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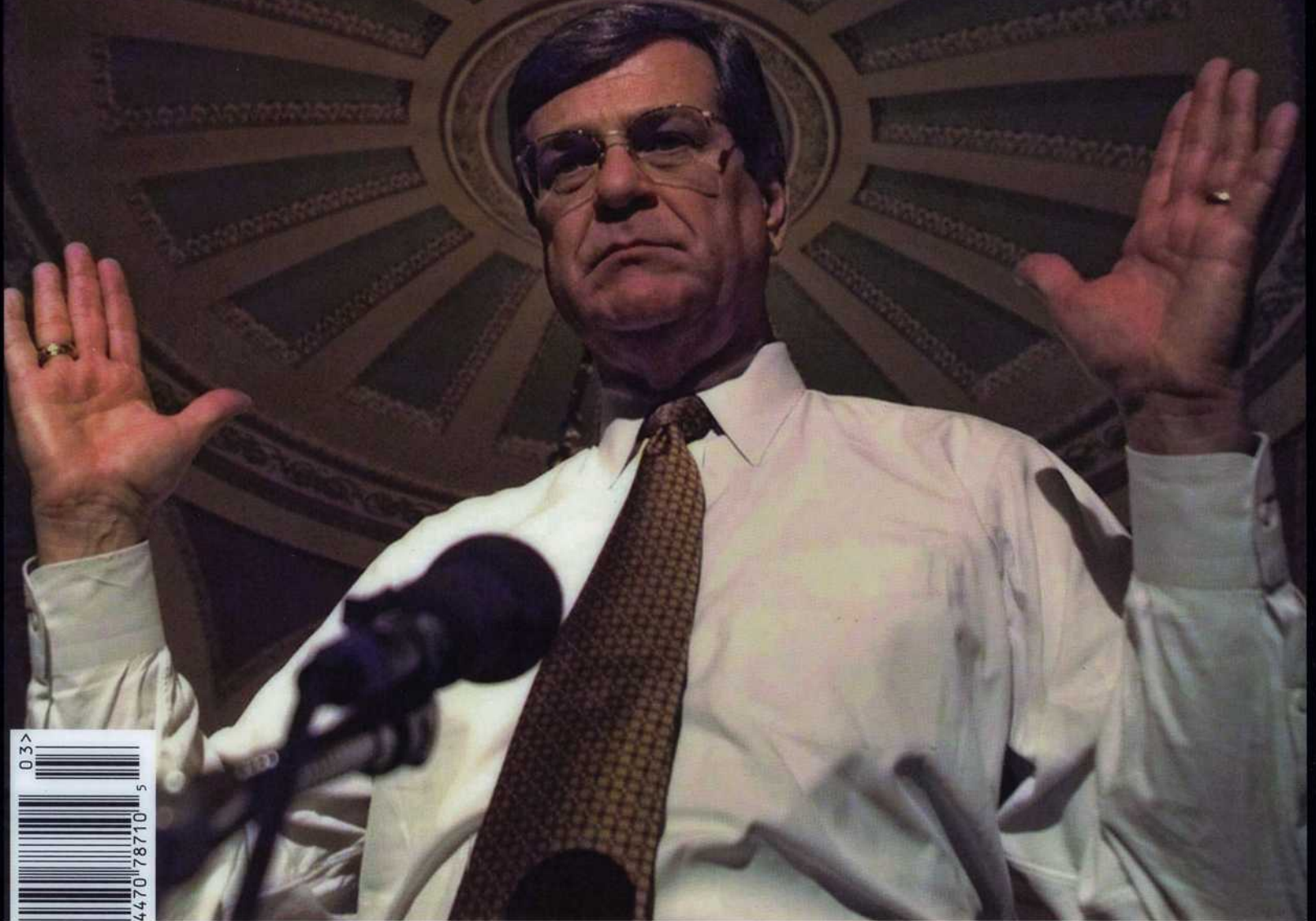
Extra!

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The Art of the Con

A notorious prankster uses hoaxes to expose the media

By Joey Skaggs

We're living in a time when it seems everything we see on the news is a bad joke: President Clinton and impeachment, Y2K and the end of the world, Viagra raising the dead, cloning your dead pet dog.

So how can a conscientious media prankster make a mark? When reality gets this strange, pranks are needed more than ever to jolt us into reexamining our values.

With the Internet's immediacy, its availability to anyone wishing to plant an idea, service or product for the world to consume, there's more opportunity than ever for both pranks and scams. Anyone can send an e-mail, create a rumor on Usenet, make a website and look official with very little effort or cost.

To me the prank is fine art. I use the immediacy of the news media as my medium. The gullibility of the media and the vulnerability of the public help me to communicate my ideas to a large audience. When I perpetrate a hoax I get media attention. I use that attention to express thoughts on issues I feel are important.

When I package a satire into a funny, sexually suggestive, controversial or highly technical wrapping, the media tend to fall for it hook, line and sinker. That's because I'm basically giving them what they want. A provocative story with great visuals that's outrageous yet plausible: a cathouse for dogs where you can get your dog sexually gratified for \$50; a portable confessional booth offering religion on the move for people on the go; an auction for celebrity sperm.

Why are my pranks—or any pranks, really—successful? I believe we are all predisposed to be conned. As children, we are conned into behaving. Then we are conned into believing. The Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus and the bogeyman occupy a great amount



of our consciousness. Then there is religious training, lessons of morality that require great leaps of faith.

The bottom line is, we're taught to suspend critical thinking and analysis and to believe what we're told. So we grow up conning ourselves as we look for answers to unanswerable questions and miracle cures for all of our ills. And, with the help of a less-than-responsible press whose corporate bot-

tom line frequently overrides sound journalistic judgment, we believe just about anything we see in the news.

Pranks vs. scams

For the most part, the kind of pranks that are being perpetrated via the mainstream news media and on the Internet are as shallow and vapid as the reality that surrounds us, or are outright scams for money. Take "ourfirst-

time.com," for example, a site mounted in July 1998 to promote two teenagers who were planning to lose their virginity with each other live online. It could have been a brilliant hoax—a great satire about our excessive fascination with the prurient and with voyeurism.

But it was a totally transparent scam for money. There were never any virgins who were going to consummate their relationship online. There was just a plan to collect \$5 per visit from hundreds of thousands of curious net surfers for weeks leading up to the great day. In other words, it wasn't a prank at all. Yes, it was a media manipulation. But its purpose was to rip off the vulnerable public it could have so beautifully satirized.

The media love this type of scam because they can righteously put it down, meanwhile sideswiping serious media activists, satirists and culture jammers who get lumped in with the scammers and con artists. The mainstream media do not want to differentiate between the two. They prefer to put down any attack on their credibility. Typically, they trivialize or ignore the intent of the media activist because acknowledging that they have been irresponsible or shallow undermines their credibility.

A good prank, however, attempts to shed light on an issue and to create social change. It is the manipulation of ideas and emotions in order to shift focus onto otherwise hidden agendas or social injustices. Using elements of truth, irony, humor and satire, a good prank is meant to target closed-mindedness, prejudice, hatred and unquestioning thinking. It deconstructs the status quo. It attacks the misuse of power by media, government, business and religion. A good prank is a smoke and mirror illusion that can change people's perceptions and make them realize that most of their reality is—smoke and mirrors.

I get e-mail every single day from wannabe pranksters, narcissists and revenge seekers. Electronic graffiti artists. They reach out to me as if I was the "Dear Abby" of pranks. They solicit my counsel on how to avenge a boss, humiliate a big brother or embarrass an irritating friend.

Sometimes I write back politely,

They Fell for Them All

• **Hippie Bus Tour to Queens** (1968)

To satirize the busloads of tourists who came to the East Village to gawk at the hippies, Joey Skaggs rented a Greyhound sight-seeing bus and took 60 bearded, beaded, camera-toting hippies on a tour of suburban Queens. He called it his "Cultural Exchange Tour."

• **Cathouse for Dogs** (1976)

A bordello for canines, a place to get your dog sexually gratified without the threat of pregnancy, staged for the media by supposed promoter Joey Skaggs, set off the media's mojo.

• **Celebrity Sperm Bank Auction** (1976)

Giuseppe Scaggoli (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs) created the Celebrity Sperm Bank. Unfortunately, the night before the first auction of celebrity sperm, the sperm was mysteriously stolen. So the auction was replaced by a press conference, and the Celebrity Sperm Bank was widely reported as a thriving new and controversial business by numerous print, television and radio media.

• **Metamorphosis—Cockroach Vitamin Pill** (1981)

"Roaches have been around for 350 million years," said entomologist Dr. Josef Gregor (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs). "They'll survive a nuclear holocaust. We have much to learn from them." Gregor, leader of a group called Metamorphosis, had bred a super strain of cockroaches, extracted their hormones, and made a cockroach vitamin pill that he said cured arthritis, acne, anemia and menstrual cramps—as well as making one invulnerable to high doses of nuclear radiation.

• **WALK RIGHT!** (1984)

"The Guardian Angels have the subways, we want the streets." So said Joseph Virgil Skaggs (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs), street vigilante, who, with his gang of black-clad commandos wearing WALK RIGHT! sweatshirts, patrolled the streets to get signatures on a petition to institute 66 rules of street etiquette. In a case of life imitating art, many of Guardian Angels' founder Curtis Sliwa's tales of heroism turned out to be made up.

• **The Fat Squad** (1986)

"You can hire us but you cannot fire us. Our commandos take no bribes." That was the motto of Joe Bones (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs), ex-U.S. Marine drill sergeant and founder of the Fat Squad, an organization created to rub out fat. Clients signed a contract to allow Bones' calorie cops to physically restrain them—whether on a date, at the job or at night in the bedroom—from breaking their diets.

• **Portofess** (1992)

A life-size confession booth on wheels, pedaled up 8th Avenue in New York to the 1992 Democratic convention, caused a media sensation. Skaggs was unrepentant.

• **SEXONIX** (1993)

In 1993, Joseph Skaggs, Ph.D. (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs), artificial intelligence computer scientist specializing in the field of virtual reality, reported he had perfected the world's first sexual virtual reality apparatus. However, his plans to demonstrate it at an invention and gift show in Toronto were waylaid when the equipment was confiscated at the Canadian border by puritanical customs agents. But Dr. Skaggs was not deterred. As he said to the media, "Machinery may be put under lock and key, but the people's dreams may not." Skaggs took the ruse to cyberspace where the rest of the story played out.

• **The Solomon Project** (1996)

Do you believe that the judicial system is a joke? That there is no such thing as "equal justice for all"? That the courts are biased and racist? Dr. Joseph Bonuso (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs) created a solution. Working with over 150 scientists, judges and attorneys for over seven years, Dr. Bonuso and his team created the Solomon Project, a series of supercomputers that could render civil and criminal decisions with great speed, low cost and no prejudice, guaranteeing equal justice for all.

An overview of Joey Skaggs' hoaxes can be found at www.joeyskaggs.com.



explaining that this is not the nature of my work. I'm not into meaningless, stupid, vicious, vindictive acts of rage against people or institutions. Nor am I interested in delusional people who confuse their lack of conscience with some tweaked concept of anarchy, pulling off the equivalent of the burning-bag-of-poop-at-the-door trick on the Internet (i.e., the plethora of computer viruses). I challenge hoaxers to do something more meaningful, something that will rock the status quo.

Pranks have always been culturally important to society. And as our reality becomes more and more bizarre and seemingly less meaningful it's more

important than ever that effective pranks be perpetrated. So here's to bigger and better pranks that attempt to effect positive change. We have to be able to look at ourselves and laugh. ■

Joey Skaggs' hoaxes have been misreported as fact by such media outlets as the New York Times, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Miami Herald, Wall Street Journal, AP, UPI, Reuters, Scripps Howard, Knight Ridder, U.S. News & World Report, Ms., New York, People, CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC. Skaggs is also a media consultant, college instructor, international lecturer on culture-jamming and media activism, and a fine arts painter and sculptor. He is, of course, working on another hoax.

Local Media Activist Contacts

FAIR does not have local chapters, but we do encourage people to work together for media diversity and accountability. The following are some of the many individuals and groups doing local media activism that FAIR works with. If you would like to coordinate your local media activism, please call FAIR, 212-633-6700, ext. 302.

ARIZONA

Phoenix

Arizona Media Action:
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Los Angeles

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San Francisco

We Interrupt This Message:
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Chicago Media Watch:
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New York Free Media Alliance
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Ithaca

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