



# Herding cats ... The whole shebang ... Parenting a child ... Smoke and mirrors ...

## SORRY, WRONG DECADE

By Bill Ibelle

**A**SSISTANT HISTORY professor Ben Schmidt has garnered a hefty amount of publicity in the last few months—from *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, PBS—with a quirky invention he has dubbed the Anachronism Machine.

The “machine” is a computer program that harnesses the power of Big Data to find time-period gaffes in movie and television scripts. So when Mary Lincoln complains about a rival’s “prosecutorial” attitude in the Academy Award-winning movie *Lincoln*, the machine flags it as a major gaffe.

The word “prosecutorial,” you see, wasn’t popularized until 110 years later, during the Watergate hearings.

How does the Anachronism Machine know this?

Because Schmidt has loaded his program with millions of books, magazines, and newspaper articles that date back centuries; these primary sources have been digitized over the past decade. When Schmidt feeds the machine a script, it flags any words or phrases that don’t, or rarely, appear during the time period in question. But if the machine flags many false positives, Schmidt then conducts a little old-fashioned research of his

own. Working together, man and machine can attain a level of historical accuracy that would have been impossible just five years ago.

So far, the duo—Schmidt and his computer—have worked as consultants for the CBS series *Vegas*, and the Showtime series *The Masters of Sex*. Schmidt also maintains a blog, *prochronism.com*, where he identifies the historical inaccuracies pumped out by Hollywood.

For example, in the TV drama *Mad Men*, a character refers to “the military industrial complex” in 1960, even though the phrase wasn’t coined until 1961 by President Eisenhower in his farewell address. A character in the World War II drama *Foyle’s War*, says the war has “escalated,” even though usage of that verb didn’t “escalate” until the Vietnam era.

Schmidt admits he was a bit perplexed when the machine flagged a soldier named Kevin in the script of the movie *Lincoln*. So he did a little research of his own and found that, according to draft records from 1863 to 1865, there was only one soldier named Kevin in the entire Union army. Apparently, the Irish name had not yet become popular in America.

Who would have thought to check?

### DOWNTON CRABBEY

One of the most consistent sources of historically inaccurate language is *Downton Abbey*, PBS’ sweeping look at the British aristocracy during the years surrounding World War I. The show is such a repeat offender, says Schmidt, that he playfully nicknamed his blog *Downton Crabbe*. The many blunders pinpointed by the Anachronism Machine include:

#### herding cats ...

Lady Grantham uses this phrase in reference to managing the chaos of the annual fair, even though the expression was made popular by Monty Python movies in the 1980s.

#### a sense of entitlement ...

A phrase used to describe the aristocratic Crawleys, but it first appears in newspapers in 1976.

#### black singer ...

This phrase is used to describe Cousin Rose’s boyfriend, but the term “black” to describe African Americans was coined during the civil rights era of the 1960s. In 1920s Britain, the man would have been described as “a Negro singer.”

#### parenting a child ...

In an age when governesses raised children of the aristocracy, it’s highly unlikely anyone would use the word “parenting” as a verb to describe child rearing. What’s more, the term parenting implies the involvement of both husband and wife, but husbands of that era tended to be hands-off when it came to raising their children.

Photo: Brooks Canaday