



Episode 153: The Max Headroom Incident

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Phoebe Judge: Hi, it's Phoebe. One of our favorite things to do is to bring the show out on the road and perform stories live. We've done it for years now all over the country. It's really just a chance for people to see me screw up reading lines. But we've always thought it was a lot of fun to be able to look out into the audience and see people's reactions to these stories right away. Maybe they're laughing. Maybe they've fallen asleep. Depends on the city. Just kidding.

We were planning on going out on a tour right after the coronavirus pandemic began and we had to cancel that. We hope we'll get back out there to maybe see all of you one day again soon. Until then, we thought we'd bring you one of our favorite stories that we've ever done live. If you like, you can close your eyes and pretend you're in a theater somewhere looking up at a big screen on stage.

On Sunday night, November 22nd, 1987, something very odd happened in the middle of the nine o'clock news in Chicago.

[clip from sportscast comes in]

Dan Roan: *McMahon and McKinnon. Fourteen—nothing, Bears. Then, the defense, which hadn't put up a sack in twelve quarters finally did—* [broadcast cuts out abruptly, interrupted by loud static] Well, if you're wondering what's happened... [laughs] so am I. [clip ends] [music comes in]

Phoebe: This is Dan Roan. He was a sportscaster at WGN in Chicago.

Dan: I was in the middle of a sportscast and we were talking about the Bears and all of a sudden — being in-studio, we didn't have the off-air feed available. We just had our studio feed. So, I was just told in my ear by a producer that we're having some signal difficulties and we'll get back as soon as we can. So, that was a little disconcerting at the time. And then they said, "Well, we're coming back up in five, four, three, two, one." And my reaction was what it was. I said, "If you're wondering what happened, so am I."

Phoebe: Dan Roan is still the sportscaster at WGN today. I'm from Chicago and have been seeing him on TV since I was a little girl. WGN is a major network. It used to be owned by the same company that owns the *Chicago Tribune*. And for a long time, it's where all the Chicago Cubs games were broadcast. It's not some small-time station with a tiny transmitter.

Dan: And then, we were trying to figure out exactly how somebody could get away with this. You know, how somebody could actually physically do it. They had to be stationed between our broadcast location studio there on Bradley Place in Chicago and our transmitter downtown. So, they had to get in between there somehow and break into the signal. I thought the funny thing about it was, as far as I remember, there was only one copy of the actual off-air. And it was immediately locked into the news director's office into a cabinet and no one saw it. So, I think whatever is out there, YouTube or whatever, is somebody who just happened to be taping the news that night for some reason on a VHS machine and he got what he got.

Phoebe: The interruption lasts around thirty seconds. First, the screen goes black. And then after a few seconds, a person appears wearing a brown suit and a black tie. They're wearing a rubber mask, dancing back and forth, and nodding their head. In the background, a big piece of what looks like corrugated metal is tilting back and forth. The edges of the video are distorted. [music fades out] The mask that this person is wearing is the face of a fictional character from 1985 named Max Headroom.

[audio from *The Max Headroom Show* clip begins]

Max Headroom: M-m-m-max Headroom here. Yes. That enormous c-cost to Cinemax. I really am here. The Original Max Talking Headroom Show! Ooooh... [clip fades into background]

Phoebe: Max Headroom was a TV talk show host who was supposed to be from our not-so-distant future. A future where the world is run by TV executives. Malicious, power-hungry TV executives who make it a crime to turn off your television. When a television news reporter gets into an accident, a hacker rebuilds him as a computer: Max Headroom, the world's first computer generated TV host, "coming at you from twenty minutes into the future." So when someone in this Max Headroom mask actually did come at you in the middle of the nine o'clock news, fiction and reality merged and for some viewers, it was terrifying.

We're sort of trained as viewers that the only time a TV show is interrupted is because something bad has happened or is about to. And then, two hours later on a completely different channel, it happened again during a broadcast of *Doctor Who*.

[*Doctor Who* clip begins]

Character 1: You should talk often with the old ones of your tribe. That is the only way to learn.

Character 2: I'll get you a hot drink, miss— [clip abruptly interrupted with loud static accompanied by distorted voice]

Phoebe: What appears to be the same person wearing the same suit and mask comes back onto the screen. But this time, they're talking.

[Distorted voice continues.]

The person leans down and picks up a can of Pepsi. Then throws it at the camera.

[Sound of Pepsi can hitting surface after being thrown.]

Then they start waving their head back and forth before bringing their face right up to the camera lens.

[Distorted voice begins singing.]

Then they start dancing and singing. They keep pointing their finger at the camera. Then they bend over, and it looks like the video cuts to them with their pants pulled down, exposing their rear end. Someone else is on the screen too. It appears to be a woman with her head out of the frame. And she starts spanking this person with a flyswatter.

[Distorted sounds continue.]

And then it's over. It lasted just over a minute.

[Clip continues with another person saying, "As far as I can tell, a massive electric shock. He died instantly..."]

[Music.]

This time it happened on Chicago's WTTW, the PBS station.

Larry Ocher: I got a call from the MasterCard operator that told me that they had lost control of the transmitter and someone else was broadcasting on our airways.

Phoebe: This is Larry Ocher. He wasn't just an engineer at WTTW; he was the engineer in charge of all the engineers. He was at home not watching television when his phone rang.

Larry: They had control of everything. We couldn't even turn the transmitter off. We couldn't do anything until they went off the air. [Phoebe interjects, then waits for Larry to finish] It was loss of complete control.

[to Larry]

Phoebe: I mean, I can think of the different kind of nightmare calls that engineers would get. But if someone calling saying, "We've lost control!" [Larry laughs] It's about as bad as it gets, huh?

Larry: That's about as bad as it gets. It's terrible. [laughing] You can't turn it off. You can't turn on. You can't do anything. They can put anything they want on the air.

Phoebe: When I saw the video of it, I kept thinking to myself, *this seems like a dream*.

Larry: Yes. It's sort of like a dream. Yes. How dreams are fuzzy, and you really don't think you're watching what you're watching. It's a sort of like a dream.

Al Skierkiewicz: It was shortly after six o'clock, somewhere between six and seven, when he came in and informed me what had taken place overnight.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: This is Al Skierkiewicz. He was a broadcast engineer for WTTW for forty years. Larry Ocher was his boss. He had just arrived at work when Larry told him the news.

Al: For broadcast operations to be interjected that way, it's a serious invasion. It's like somebody breaking into your house. It interrupts your air and you're very proud of the quality of your air signal and the programmings that you actually broadcast. So, to have somebody take that over from you became sort of personal for every one of our engineering staff.

Phoebe: Al Skierkiewicz says he knew exactly who Max Headroom was when he heard about it. And that it's kind of funny that the person in the video was throwing cans of Pepsi, not Coke. [music fades out]

Al: At the time, this was in 1987, Max Headroom was a character that was supposed to be the very first virtual person. [music comes in] And it was used for a Coke ad campaign. And so, he had this kind of straight up hair that was not really hair. He looked like it was a cartoon character of sorts. But it was a popular campaign for Coke at the time. And so that made it possible for people to buy Max Headroom masks for Halloween, for instance. So, you could go to any Halloween store and pick up one of these Max Headroom masks that would slip over your head.

[to Al]

Phoebe: So, this image was pretty well known.

Al: Yes, it was.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: The hack was major news in Chicago. *The Chicago Tribune* described it as, "Evidently the work of a sophisticated video pirate with an unsophisticated sense of humor." News stations interviewed people who'd seen the instance live on their televisions. One man said, "I got so upset that I wanted to bust the TV set." Another man said that whoever did this just wanted attention and that the interruption was like throwing a brick through a window. A young boy simply said, "It was very, very funny."

Dan: And then the next evening, I'm in the office. We've got CBS national news on and there I am...

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Dan Roan.

Dan: ...on a national news broadcast, they're doing a big piece on this thing. And I thought, *wow, maybe it is a little bit more serious*. And it was my understanding that the FCC took it very seriously. And the government did all they could to find out who did it. And have yet to have been able to crack the case.

Phoebe: It's one of the most bizarre crimes in the history. [music comes in] One with no discernible means, motive, or opportunity. I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal. [music fades out]

The Chicago Sun-Times published an article with the headline: "Two channels Interrupted to the Max." It quoted an FCC spokesperson who said that whoever was involved could face up to a hundred thousand dollars in fines and a year in jail. And that additional federal obscenity charges could also be brought by the U.S. Attorney's Office. It was a serious crime.

[music comes in] [to Larry]

Pretend that I'm a five-year-old.

Larry: Right.

Phoebe: What were they actually doing in order to interrupt the signal?

Larry: They probably... what they did was they had a portable transmitter they would use in news gathering. Had is probably a two-foot diameter parabolic antenna on it. And they were just pointing it at Sears Tower, and that you could tell, if he was in the business, where the transmitters were, where the antennas were off of opposite Sears Tower. So, they could pre-aim it, and during the day - even though this was at night - and aim at Sears Tower, they would probably pick up— probably intercept our signal.

[to Larry]

Phoebe: Were any of you looking at each other at TTW saying, "Well, I always thought he was a little sketchy." Was there any internal thought that maybe it was one of you?

Larry: Um, [hesitates] of course that's the kind of thing that would jump into your head; but the penalty that would be levied should somebody actually be found out by the FCC would mean

immediate dismissal from the station. Certainly an impossible task to be hired within the broadcast community ever again. So, the weight of the violation would have been an extreme for any of the people that worked at either our station or at WGN. And we took an extreme amount of pride in our capabilities, in our air signal, in the station that we worked for. You know, we look back at it now and kind of laugh from time to time. But at the time, it was like we had had a home invasion. It makes you suspect everybody that you talk to. It makes you think that it might happen again at any point in time.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Al Skierkiewicz says that the day after the broadcast intrusion, he had had discussions with his union, with maintenance staff, and with the director of engineering. Everyone was talking about it. He says that by 9:00 a.m., they had sent the first record of complaint to the Federal Communications Commission.

Jim Higgins: [over the phone] I've investigated things from stuck radio microphones on vessels to people intentionally jamming the police and swearing at them with stolen or police radios... or, clock radios that accidentally generate a signal that interferes with something else nearby.
[music fades out]

Phoebe: This is Jim Higgins. He was working at the FCC when the Max Headroom incident happened.

Jim: I was working on various things - inspecting television stations, special projects, studying interference to the Voice of America - and the Max Headroom incident popped up.

Phoebe: Jim Higgins was assigned to the Max Headroom case because he had worked on a similar incident that happened the year before. This hacker called himself "Captain Midnight."
[music comes in]

On April 27th, 1986, someone took over HBO.

Jim: This is a little worse than bothering a couple of stations in Chicago. He transmitted to a satellite in a geostationary orbit over the top of an HBO signal. HBO is uplinking a movie at the time. *The Falcon and the Snowman*, as matter of fact, and turned on his transmitter and pointed it at HBO's satellite. And this person put up a message, a text message.

Phoebe: It said, "Good evening, HBO from Captain Midnight. 12.95 a month. No way. Showtime movie channel beware." HBO had recently announced that they would start charging people 12.95 a month for the service. Previously, if you had a satellite dish in your backyard, you could just aim it up at HBO's signal and get it for free. A man named John McDougall decided that he was going to try and do something about it.

Jim: He sold backyard dishes on the side. [Phoebe says, "humph"] So, he was a backyard dish dealer and his motive obviously was if people— if HBO scrambled and people had to pay a monthly fee to get it, then maybe his dish business wouldn't do so well. So...

Phoebe: McDougall was arrested and charged with illegally operating a satellite uplink transmitter. He accepted a plea deal and was put on probation for a year and fined \$5,000. [music fades out]

That year Congress passed something called the "Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986." It contained a provision that made satellite hijacking a felony. The Max Headroom incident, which occurred just one year later, didn't involve satellite hijacking. But it did result in airwaves being taken over. [music comes in] And it did scare people. The FCC and FBI both investigated the Max Headroom incident but could find no leads on who could have done this or why. [music fades out]

[to Jim]

So, the Max Headroom incident was never solved.

Jim: That's correct. You know, the FCC had some ideas of a couple of people that might've been involved, but never enough evidence to pin it on anybody. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Jim Higgins and Al Skierkiewicz both think that the person who did this had to have been an engineer with the knowledge to have set something like this up. Jim Higgins thinks that they must have been proud of their work and that it pops up every once in a while, online because they want to remind people of what they pulled off.

Jim: In my view, those people who continue to bring it up and ask questions about it and post questions about it, were either involved or know who was involved in the incident, right. The criminals always, you know, they're proud of their achievements... [crosstalk]

Phoebe: [to Jim, crosstalk] So they don't want it... they don't want it to go away. They want people to remember this.

Jim: Perhaps. That's my theory, anyway. So, maybe someday someone will make an admission, but for now, we don't know.

[as narrator]

Phoebe: Al Skierkiewicz thinks it was probably just a dumb prank.

Al: My real suspicion is this was not a vicious, intentional act. It was the act of a couple of people drinking beer in back of somebody's garage, going, *you know, if we could do this, I've got this piece of equipment over there and I know this guy has got a dish over here and maybe for a case of beer, we can get this all together and do something.* That's the way I think it really happened.

Phoebe: There's one place where it's still being actively investigated: Reddit. There are lots of theories. One of them called the "J and K theory" comes from a user who says that when he was thirteen, he was friends with some local hackers and overheard two brothers [music fades

out] who he calls "J and K" talking about something big. They then told him to watch WTTW later that night. Another theory says that it was most likely a person who had ties to the local Chicago broadcast community. This is also WTTW engineer, Larry Ocher's theory. He says it had to be an inside job. Only a TV engineer would have that kind of know-how. And Larry says engineers can be grumpy.

[to Larry]

It makes me think that everybody in their own position and profession has the ability to become a menace, right? [Larry laughs and affirms] I mean, in some way. [Larry affirms] If you're a painter, you throw the wrong colored paint all over the house. [Larry affirms] If you're an engineer, you say, "Screw it, I'm taking over the airwaves." [Larry affirms] You know, we all have the ability to shake things up.

Larry: I don't think it was meant to be essentially bad or really a criminal act. But it was just saying, *I'll show you what I can do*. And that's what they did. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

Phoebe: There's evidence to back up Larry Ocher's theory. Although the voice in the video is heavily distorted, you can hear it say the name "Chuck Swirsky." Chuck Swirsky was Dan Roan's colleague at WGN. You can also hear the voice say, 'I just made a giant masterpiece for all the world's greatest newspaper nerds.' This is very likely a reference to the *Chicago Tribune*. Their slogan is "World's greatest newspaper." That's how WGN got its name. On the other hand, the person in the video also seems to be referencing cartoons and hemorrhoids and the Temptations, so who can say.

Whatever this person was trying to say, it can't be a coincidence that they're wearing a Max Headroom mask. In Max Headroom's world, a broadcast signal intrusion is punishable by death.

We called Matt Frewer, the actor who played Max.

Matt Frewer: [over the phone] Hello everyone. My name is Matt Frewer and I played the character called Max Headroom back in the 80s.

Phoebe: You might remember him as the next-door neighbor in *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* or Dr. Leekie on *Orphan Black*. We wanted his take on the Max Headroom incident. After all, it is his face.

Matt: It was very surreal and flattering. And in a way, kind of expected, you know that Max being the subversive character that he was. And he was born of a hacker. Why not? You know, and a hacker would use him [music comes in] in a subversive way. And in a lot of ways, it was very flattering because Max himself is kind of the ultimate satire because he's Mr. TV. He's on a TV and it's about a TV network. So, I guess it makes perfect sense that he would be used as [chuckles] a tool of something subversive.

Phoebe: When you read through all the theories on Reddit and other places online, you sort of get the impression that if we did figure out who did this and why, the videos would lose their

power. Maybe we don't want it to just be a guy with a grudge or some kids screwing around. Nothing fascinates us like an unsolved case, especially one coming from twenty minutes into the future

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Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[Music fades out.]

Jingle: Radiotopia, from PRX.

END OF EPISODE.