Who was TV's first anchorman? Study finds it wasn't Walter Cronkite

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No kidding: The history of the first anchorman may have more to do with Will Ferrell than people might think, according to new research by a journalism historian at Indiana University.

While Ferrell is best known for playing Ron Burgundy in the 2004 comedy "Anchorman," he also famously parodied "Jeopardy" game show host Alex Trebek. Research by Mike Conway, an associate professor of journalism at IU, has found that the first "anchor man" was John Cameron Swayze, then a regular on the 1948 quiz show, "Who Said That?"

Some today may remember Swayze, an experienced print and broadcast journalist, for his 20 years of Timex watch commercials and their catch phrase, "It takes a licking and keeps on ticking."

"A subtle competition took place during the last decades of the 20th century in interviews, memoirs and history books over the origin of what has become one of the most powerful positions in television," Conway said. "Two of the most powerful people in television news at CBS in the 1950s clearly wanted the credit, but they also didn't want to appear to be lobbying for the distinction."

The accepted "anchor man" origin story comes out of an era when television news was attempting to gain an audience and respect from the journalism community. It implies a coherent progression from early TV to today, with a recognizable hero, while the real story that Conway

found revealed an industry that had yet to crystalize.

Conway will present his research, "The Curious Origins of Television's 'Anchor Man:' A Quiz Show's Role in Launching Journalism's Most Powerful Title," at the annual conference of the American Journalism Historians Association in Raleigh, N.C., on Oct. 11 to 13.

Nearly all of the books on the history of journalism say that the first person to be called an anchor man was Walter Cronkite, during the 1952 political conventions, and that the term was created by either Sig Mickelson, then president of CBS News; Don Hewitt, who went on to create "60 Minutes"; or Paul Levitan, a news producer.

In biographies written years later, Mickelson and Hewitt took credit for inventing the term. While Levitan didn't say he came up with the idea, Cronkite said he was "convinced that it was Paul Levitan who used the phrase first." All four men have since passed away.

"What it is is a case of people wanting to have history told their way," said Conway, also is the author of a book that broke some myths about the early days of TV news. "The Cronkite anchor origin story is very consistent in history books. I certainly accepted it until I started doing this research."

While conducting research for his 2009 book, "The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s," Conway found evidence that the term "anchor man" had been used to describe someone who had been on television years before Cronkite.

Like a detective, Conway pursued the mystery and discovered to his surprise that in October 1948, the NBC quiz show "Who Said That?" began referring to Swayze as their "anchor man." The quiz show featured a "quotesmaster" and four panelists. Swayze—who also was a

news broadcaster on NBC's top rated Camel News Caravan—was the permanent panelist.

The program first aired on radio before becoming an early TV staple, and as the panelists were introduced on the Oct. 1, 1948, radio broadcast (it premiered on TV two months later), the script had a new description for Swayze, who was "holding down the anchor man position."

After coming across that first reference to Swayze as "anchor man," close to four years before Cronkite was given the title, Conway began searching for more scripts and documents relating to the quiz show. Pulling together documents from a number of archives, he pieced together broadcasts, NBC internal memos and documents, scripts, audience mail and news coverage at the time to show that for close to three years, on both radio and television, Swayze was known as the "anchor man" on "Who Said That?"

Then Conway turned his attention to who deserved the credit for coining the term. Another major figure in the history of television, Fred Friendly—who worked closely with Edward R. Murrow, including on the celebrated 1950s television program "See It Now"—came up with the idea for "Who Said That?"

"If you know anything about Fred Friendly, he had a very big ego like all of these other men that we're talking about. In my mind, if he had invented 'anchorman,' we would know it, but as far as I know, he never mentioned it," Conway said, adding that Friendly's autobiography only mentions the quiz show in passing. "He wanted to be known for working with Murrow."

Conway started to look at the credits for the show and noticed that they also credited Dorothy Greene Friendly, an established writer at Time-Life who became Fred Friendly's business partner after they married.

The couple divorced in the 1960s, and Conway believes that—as the show's writer—she came up with the job description "anchor man."

It is purely speculation on his part, but Conway wonders whether she may have been influenced by something controversial that happened during the London Olympics in the fall of 1948. Nearing the end of the games, a British relay team was awarded the gold medal after the American team had been disqualified.

In its coverage, The New York Times showed a picture of the American who crossed the finish line first, Mel Patton, "anchor man for the U.S. relay team." The Friendlys acknowledged that the Times was the source for many of the quotes used on the show.

Could Swayze's being called an "anchor man" be a creative form of cross promotion, since he appeared on both the quiz show and NBC's nightly television newscast Camel News Caravan? The answer, Conway found, was no. The news program did not have its premier until February 1949, several months after the term started being used on the quiz show.

"Using the available evidence, the first, consistent use of 'anchor man' in American broadcasting did not describe Walter Cronkite and his role for CBS television at the 1952 political conventions, but instead applied to John Cameron Swayze and his position as the permanent, and most knowledgeable, member of a quiz show panel," Conway said. "But it's obvious that with Cronkite, the title of anchorman stuck, but he wasn't the original."

Conway noted that in the hierarchy of broadcast news in the 1950s and 1960s, Swayze and Douglas Edwards—another original news anchor—"were not considered the heavyweights," thus explaining what history books say today. While popular with the viewing public, Swayze was openly ridiculed by the journalism community. Also, his journalism

career was over by the early 1960s, before "anchor man" became commonly used to describe TV newscasters.

"For me, it's the messiness of early technology. It's not as easily defined as we want to think later on," Conway said. "We tend to want with history to make a neat package, so the idea that one of the most famous television people in news is also the first anchorman really fits well ... but in reality there was so much more at play."

Provided by Indiana University

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