

# NJ Film Fest preview: ‘Art of the Prank’ doc looks at an anti-fake news pioneer

By: **JAY LUSTIG** | January 28, 2017

Decades ahead of his time, Joey Skaggs started thinking about things like fake news and alternative facts — and doing something about it. His efforts are chronicled in the entertaining and enlightening documentary, “Art of the Prank,” which will be shown Jan. 29 at 7 p.m. at the [New Jersey Film Festival](http://www.njarts.net/film/nj-film-fest-begins-weekend-watch-trailers/) (<http://www.njarts.net/film/nj-film-fest-begins-weekend-watch-trailers/>) in New Brunswick.

Using actors and sets, fake press releases and newspaper ads, Skaggs has sold legitimate news organizations — everyone from CNN to the Wall Street Journal — on the reality of phenomena such as a brothel for dogs, cockroaches as health food, a mobile confessional booth used at a political convention, and a sperm bank auctioning celebrity DNA to the highest bidder. The clips of him being interviewed on actual news shows — and, sometimes, the reporters remorsefully apologizing after they realize they’ve been pranked — are priceless.

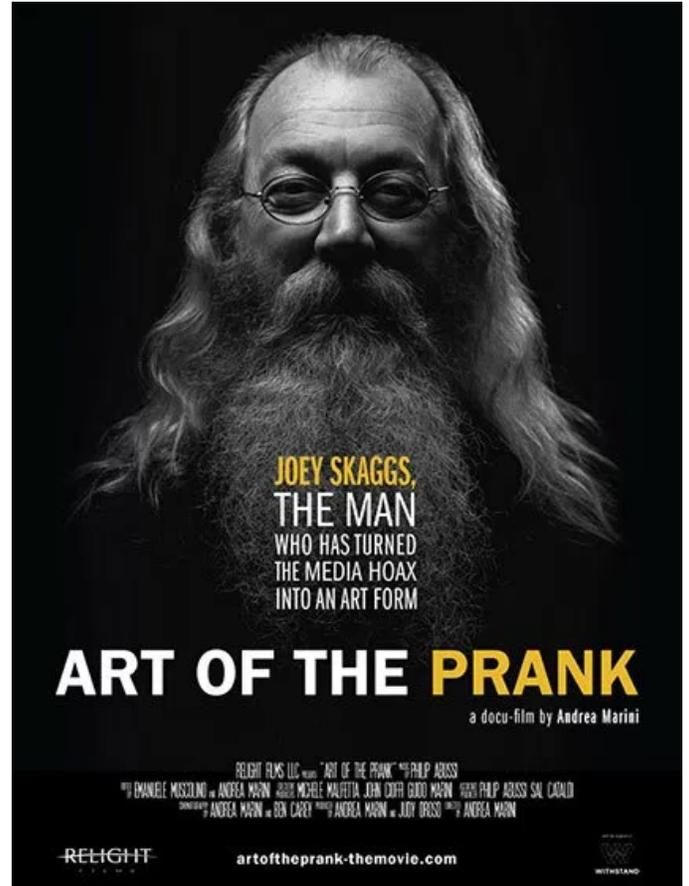
Much of the film follows him on one of his most recent pranks. He makes a short film, “Pandora’s Hope,” in which, among other things, he claims to have used shark stem cells to create new teeth for himself (that regenerate, just like shark’s teeth do). He then gets a bunch of film festival to show it, and this, in turn, leads to a bunch of posts on web sites.

This prank has a specific goal: To draw people’s attention to genetic engineering in agriculture, which “Pandora’s Hope” also explores. Most of Skaggs’ hoaxes through the years had a simpler goal, though: To show how careless media members can be.

“Art of the Prank” traces Skaggs’ obsession back to ‘60s, when he created elaborate anti-war art pieces that journalists distorted for their own purposes.

“I decided,” Skaggs says in the documentary, “rather than just use the media to try to get attention for my work, I would use the media as part of my work, exploit their vulnerability, gullibility (and) necessity for being out there first and incorporate this into a theatrical performance. And then see what happens.”

I have to admit, while watching “Art of the Prank” it occurred to me that the documentary itself might be an elaborate hoax. I looked into it as much as I could and, no, that doesn’t seem to be the case. But I think Skaggs would agree, it’s a good thing that I at least considered this possibility.



*A poster for the documentary, “Art of the Prank.”*

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