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Crowd Control and the Power of the Hoax: What Can Advertising Learn from Stuntsters?

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Monday marks the beginning of [Advertising Week Europe](#) at which the world's leading figures in the advertising and media business will be uniting in venues ranging from St Paul's Cathedral to BAFTA in focussing their efforts on how to survive and thrive in light of the speed of change in media land.

I'm going to be hosting a session there on Tuesday with [Joey Skaggs](#), perhaps the most dedicated proponent of independent thinking and media literacy whom I have met over the years, and someone who understands brands and the narratives around them better than most. PRs should keep an eye on him; he is the single most important person to watch in the face of the changes currently occurring in the media ecosystem.

The rise of the Now! Economy has most industries wondering what the next step is. For years now, many professions have looked on to the changes taking place in the way we communicate, stunned by the speed of change and unsure what the next steps are for their industry. Politicians have wavered, the music industry has waned, banks have found themselves red-faced (if not red-handed), and the world of advertising has experienced a reawakening.

For years, consumers have been in a position of relative passivity: mass media, large billboards and a relative lack of choice meant that advertisers and governments could get their messaging out with confidence, and crises could be handled mostly behind closed doors.

However, with the advent of internet and mobile communications has come a greater sense of empowerment. We have witnessed worldwide uprisings of the disgruntled and the oppressed, and accountability and transparency has worked their way up to the top of the global agenda in almost all areas of our lives.

But this drive for accountability, and the seemingly new found trend for virality that has come to define the modern era finds its genesis long before the birth of the internet.

It all started with one man; a magnanimous maverick by the name of Joey Skaggs. Like many at the time, Skaggs was frustrated with the travesty that has come to be known as mainstream media. The injustices of the Vietnam War were going largely ignored as the public conscience became increasingly distracted by consumer culture and celebrity stardom. Something had to be done.

Where the plight of Vietnam veterans was being largely ignored, Skaggs took to the challenge of exposing America's obsession with its appearance under the identity of Joe Bones, leader of a group of commandos, who, for a fee, would ensure that you didn't go around eating all those cookies. The story caught the attention of the mainstream media, and before long, not only was the story being broadcast on television and gaining column inches in the *Washington Post*, he was also receiving offers of partnership, investment and volunteers. The hoax had gone viral. International television queued for an opportunity to cover the issue.

Skaggs of course revealed the hoax, giving the world pause for thought about the issues that hadn't been talked about through the exposure of those that had. His methods do not differ greatly from the way playwrights such as Pirandello use comedy. By laughing at something, we question what has made us laugh, causing us to reflect on a subject more than we might through plain exposure to it.

Skaggs has an inherent understanding of the strength of a good story, and an even better capacity to cultivate the power of the crowd. He has used his skills over the years to invert the saccharine media messaging and the power it has over public opinion forming. As the public has come to accept the smoke-and-mirror spoon-feeding of the media as common place, Skaggs has used the media to expose its failings, questioning what we accept as truth, and throwing up the motives and laziness behind the machine.

As the media landscape continues to change and evolve and micromedia starts to affirm its position in this strange ecosystem, there are few people with greater ability and expertise to direct us through the miasma and offer a disruptive voice to cut through the stagnation than Skaggs.