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Fake news? This guy practically invented it.

Charles Runnells, The News-Press 8:01 a.m. ET Jan. 22, 2017



(Photo: Special to The News-Press)

People talk about "fake news" like it's something new.

It's not.

Media prankster **Joey Skaggs** has been doing it since the 1960s — long before Facebook, Twitter and the so-called "fake news" crisis. He's concocted all kinds of bizarre schemes to fool gullible news

reporters and their unsuspecting audiences.

Take, for example, his infamous "cat house for dogs" — a brothel for stressed-out dogs that got national attention in the 1970s.

Or his portable confession booth parked outside the Democratic National Convention in 1992, complete with Skaggs disguised as a Catholic priest.

Or his annual Father's Day Parade that doesn't actually exist. That is, until a Chinese TV crew decides to visit Manhattan, and Skaggs has to come up with something for them to film, including official T-shirts and actors pretending to be parade participants.

None of those things were real, of course. But that didn't stop the news media from reporting on them.

Skaggs isn't sure if those reporters completely bought his hoaxes or if they did the stories with a knowing *wink-wink* to the audience. But either way, he says, it's a problem.

"If they were totally gullible, that's understandable," he says. "It's a good story, and I give them good visuals.

"But if it's *wink-wink*, why is it *wink-wink*? What am I replacing that's more newsworthy? That's a tremendous problem. They could be covering something more important."

Skaggs and his hoaxes are the stars of the new documentary "Art of the Prank," one of more than 50 films being shown next week at the annual [Bonita Springs International Film Festival](#).

The fest features screenings of narrative, documentary, animated and short films. It also hosts workshops and Q&A sessions with the films' creators and stars, including Skaggs.

"Art of the Prank" couldn't be more timely, Skaggs says. Fake news is all over social media — bogus news stories designed to sway public opinion or generate page views, regardless of facts, truth or journalistic ethics.

"Of course, there's a big difference between that and what I do," he says. "I'm calling attention to fake news, but a lot of people don't see that. They want to shoot the messenger."

Jonathan Frantz, MD, FACS

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Joey Skaggs and his portable confession booth got national media attention in the early 90s. (Photo: Special to The News-Press)

Skaggs considers his hoaxes to be a unique art form. It starts with the prank, itself, including hiring actors and writing official-looking press releases to fool TV reporters and producers. But then the media, itself, becomes part of the art — an art designed to get the audience questioning what they watch and read every day.

If the media swallows his hoaxes, Skaggs says, what *else* are they swallowing? "It affects all of us. And it has for a long time."

Director Andrea Marini had never heard of Skaggs when he met him in 2012. But he knew right away that he wanted to make a documentary about him.

"It's a sensational story and a controversial character," Marini says. "He's doing something extremely creative."

"He's an artist. He's a painter. And the televisions and newspapers are his canvass."

The movie — which will be shown Sunday, Jan. 29, at the Bonita Springs fest — draws from 300 hours of video footage from Skaggs' own archives, plus another 300 hours of modern footage shot by Marini and his crew.

So far, "Art of the Prank" has only been seen at a handful of film festivals. But Marini says he just signed an international distribution deal that could put the movie in theaters and on download websites later this year.

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Skaggs hopes the documentary gets people questioning what they see or read on the news, whether it's a reputable TV anchor or just some sketchy post on Facebook.

Even so, Skaggs admits he sometimes feels guilty about fooling everybody with his brand of fake news.

"The inner voice inside me is saying, 'I can't believe this!'" Skaggs says. "The camera's red light is on, and I'm thinking, 'Millions of people are watching this' and I'm thinking, 'Oh, man!'"

But then he starts thinking about the gullible reporters and their gullible audience. And he realizes he's still got important work to do.

"I want to make people stop and think," he says. "It's not just about giving them a laugh. I want them to stop and think."

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If you go

What: Bonita Springs International Film Festival

When: Thursday through Sunday, Jan. 26-29

Where: The Center for Performing Arts Bonita Springs, 10150 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs

Tickets: \$15 per film or \$100 for a 10-film pass, \$75 for opening night and \$50 for closing night (including a screening of "Art of the Prank")

Info: 495-8989 or [artcenterbonita.org](#)



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[Michelle Malkin](#)



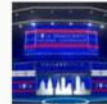
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