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Fake News: The Relentless Pursuit of Mind Control

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JOEY SKAGGS ARCHIVE

Jojo, King of the New York Gypsies (a.k.a. Joey Skaggs), protesting to rename the Gypsy Moth in 1982

Joey Skaggs

Artist, Activist, Media Critic



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The news media is all a-flutter with headlines about the rise and proliferation of fake news media: “Did Russia Install Donald Trump As the Next U.S. President?” “It’s About To Get Worse!” “Living in a Media Bubble” “Can American Democracy Survive?” Excuse me? Wait a minute...

Propaganda and disinformation have been an integral part of our daily dose of information forever. In essence, everywhere you look, whether it’s the allegedly trustworthy mainstream media or the not-so-trustworthy social media alt-right or left-trending news stories, someone is always peddling influence.

It wasn’t just the Russians who supposedly engaged in influencing election results by hacking emails and proliferating fake news that damaged the Democrats’ pursuit of the White House. Americans can’t play the innocent victims here. We’re all using the same propaganda techniques. Now, because of warp-speed Internet and social media delivery systems, we have a perpetual game of Propaganda Pong, and the onslaught is much more ruthless and, at the same time, highly profitable financially.

That’s what life is like these days. You’re either the provider or the recipient—or more likely both—of propaganda and disinformation.

Ask any Gypsy fortune teller about sizing up a mark. If she answers honestly, she will say, “Well, he walked in.” The philosophy and the reality behind both fortune-telling and the pursuit of hearts and minds in politics and commerce is, “Give ’em what they want or con them into wanting it.”

TRENDING

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I should know. In 1982, as [Jojo, the King of the New York Gypsies](#), leading a group called "Gypsies Against Stereotypical Propaganda," I called for the renaming of the Gypsy Moth. I said, "Call it the Ayatollah moth, call it the Idi Amin moth, call it the Hitler moth. But never again the Gypsy moth! We Gypsies have suffered enough abuse!" *The New York Times* [fell for the story](#).

I've been using the tools of propaganda as my art form for over 50 years. The media has been my medium as I have challenged the status quo repeatedly. Using false, satirical press releases and staged guerrilla performances, I have duped the world press with outrageous and often ridiculous premises. We are, and have always been, in a war of propaganda, where disparate interests are competing to influence our thoughts. When our values are so shallow and self-oriented, it's relatively easy to sway opinions.

What made me who I am? My battles with the delusions of religious salvation, the hypocrisy of democracy, rampant political corruption, militaristic propaganda, social injustice, racism, sexism, corporate greed, and advertising that sells us shit while destroying our environment.

I'm an avid news junkie, constantly switching from one form of media to another, one source to another, one ideology to another. I try to ingest as many points of view as I can. This is what inspires my satire. The media can be a tool to educate and inform or an instrument of lies and propaganda. What we have to watch for is the ill-intended misinforming the uninformed.

If we have a chance to stop the perpetuation of social injustice in its broadest sense, we have to educate everyone about media literacy. The earlier the better. We need to teach children to use critical analysis so they can understand how and why they are being manipulated and molded by society.

I penned this piece, "[The Art of the Con](#)," about how I use pranks to jolt people into reexamining their values for the March 1, 1999 issue of *Extra!*, published by FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting). Although it refers to news stories of 17 years ago, it's as relevant now as it was then.

Joey Skaggs is the subject of a new award-winning documentary feature, [Art of the Prank](#), by Andrea Marini, produced by Marini and Judy Drosd. Recently picked up for distribution by [Content Media](#), the film will be available to the public soon. Watch the teaser trailer below.

