

A powerful video prankster could become Max Jailroom

By John Camper

An off-color skit starring a bare-bottomed imitator of television character Max Headroom showed up on Chicago-area TV screens Sunday night, evidently the work of a sophisticated video pirate with an unsophisticated sense of humor.

Officials of the Federal Communications Commission were not amused as they searched Monday for clues to the identity of the pirate, who somehow managed to override the signals of two television stations in two hours.

The bizarre 1½-minute skit, which ended with "Max" pulling down his pants and getting

paddled with a fly swatter, interrupted a WTTW (Channel 11) broadcast of the British science fiction series "Dr. Who" at 11:10 p.m.

Two hours earlier, the "Max" character made an unauthorized 28-second appearance in the middle of a newscast on WGN (Channel 9), but was zapped by an alert engineer before the imposter could do anything offensive.

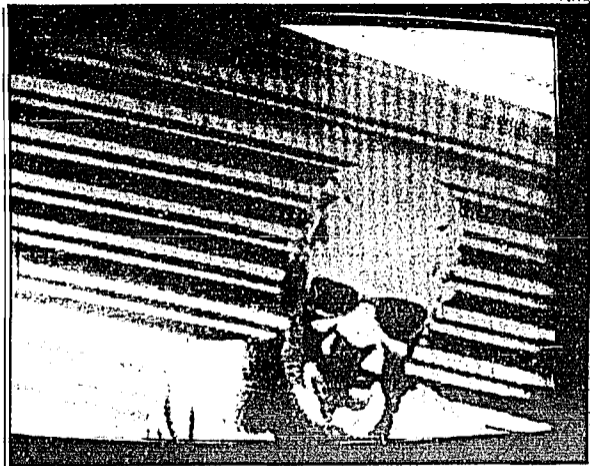
Television engineers speculated that the stations had been victimized by a practical joker with an expensive transmitter. They said it would take extremely high-powered equipment to squeeze out the microwave sig-

nals that carry the programs from the stations' Northwest Side studios to downtown skyscrapers, where they are retransmitted to television sets throughout the Chicago area.

"You need a significant amount of power to do that," said Robert Strutzel, WGN's director of engineering, who was reluctant to discuss the prank in detail for fear of providing a "how to" guide for others. "The interfering signal has to be quite strong."

"This guy had to have quite a rig," said Larry Inman, chief engineer of an Urbana station, WILL-TV. "Transmitters with

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Tribune photo by Phil Greer

A Max Headroom imposter invaded some TV screens Sunday night when a sophisticated video pirate with an unsophisticated sense of humor overrode signals from Channels 9 and 11.

Video

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that much power cost \$400,000 to \$600,000."

Strutzel speculated that the pirate operated from somewhere on the city's North or Northwest Sides, between the two studios and their downtown transmitters. WGN has studios at 2501 W. Bradley Pl. and transmits from the top of the John Hancock Center. WTTW's studios are at 5400 N. St. Louis Ave. and its transmitter is atop the Sears Tower.

The first interruption occurred at 9:14 p.m. during videotaped highlights of the Chicago Bears game on WGN's newscast. A character wearing a Max Headroom mask gyrated for almost half a minute but did not make audible sounds.

Strutzel said an engineer quickly changed the frequency of the signal that was transmitting the news show to the Hancock building, thus breaking the lock established by the video pirate. Sports reporter Dan Rohn apologized for the interference and continued the sports report.

Two hours later, a "Dr. Who" episode called "Horror of Fang Rock" on Channel 11 was interrupted by wobbling black and white lines. Then the character in the "Max Headroom" mask appeared and swayed back and forth while saying a number of barely audible words.

Among the words that could be heard were "Chuck Swirsky" (the name of a WGN sportscaster), "TV studio," "great newspaper" and "but it's dirty."

"Max" picked up a can of Pepsi-Cola (the real Max Headroom advertises Coca-Cola) and threw it away, then picked up another can and threw it away. He then put on what looked like a glove.

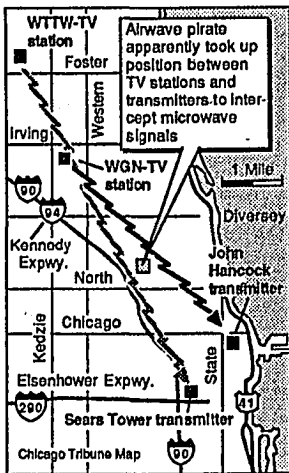
"Max" bent over, exposed his bare buttocks and was paddled several times by a fly swatter that appeared to be wielded by a woman standing off camera.

"By the time our people began looking into what was going on, it was over," said Anders Yocum, vice president for corporate communications at Channel 11. "Initially, we checked our internal video sources before thinking about something from the outside."

"We've spent most of today figuring out what we can do to prevent this sort of thing in the future, and we believe we will be able to avoid it," he said. Channel 9 officials said they, too, were studying ways to improve security over their broadcast signal.

The legitimate Max Headroom,

Pirating TV signals



a wisecracking, stuttering, computer-generated character, originated on British television in 1985. His own American prime-time television show, carried on ABC, was canceled earlier this year.

The original story line for the Max character involved a futuristic world dominated by television, where video piracy—such as what occurred Sunday night—was punishable by death.

Video piracy in the U.S. carries a criminal penalty of up to \$10,000 in fines and up to one year in prison, an FCC official said.

"We consider this a serious matter," said Maureen Peratino, the FCC's deputy director for public affairs.

She said she was unaware of any previous thefts of a TV station's signal.

The most celebrated case of video piracy occurred in April, 1986, when a pirate calling himself "Captain Midnight" intercepted the satellite transmission of Home Box Office, a cable television programmer, and broadcast a message criticizing the company for scrambling its signal to prevent non-subscribers from receiving it on privately owned satellite dishes.

Captain Midnight later was identified as John R. MacDougall, a satellite dish salesman from Ocala, Fla. He was fined \$5,000 and sentenced to a year's probation.

In October, 1985, an electronic bandit overpowered the signal of the popular Wally Phillips show on WGN-AM radio and made sexually explicit comments.

Steve Daley contributed to this report.