

## Preface

In 1992 Michael Braverman, executive producer of the pioneering television program *Life Goes On* (1989–1993), convened an unusual meeting bringing together the writers, director, and actors, as well as science consultant Wayne Grody of UCLA's School of Medicine and HIV/AIDS consultant Rod Garcia, an HIV-positive activist.<sup>1</sup> The meeting's subject was the storyline for HIV-positive character Jesse McKenna.<sup>2</sup> Garcia recommended that Jesse forego the standard treatment of antiretroviral pills in favor of alternative therapies such as acupuncture and a macrobiotic diet. Grody could sense as Garcia made his recommendation that he was the only person in the room who did not approve of Garcia's proposal.

From a narrative point of view Garcia's suggestion was reasonable. Many AIDS patients were trying options outside of mainstream medicine, so it would not have been an unrealistic option for this fictional character. From Grody's scientific perspective, however, he knew that Garcia's proposed storyline would have real-world ramifications for HIV/AIDS research. This meeting took place just as the Federal Drug Administration had approved the use of "cocktail" therapies combining the first antiretroviral drug AZT with other antiretroviral therapies such as ddC. The only means by which scientists could determine these cocktails' efficacy, however, was to run large double-blind clinical trials that required a significant number of volunteers.

Grody's argument for keeping the fictional Jesse on his medicine was not about maintaining scientific "realism." He had no evidence that the new antiretroviral cocktails would be any more effective than Garcia's macrobiotic diet, but he knew that scientists needed the opportunity to find out. As the first HIV-positive recurring character on television, Jesse was an icon in the AIDS community whose members closely monitored

his depiction. If Jesse ceased taking his medicine his actions would have influenced thousands of real-world AIDS patients to do the same,<sup>3</sup> which, in turn, would have drastically reduced the number of volunteers available for the clinical studies needed to establish the cocktail therapies' efficacy.

Grody appreciated the value of Garcia's presence within the production since he could speak personally to actors and writers about his experiences living with a disease that, at that time, was a certain death sentence. But Garcia was not a scientist. He was approaching the question from a different frame of reference. For him, drugs failed while a macrobiotic diet seemed to work. In the end, the television producers put their trust in the expertise of their science consultant and Jesse continued taking his anti-retroviral medicine.

HIV/AIDS researchers did not know that Wayne Grody was working as a science consultant on *Life Goes On*. Yet, his presence in that meeting saved them from a potential public relations disaster. In fact, very few people ever knew that a single scientist was able to significantly influence the depiction of AIDS therapy in this groundbreaking television show. This is because, as a science consultant, Grody's decision making and his negotiations with entertainment professionals including writers, actors, special-effects technicians, prop masters, directors, and producers all took place behind the scenes. Television and film productions are complicated processes where multiple participants have competing agendas for science. Given these conditions, contributions by scientists to the production of entertainment texts such as movies and TV shows are not often recognized outside of Hollywood. Yet, Grody's successful battle to ensure that a fictional character continued taking his antiretroviral medicine illustrates the substantial influence that science consultants can have on the depiction of science, technology, and medicine in entertainment products.

This book is an attempt to uncover science consultants' backstage role in entertainment production. It is also about the reciprocal relationship of how fictional texts in turn impact real-world science. A growing belief within the entertainment industry that scientific verisimilitude translates into bigger box office receipts and higher television ratings has led to an ever-increasing reliance on science consultants to examine scripts, participate in preproduction meetings, and serve as on-set advisors. It would be

rare indeed to find a contemporary science-based television or film production that lacked a science consultant in some capacity.

One point of clarification concerns the term *science consultant*. There are two distinct categories of science consultants for the entertainment industry. One category, also referred to as technical consultants, involves scientists who consult on the development of new cinematic and televisual technologies whether they are mechanical or digital, hardware or software. My concern is not with technical consultants; the focus of my study is not on scientists whose advice shapes the technology itself, but rather on the second category of science consultants, whose advice shapes the narrative and visual content of specific cinematic texts. These consultants are brought in to comment on scientific matters involving the script, the actors, the sets, the props, and any other relevant factor during production.

Previous research on science in entertainment media tends to treat media texts as discrete entities (content) that are isolated from the act of production (process).<sup>4</sup> It is always important to keep in mind that the content of media texts is determined entirely by choices made during production. Audiences may interpret episodes of *Life Goes On* in a wide variety of ways, but the texts from which they are drawing meanings would have been radically different without the presence of scientist Wayne Grody on the production staff. When a high-profile film like *Deep Impact* (1998) or *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) makes an obvious intrusion into scientific culture we cannot attribute their influence to a disembodied "movie." These texts are the sum total of filmmaking and consulting decisions made during production and we need to acknowledge the agency of those who made these decisions. Therefore, I want to move beyond approaches based on close textual analysis and cultural analyses in order to explore entertainment media as vehicles of communication.

The ascent of the expert throughout the twentieth century has paralleled the commodification of knowledge in our society. This growing valuation of expertise has led to increasing collaborations between two communities whose objectives seem to be at odds: the entertainment industry and the scientific community. The recent influx of scientists into Hollywood provides an opportunity to examine science's role in entertainment products. By examining science consultants' impact on

entertainment media this book addresses salient questions in science studies concerning the production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, the deconstruction of expertise as a concept for both scientists and filmmakers, and the relationships linking media, science, and society. To get at these issues the book will examine cinematic depictions of science across three areas: scientists and the practice of science, scientific knowledge and plausibility, and the relationship between science/scientists and other elements of society.