose as "true history" and are presented as documentaries, a higher standard of authenticity should be required.*

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Those days are long gone, James. Dwelling on the events of the past to the point where you have to be accurate down to the tiniest detail doesn't sell anything outside of Hollywood.

> *The Apollo-11 anniversary programs showed again that such standards are not*
> *universally met. Some programs, such as Discovery's "One Giant Leap", were*
> *strikingly accurate, showing signs that some producers took the extra*
> *trouble to "get it right", and knew how to do so. But the widespread*
> *misrepresentations in other shows are more reminders that people should seek*
> *truth where it can be found, and the TV screen, with its need for visual*
> *excitement and compressed action, is not an environment always conducive to*
> *historical accuracy.*

10 years ago this was borderline scandalous. Today it's standard operating procedure. In another 10 years everyone under the age of 30 will be saying, "But that's the way it's always been." I would not be at all surprised if they talk about Apollo 11 tonight and show footage of the Space Shuttle. I hope they do it justice but I'm looking forward more to the Nova program about String Theory at 8 Eastern.

After watching the nightly news programs I'll be surprised if Apollo 11 gets mentioned period.

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bp

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