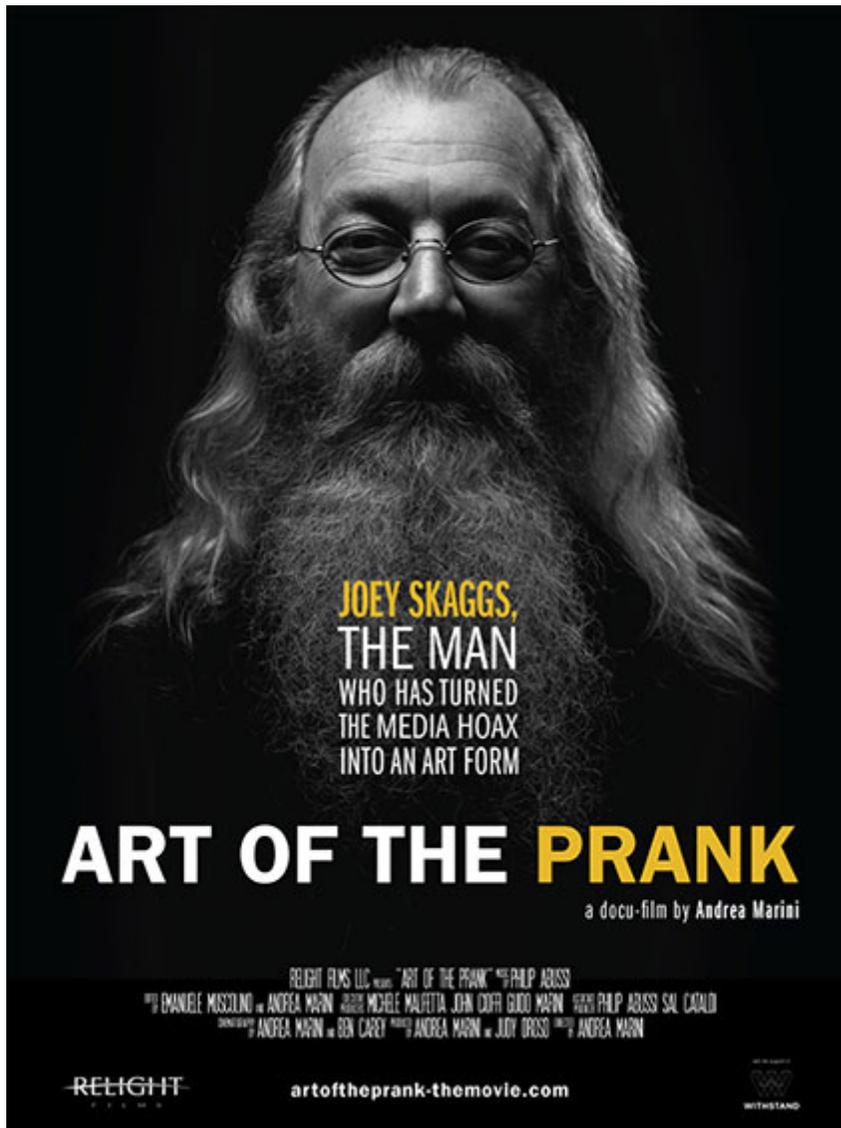


David Strom's Web Informant

Musings on technology

Joey Skaggs and the art of the media hoax



I have had the pleasure of knowing Joey Skaggs for several decades, and observing his media hoaxing antics first-hand during the development and deployment of his many pranks. Skaggs is a professional hoaxer, meaning that he deliberately crafts elaborate stunts to fool reporters, get himself covered on TV and in newspapers, only to reveal afterwards that the reporters have been had. He sometimes spends years constructing these set pieces, fine-tuning them and involving a cast of supporting characters

to bring his hoax to life.

His latest stunt is a documentary movie about filming another documentary movie that is being shown at various film festivals around the world. I caught up with him this past weekend here in St. Louis, when our local film festival screened the [movie called The Art of the Prank](#). Ostensibly, this is a movie about Skaggs and one of his pranks. More about the movie in a moment.

I have covered Skaggs' exploits a few times. In 1994, he created a story about a fake bust of a sex-based virtual reality venture called Sexonix. I [wrote a piece for Wired](#) (scroll to nearly the bottom of the page) where he was able to whip up passions. In the winter of 1998, I wrote about one of his hoaxes, which was about some issues with a rogue project from an environmental organization based in Queensland, Australia. The project created and spread a genetically altered virus. When humans come into contact with the virus, they begin to crave junk food. To add credibility to the story, the virus was found to have infected Hong Kong chickens, among other animals. Skaggs created a [phony website here](#), which contains documentation and copies of emails and photos. Now remember, this was 1998: back then newspapers were still thriving, and the Web was just getting going as a source for journalists.

As part of this hoax, Skaggs also staged a fake demonstration outside the United Nations headquarters campus in New York City. The AP and the NY Post, along with European and Australian newspapers, duly covered the protest, and thus laid the groundwork for the hoax.

Since then he has done dozens of other hoaxes. He set up a computerized jurisprudence system called the Solomon Project that found OJ guilty, a bordello for dogs, a portable confessional booth that was attached to a bicycle that he rode around one of the Democratic conventions, a miracle drug made from roaches, a company buying unwanted dogs to use them as food, and more. Every one of his setups is seemingly genuine, which is how the media falls for them and reports them as real. Only after his clips come in does he reveal that he is the wizard behind the curtain and comes clean that it all was phony.

Skaggs is a genius at mixing just the right amount of believable and yet unverifiable information with specific details and actual events, such as the UN

demonstration, to get reporters to drop their guard and run the story. Once one reporter falls for his hoax, Skaggs can build on that and get others to follow along. Skaggs' hoaxes illustrate how little reporters actually investigate and in most cases ignore the clues that he liberally sprinkles around. This is why they work, and why even the same media outlets (he has been on CNN a number of times) fall for them.

In the movie, you see Skaggs preparing one of his hoaxes. I won't give you more details in the hopes that you will eventually get to see the film and don't want to spoil it for you. He carefully gathers his actors to play specific roles, appoints his scientific "expert" and gets the media – and his documentary filmmaker – to follow him along. It is one of his more brilliant set pieces.

Skaggs shows us that it pays to be skeptical, and to spend some time proving authenticity. Given today's online climate and how hard the public has to work to verify basic facts, this has gotten a lot more difficult, ironically. Most of us take things we read on faith, and especially if we have seen it somewhere online such as Wikipedia or when we Google something. As I [wrote about the "peeps" hoax in 1998](#), "a website can change from moment to moment, and pinning down the truth may be a very difficult proposition. An unauthorized employee could post a page by mistake. One man's truth is another's falsehood, depending on your point of view. Also, how can you be sure that someone's website is truly authentic? Maybe during the night a group of imposters has diverted all traffic from the real site to their own, or put up their own pages on the authentic site, unbeknown to the site's webmaster?"

Today we have Snopes.com and fact checking efforts by the major news organizations, but they still aren't enough. All it takes is one gullible person with a huge Twitter following, (I am sure you can think of a few examples) and a hoax is born.

In the movie, trusted information is scarce and hard to find, and you see how Skaggs builds his house of cards. It is well worth watching this master of media manipulation at work, and a lesson for us all to be more careful, especially when

we see something online. Or read about it in the newspapers or see something on TV.



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2 thoughts on “Joey Skaggs and the art of the media hoax”



Bob Marsh

November 7, 2016 at 9:30 am

David, I thought as I read this that the punch line was going to involve Skaggs' creation of the Donald Trump campaign as a hoax or a hoax gone awry. Good story, though, and a reminder of the blurry line between media-reported reality and fiction.



Ben Myers

November 7, 2016 at 10:11 am

And Skaggs is a member of Trump's inner circle? Seems that way, which may be an insult to Skaggs.