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Skating on . . .

Posted on April 7th, 2011 by earlehholland

An early morning email from a member of our reactor staff rarely signals a serious problem but such communiqués should never be ignored. Last week's message, however, was just plain weird. It contained:

*"Screenwriter Greg Russo has sold an action pitch to Alloy Entertainment called **Black Ice**. Meanwhile, the scribe also has been hired to rewrite the script for the Platinum Dunes actioner Heatseekers at Paramount.*

"Black Ice is an action-thriller about a group of highly trained thieves who break into a university's research reactor during winter break to steal a cache of stockpiled uranium and the trio of college students who try to stop them. The contained drama is pitched as Disturbia meets Die Hard."

The note had come from Andrew Kauffman, associate director of the [nuclear reactor laboratory at Ohio State](#). He had forwarded it from a message pulled from a communications network linking RTRs – [research and test reactors](#) – around the country, most of which are at universities. Like laboratories in other scientific disciplines, the reactor lab on campus focuses on research, in this case requiring radioactive sources and instrumentation, and on training students from across the state.



What seemed almost comical in its absurdity was the actual proposed plot line the potential movie would use. But it is less humorous once you factor in the public's susceptibility to false information, especially when that information involves science.

Take the initial idea, for example, that *"a group of highly trained thieves who break into a university's research reactor during winter break . . ."* For most laboratories on the campuses of research institutions, security is a top priority. That's especially true for some labs where [biological agents](#) may be studied, or facilities where radioactive materials are used. Strict federal and state security requirements are mandated for such places insuring that any unauthorized entry will trigger a rapid response from law enforcement.

Then there's the part where the thieves planned *"to steal a cache of stockpiled uranium"* at the university reactor, as if extra nuclear fuel was just kept on hand in case it was needed. The assumption is, I guess, that the thieves were trying to steal uranium that could be used for some weapon of

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mass destruction. But beginning in the 1980s, the **Nuclear Regulatory Commission** mandated that research reactors begin converting their fuel from **highly enriched uranium (HEU)** to **low enriched uranium (LEU)**, specifically to eliminate the risks of such thefts. [Ohio State's reactor was one of the first to complete that conversion.]

"Research and test reactors (RTRs) do not keep a "cache of stockpiled uranium," Kauffman said flatly.

Lastly, there's the idea that a "trio of college students . . . try to stop them [the thieves]." College students tend to be smarter than that — at least most of them, we hope. The idea of student-turned-vigilante just doesn't make sense when a 911 call on an ever-present smartphone will probably fetch armed officers in a couple of minutes or less.

While one could conjure up a farcical slapstick comedy scene, a la "**Home Alone**," with Macaulay Culkin thwarting incompetent burglars, that doesn't seem to be what's intended in this movie.

As best we know, and not surprisingly, none of the university RTRs have volunteered to serve as a location for the movie.

What's sad about this whole episode is that science organizations have for years been trying to work with Hollywood writers and directors to not only bring more science into movies and television, but to make that science more accurate and believable.

Organizations such as the **American Association for the Advancement of Science**



(AAAS), the **National Science Foundation (NSF)** and the **National Academy of Sciences (NAS)** have all committed to ongoing projects aimed at improving the way science is depicted via these media.

But still, we get films like "*Black Ice*."

Granted, we're talking about fiction here, and a degree of creative license is to be expected.

Admittedly, I know next to nothing about the movie industry, and I'm as much of a fan of techno-thrillers as the next guy, but really . . . Can't we do better than this?__*Earle Holland*



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John T // Apr 10, 2011 at 9:59 am

I would just point out that only about ten percent of COMPLETED screenplays that are optioned by a production company ever actually get filmed, and that the odds of any pitch (i.e. a one-paragraph idea for a movie) ever making it through the whole development process and getting filmed and released by a major studio are even smaller than that! So while the story's premise is troubling, I would caution against an overreaction in the research community, which would be a rather ironic way to try to prevent a hypothetical public overreaction.

[earleholland](#) // Apr 10, 2011 at 10:11 am

John's right, of course, that most film projects, like other proposals, survive to become full-fledged movies. But that doesn't change the fact that the premise of this proposal was substantially flawed. That in itself, isn't rare, given what we see in theatres today. But basing a film plot on something that (1) is absurd in its inaccuracies and (2) is guaranteed to seem convincing to a portion of the ill-informed public seems to be the wrong road to take. Two out of three Americans can't qualify now as "scientifically literate" by even the simplest measures. With our technological knowledge increasing at a rate that far exceeds public understanding, It's probably appropriate to wave warning flags early in the process.

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