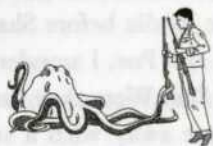


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## HOAXES WITHOUT END

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOEY SKAGGS,  
ABOUT MAKING UP NEWS

ON APRIL 13, 1844, the *New York Sun* published a special edition, called *The Extra Sun*, on the strength of a front-page story announcing that a hot-air balloon had successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean. With no fewer than eight exclamation points and a series of bold headlines, subheads, and kickers that filled one-third of the column, the *Sun* trumpeted its astounding news. The balloon had crossed the Atlantic in three days! The “Flying Machine!!!” had just arrived and landed in Charleston, South Carolina. The article promised “full particulars of the voyage!!!” The article, as it happens, was fictional. It was written by Edgar Allan Poe and published knowingly by the *Sun*. New York newspapers were far more numerous then and competition for readers was fierce, and so Poe’s story was a sure-fire way for the *Sun*’s editors to boost their circulation. They were right; the paper sold 50,000 copies of the special edition. Poe was amazed and, even stranger for him, genuinely overjoyed at the enthusiasm that greeted his story. He wrote:

On the morning (Saturday) of its announcement, the whole square surrounding the Sun building was literally besieged, blocked up—ingress and egress being alike impossible, for a period soon after sunrise until about two o’clock p.m.[...] I never witnessed more intense excitement to get possession of a newspaper. As soon as the first copies made their way into the streets, they were bought up, at almost any price, from the news-boys, who made a profitable speculation.

Today, Poe’s fictional news article appears in most of the major collections of his writing, as a story called “The Balloon-Hoax.” His story came to

mind as I was preparing to interview Joey Skaggs, an artist who has, since 1976, made up stories that are the contemporary equivalent of Poe's and managed to get them published in newspapers and on the Internet and broadcast on television and the radio, all without editors and reporters suspecting a thing. Most recently Skaggs created The Final Curtain, a fake company and its requisite web site, promising to do for cemeteries what Walt Disney did for theme parks, and do so tastefully. The company got quite a bit of attention in the media before Skaggs revealed it as his latest hoax. Thinking about Skaggs and Poe, I wondered about the 50,000 people who bought that issue of the *Sun*. Were they just hoodwinked? Was it that simple? Or did they also come away with a story, albeit fictional, about progress, human achievement, and risky adventures, all of which they happened to want to believe in? And could the same be said for those of us fooled by a Skaggs hoax today, or tomorrow?

Q: Now that you've revealed the Final Curtain, I'd like you to talk about some of the logistical nitty-gritty that goes into one of your productions.

A. The Final Curtain took about two years of work from when I first started putting it together to when I released the exposé. Having come up with the concept to satirize the funeral industry, I decided to create a bogus company and web site to promote the concept. I wanted to use the Internet because while fact and fiction are so easily manipulated and blurred, it has also become an ubiquitous and supposedly reliable source for information. It gave us an instantaneous and constant presence, with the illusion of having a history. I registered a domain name and put together a team of volunteers. In this case over fifty people helped perpetrate the hoax—businesspeople, writers, architects, web designers, programmers, ISP providers, and the artists who provided concepts and sketches for their monuments.

We created the Final Curtain web site complete with architectural renderings, a development proposal, biographies for the management team, information about investment opportunities and the time-share program for the deceased, a monument gallery of iconoclastic and satirical grave sites and urns, and a tour of the memorial theme park.

To be successful, this project had to appear completely real. I needed a mailing address, letterhead, telephone business listing, and a staff. One volunteer agreed to let me use his home/office address in New Jersey and we installed a telephone line under the name of Investors Real Estate Development d.b.a. the Final Curtain.



All calls and mail were forwarded to my New York City studio. Our web master created e-mail addresses for all the staff members which were also routed to me. They were real people, but since none had the time to deal with the day-to-day correspondence once the piece took off, I played all the roles.

Then I placed ads in twenty alternative newspapers around the country. The ad read, "Death got you down? At last an alternative! [www.finalcurtain.com](http://www.finalcurtain.com)."

Q: What initial reactions did you get from the ads?

A. As soon as the ads came out, the hits to the site spiked into the tens of thousands per day for several weeks. However, only a few people responded directly.

Q: Then what happened?

A. I let the Final Curtain percolate. Over the next six months, we added artists' submissions to the Monument Gallery. This helped it look as if it had caught on and that more people were becoming involved.

When I felt the site was sufficiently populated with creative, emotionally poignant monuments, I launched a major PR campaign announcing the concept and soliciting artists' monuments for a scholarship program. The winners would receive free 10' x 10' plots for their memorials or urns at one of our soon-to-be-created memorial theme parks.

Q: Satire always seems to require at least some of the audience to completely miss what's funny and accept it as real. Were these very serious, earnest submissions from artists who took the web site at face value?

A. The responses I got seemed genuinely sincere. Some artists embraced the concept and were happy to participate. Others saw it as a business opportunity. For example, one artist who did tombstone engraving for people and pets wanted to put her work up in the gallery as a way to get more work through the Final Curtain.

Q: So next the Final Curtain starts to get early attention from the media.

A. The media response kept me extremely busy granting interviews. I

played various staff members and appeared on radio shows, in newspapers and magazines, on the Internet, and on TV shows. Thankfully no one asked me to come in to the studio.

After an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, the legal challenges began. A lawyer for Uncle Milton Industries Inc., owner of the registered trademark "Ant Farm," sent a formal complaint to both the writer at the *Los Angeles Times* and our company claiming trademark infringement because one artist's monument emulated an ant farm.

It pays to have a *pro bono* lawyer friend with a sense of humor. In response we changed the language on the site to "ant habitat," and all was well with the world again. But I couldn't pass up the opportunity to stir up a little more trouble. I sent a second press release out about the ant farm controversy to keep the Final Curtain in the news.

Q: I like how the fact that Uncle Milton's attorneys took the Final Curtain seriously can become justification for journalists just hearing about the Final Curtain to take it seriously, too.

A. When something seemingly adverse happens, I use it as an opportunity. Controversies help to distract reporters from questioning the original premise.

Q: Then what happened?

A. Months went by and I maintained nine-to-five business hours, pretending I worked in a real office. I handled a flood of interviews by phone and e-mail. I had an answering machine with a secretary's voice on the message, so I could occasionally leave "the office."

I tape recorded and logged all the calls, and kept track of the articles and stories through print and electronic clipping services. I had to keep everything going long enough for numerous magazines, with very long lead times, to publish their stories.

Q: In order to create a fictional business you had to behave like an actual business. You kept business hours, you held meetings with your volunteers, you did all those standard business things. It's as if some semblance of reality can't be imitated accurately without recreating reality completely. Running a business that's supposed to appear real could even be harder than running a real business.



A. When I create a false reality, I always try to create a plausible structure to help convince people.

Q: When and why did you decide to reveal the hoax?

A. After many months of running this non-existent company I was satisfied with the success of the piece. I composed and mailed an exposé press release. I canceled the auxiliary telephone line and mounted a disclaimer on the Final Curtain web site. But releasing an exposé doesn't mean the piece is over. Since a majority of the media that had fallen for it chose not to do a follow-up and never revealed it was a hoax, many people weren't exposed to the truth. Consequently some serious inquiries continued to come in. Even with a disclaimer on the web site, I receive letters of inquiry, commentary, and offers.

Q: As you watch the news or read newspapers, what do you notice about journalism that you then take into account in your hoaxes? Are there types of stories reporters tend to go for that you then try to replicate?

A. Sometimes it's a matter of being topical and outrageous. Other times you can use a calendar to predict the kinds of stories the media is looking for. Celebrations of anniversaries of disasters, such as nuclear power plant meltdowns or political assassinations provide opportunities, as do holidays. And then there are the ubiquitous animal or pet stories. There's one every day.

Most important to any fake story is a plausible, realistic edge with a satirical twist that is topical. I want people to be amused or amazed but fooled. I want them to say, "Unbelievable!" but believe it. Satire and believability are irresistible to the news media. Sensationalism gets them every time.

Q: Sensationalism is something that people regularly accuse some journalists of. What must be alluring about your hoaxes is that you present journalists with a sensational story. That is, they don't need to cover the cathouse for dogs or the cockroach vitamin pill in sensational ways. They're already sensational. Your hoaxes allow them to be thoughtful, objective journalists while covering something that's completely outrageous.

A. I'm willing to play the buffoon or the wacko and let them laugh at my expense, knowing I'll have the last laugh.

Q: How did you get started doing this?

A. I loved painting and sculpting, but realized how difficult it was for a young artist to be taken seriously by the art establishment. Also, I was impatient. So I began doing confrontational, iconoclastic performances, bringing my artwork into the public arena, like the Easter Sunday Crucifixion in 1966, which started when I dragged a 200-pound ten-foot-tall sculpture depicting a decayed figure on a cross into Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side.

These were the early stages of using the news media as an integral part of my work. These performances usually ended up badly for me and anyone associated with me. They were not humorous. I was scorned, chased, and arrested. But I learned first-hand how the news media operates by watching how they interpreted, changed, and misrepresented my intentions.

Q: How did the news media report on those early projects?

A. As a news story, I'm just a subject, not a person. My early performances were provocative, so I was stereotypically portrayed as a counter-cultural figure by the mainstream media. Not much has changed.

Q: Then the media became much more integral to your work.

A. I began to experiment using the media as my medium rather than just a vehicle to report on my performances. I learned more complex ways to manipulate the manipulators, to bring attention to issues about which I felt passionate. My performances became, rather than simple political or social statements, more sophisticated theatrical productions, like the Vietnamese Nativity in 1968, where I constructed a life-sized Vietnamese village in Central Park on Christmas Day and had actors representing American soldiers with weapons attack and destroy it.

I combined advertising art and public relations techniques with theater, film-making, set design, research, writing, character development, acting, photography, and, of course, sculpting and painting. And I added hoaxing to my repertoire, where I would fool the media into believing total fabrications. I called these my plausible but non-existent realities. I was inspired by the need to be cunning enough to fool intelligent journalists, while leaving clues and challenging them to catch me. I'd given up the control a painter might have, but I was dealing with issues, with irony, and with worldwide media attention. It was no longer necessary to have a gallery in order to be seen.



Q: You've written that when reality as reported on the news gets as strange as it sometimes is, "pranks are needed more than ever to jolt us into reexamining our values." What values and what sort of reexamination do you have in mind?

The issues of my performances vary, but most of the questions buried in the work remain the same: What do we believe? Why do we believe it? This is true whether we're talking about questioning the authority of the media or questioning deeper personal beliefs, such as political, religious, moral, or ethical concerns.

My challenge as a satirical artist is how to present ideas to people to enable them to question and reexamine their beliefs. My hope is that my work provokes people to look at things in a new way.

Q: What sort of reexamination do you have in mind for the Final Curtain?

A. The theme is life and death. It's about as heavy as you can get or as light as you can try to make it. Hopefully, the Final Curtain has inspired people to think about how they respond to the death of a loved one. I tried to create an inspirational framework around an absurd premise to jumpstart the process. As it turns out, the premise of a cemetery theme park mall with a time-share program for the deceased may not be that absurd after all. Many people thought it was a great idea.

Q: How reliant are the reporters who write about the Final Curtain on the press releases you feed them?

A. Most reporters who come to me get their stories directly from press releases. Very few do what one would consider to be their professional duty. I count on this to a degree.

If I'm successful in fooling a wire service, I don't really have to do anything else to promote the story, because the media will feed off of itself. They all assume the original author did his or her homework.

The Final Curtain web site contained a lot of information including contacts for the staff. So even if a journalist considered the concept over-the-top, there were people to talk with to get verification. Some journalists did call, which allowed me to have fun elaborating on the concept in order to convince them. Most did not question the premise but would focus on getting clever material for their stories. They asked about the artists' submissions. So I made up answers I thought they'd like.



Q: What sort of questions did reporters ask you?

A. The questions were quite typical. Where did the idea come from? When and where will the first theme park open? Tell us about some of the artists and their concepts. Is there anyone famous? How much will it cost to be buried there?

Q: Did any reporter want to pry into the story a bit?

A. A few journalists dug deeper. Some had questions about the backers and potential investors. But I'd answer probing questions with, "I'm sorry but what you are asking is proprietary in nature and I'm not at liberty to disclose this information." Very few continued to pry after that.

Also, I could always try to manipulate the conversation and feed them other aspects I thought might interest them. I'd tell them we were being besieged by the public, that we were really filling important needs. I'd speak of economic development for the areas in which we planned to build. If it was a radio interview, I knew they wouldn't spend much time. If it was a print journalist I'd ad-lib as long as they wanted. But it was relatively easy to answer their questions and keep them engaged.

Q: Did any reporters contact you, ask a few questions, and then not run a story?

A. A journalist from the *Bergen County Record*, in New Jersey, called several times. Each time he called he tried to dig deeper. Finally he called to say his editor was not satisfied with the information, and he needed more. I told him I could understand the editor's hesitancy since we had not yet broken ground on the first park. And since I couldn't tell him exactly where the first park would open, "for fear that the information would drive up prices of surrounding properties," I suggested he wait until we announced a groundbreaking. He sounded disappointed that his editor was holding him back, but agreed that maybe it was best he wait.

His calls were particularly challenging. The Final Curtain office was not far from his office. I feared he'd take a short trip to our headquarters only to find it was a private home. But he never brought up the subject of visiting us and he never wrote the story.

Q: Before you revealed the hoax, *The Boston Herald*, *Mother Jones*, National Public Radio, and many others reported on the Final Curtain. Have any of

those organizations run retractions or stories explaining the hoax?

A. Disappointingly no. Yahoo! Internet Life, *Mother Jones*, NPR, Fox TV, Associated Press, Flash News, and the *New York Daily News*, etc.—none of them ran retractions. Only the *Boston Herald* ran a retraction, but it was a put-down. And they were joined by the *Boston Globe*, which hadn't fallen for it. But then, I'd hoaxed both repeatedly.

Follow-up stories by those who have been fooled are rare. When it does happen, it isn't necessarily an explanation, apology, or examination of the issues brought forth by the hoax. They don't want to give the story any more attention for fear of further embarrassment. They don't want the public to question their credibility as an investigative news source.

Q: So your hoaxes typically get more coverage than your subsequent revelation that they are hoaxes?

A. The news media mostly choose to focus on the aspects of the story that concern their having been fooled, not the issues brought forth in the hoax. So the follow-up story is usually an admission that they "among many other journalists" were fooled by a hoaxer. They try not to mention my name. And if they do, they usually put me down. Not that I expect them to praise me.

Q: You ever have any close calls with reporters almost discovering you hiding behind their story?

A. I'm sure, well, at least hopeful that there have been suspicious journalists who, thinking the story was bogus, decided it wasn't worth their time to investigate and let it go. But my experience has shown me that most journalists don't want to screw up a good story with reality, and they will talk themselves out of questioning the story to death.

I remember the first time I fooled *UPI*, this was with my Cockroach Vitamin Cure Hoax. When asked by another journalist for a statement, a *UPI* senior editor said, "The information was correct at the time." I never forgot that. That comment was the excuse he used to justify their incompetence. Incidentally, I've fooled *UPI* numerous times since.

Q: Has the Final Curtain received any media attention since, as the *UPI* editor would have it, the information about it now appears to be incorrect?



A. Even though the site has an exposé announcement on the home page, the site still receives thousands of hits from all over the world everyday. And the servers those hits are coming from keep changing. For example, last week I started getting hits from Poland. So apparently, someone somewhere is writing about it.

Also, I'm still getting e-mails from people interested in financing or mounting their memorial, or offering planned giving opportunities. Obviously people don't read very carefully. If I removed the hoax disclaimer, the hoax would continue on. It would be an interesting test, and I'm tempted to do it.

Q: Your Celebrity Sperm Bank, a plausible but non-existent reality circa 1976, has recently become a plausible, existent web site that auctions model's eggs to the highest bidder. In "Writing American Fiction," Philip Roth wrote, "The American writer... has his hands full in trying to understand, describe, and then make credible much of American reality. It stupefies, it sickens, it infuriates, and finally it is even a kind of embarrassment to one's one meager imagination. The actuality is continually outdoing our talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist." As a satirist, do you ever feel you're in a high-stakes race against reality?

A. Sure, but it also reminds me not to get old or culturally stuck, and not to be disappointed when reality beats me to the punch. It's a wonderful challenge. Not just to keep up, but to guess ahead of the crowd.

Q: Do you consider yourself at all gullible?

A. It is the fool who thinks he cannot be fooled. I hook lots of journalists because of this attitude. Especially Europeans who say, "You couldn't get away with that here." I say, "Excuse me, but I have."

But I'm as susceptible as anyone else. At the same time, I'm highly skeptical. It would make life much easier if I could have total faith and not question everything all the time, but I can't do it and I won't do it.

Q: What would you do if a Joey Skaggs impersonator began making hoaxes in your name, in effect adding counterfeit hoaxes to your real body of fake work in much the same way that van Gogh's oeuvre, say, is today swelled by a number of careful fakes?

A. Are you trying to create more trouble for me here? Actually I thought a lot about continuing my work even after I'm dead. So I've been designing hoaxes that can be executed when I'm no longer alive. For example, hoaxes that my friends can drop in the mail. I actually can still continue working, and no one will be the wiser.

Q: So you might create a hoax that's never revealed, that forever remains a plausible but non-existent reality? That would be a fitting memorial for you, to leave behind some complex, undisclosed puzzles, a bunch of hoaxes without any end.

A. It makes the thought of dying a little more amusing.

## THESE THINGS NEVER HAPPEN OVERNIGHT

by CHRIS CURTIS

From a series of letters received by Oakland, California resident Nancy Nelson, January, February and June 1992. Nelson corresponded with Andy Kaxiras, Assistant Co-Director of the West Oakland Transit Village Study, a group formed to develop plans for a transit and living-space adjacent to the Oakland's Bay Area Rapid Transit station. The letters first appeared in the December 9, 1992 issue of the Bay Area Express, published in Fremont, Oakland.

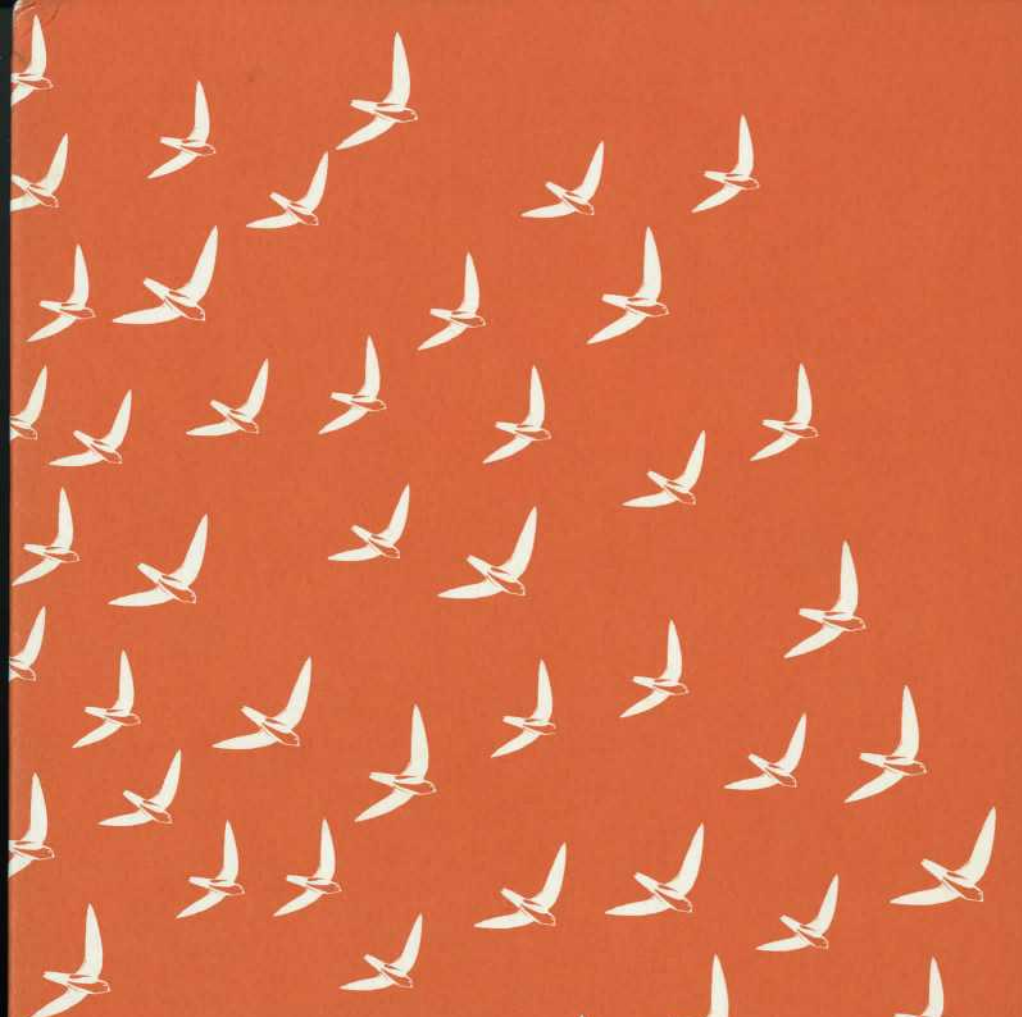
Dear Ms. Nelson:

I'm sorry you received two of our Exam letters. We've been awfully busy here, so you can probably imagine, and we don't always have time to reply as quick as we'd like to answer yours when we have.

To answer your questions, our work is in final construction by or after July. The Transit Village will be built in increments. We have identified Opposability Sites (p. 2, fig. 2 on the mailing), and these will be summarized into the Key Project Areas discussed in the mailing. Once the KPAs are underway, reconstruction of the BART station, and augmentation of the Parking/Shop, will occur. Finally, we will authorize construction of the Transit Village Towers.

We are sensitive to the history and needs of the West Oakland community. Nelson 1 says "transparency." Alternately proposals failed to consider the interests of those that reside in the West Oakland neighborhoods. We chose to have these issues, and believe that the project of the Village will





GUEST EDITED BY PAUL MALISZEWSKI

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