

This Isn't Funny
By Joey Skaggs
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Reflections sparked by correspondence with John Tierney for a New York Times article subsequently published Tuesday, November 6, 2001...

The events that began September 11, 2001 have changed life as we knew it. We are now in a global conflict. The U.S. economy has been severely impacted and has, in some sectors, been shut down by a series of events that have included thousands of hoaxes. CNN reported over 2,300 episodes of Anthrax scares in the last several weeks, the majority of which have proven to be false.

As an artist who has used the "prank" to make social statements for over 35 years, I am watching as our government and media have declared all-out war on hoaxing as well as terrorism.

I would like to make clear that I have always held mindless, vicious, self-serving, "screaming-fire-in-the-theater" hoaxes as irresponsible, stupid, dangerous and destructive. I don't condone anyone who participates in or adds to the public panic and the demand on already over-burdened agencies responding to deadly serious acts of terrorism and sabotage.

It is my opinion that anyone who is using this opportunity to create false alarms is a saboteur to society and should be dealt with swiftly and strongly. These hoaxes are criminal acts and those who do this must be brought to justice.

I have known the power of the prank for decades. I've explored and polished it as a method of communicating my ideas. And I think it's fair to say that I've proven that the prank can be an effective tool for delivering propaganda, whether it promotes independent thinking or tells you what to think (in many ways, just like the media). It's purpose is to manipulate thinking.

My pranks have been designed to make a statement that hopefully opens people's eyes to a different way of looking at social issues while shedding light on the process of manipulation. Granted, this is an unusual occupation. But it works for me. It is my art. And it has given me a platform to spark conversation and debate.

A couple of years ago, I wrote a piece that was published in Extra! (the publication of FAIR, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) in which I stated "I'm not into meaningless, stupid, vicious, vindictive acts of rage against people or institutions. Nor am I interested in delusional people who confuse their lack of conscience with some tweaked concept of anarchy, pulling off the equivalent of the burning-bag-of-poop-at-the door trick..."

And I elaborated on the meaning of a "good" prank, which, in my opinion "attempts to shed light on an issue and to create social change. It is the manipulation of ideas and emotions in order to shift focus onto otherwise hidden agendas or social injustices. Using elements of truth, irony, humor and satire, a good prank is meant to target closed-mindedness, prejudice, hatred and unquestioning thinking. It deconstructs the status quo. It attacks the misuse of power by media, government, business and religion..."

I own the URLs "pranks.com" and "hoaxes.com," which both feed into "joeyskaggs.com." So many of the people who come to my site are looking for mindless

pranks. Thus, the section on my Web site called "Top Secret" at <http://www.joeyskaggs.com/html/topsec/index.html>, where I try to educate young wannabe pranksters about being responsible while doing pranks. If I can influence even some of them to not join in on this craze to cause panic, I'll feel better.

But it's not just kids. I get emails from people of all ages asking me to give them ideas for pranks. I don't respond to requests like that. It's important to me to clearly differentiate between what I do as an artist/activist/satirist/educator and those who perpetrate vicious criminal acts.

I've recently been asked how to catch the hoaxers or, better yet, how to stop them. There's no way to stop people from perpetrating pranks, just like there's no way to stop people from letting their imaginations get the best of them, or stop people from hating other people.

A hoax is a perfect weapon. It is just as effective to imply mass destruction as it is to actually cause mass destruction. It allows a small person to experience power. It's David against Goliath.

All the surveillance cameras in the world, monetary rewards, tapped phone lines, and severe punishments will hardly dissuade a wacko, an unscrupulous hateful person, or a kid not fully comprehending the consequences of his or her actions.

The news media is not handling the situation in such a way as to dissuade these hoaxes. Broadly displaying each and every scare, is not a good way to play poker. These pranks have gotten far too much attention. When someone wants attention and doesn't get it, they either stop or they move on to some other technique. The media has been effectively supporting the terrorists' and the hoaxers' positions by reporting on stories not substantiated by facts, then following with changes to their previously "first but false" reports with more speculation. This just adds to the fear factor.

So far, we have no evidence about who is behind these "pranks," but I suppose it might be: 1) a group of foreign terrorists, 2) a rogue, like the Uni-bomber, 3) a foreign government, 4) People who hate junk mail (that's a joke), 5) people in America who hate America, or 6) kids or malcontent adults (the equivalent of pulling a fire alarm when there is no fire), or, perhaps most sinister and paranoid -- 7) political operatives, in an effort to influence the US to agree to attack Iraq or other enemies countries.

But whoever it is, the moment of the devastatingly damaging hoax is upon us. Not many people ever imagined that a series of inexpensive, simple acts could cause so much disturbance on such an international scale.

The reality is that Anthrax is the least of our potential problems. There are other biochemical agents that are far more deadly. And then there's the threat of a nuclear suitcase.

I attempted to address the issue of new and alternative weaponry with my Stop BioPEEP hoax a few years ago. In this piece, as a non-existent character named Dr. Joseph Howard, I revealed a plot by multi-national corporations to cause mass addiction to certain consumer products in an effort to secure market share. In this fictitious scenario, I said that this scientific breakthrough was then usurped by the U.S. Government as a perfect weapon. Corporations could profit while supplying product to the addicted population, but at some future date, the government would be able to step in and control or eliminate populations at will. For example, one could secretly eradicate specific

targeted racial DNA types by altering the products to contain a virus worse than Ebola, without fear of retaliation.

This hoax can be found at <http://www.joeyskaggs.com/html/retsub.html>. (scroll down to 1998). To me, this was science fiction. But I always thought it could easily be real, as is true of most of my hoaxes. As an aside, given the current situation, if I staged Stop BioPEEP today, I would most likely be arrested.

In fact, this may be why the number of people looking at my Web site has doubled in the last few weeks. I used to get about 4,000 hits a day. In recent weeks, the hits have gone up over 7,000. And my site is being perused by more people from the US Government, US Military and Arab countries than ever before. Perhaps they are looking to see if there are any clues of involvement or to see if I am trying to agitate or inspire others to do hoaxes. Or maybe they are trying to learn a thing or two. Who knows?

I realize that I must be very careful right now because a lot of people (particularly some overzealous government agents or previously hoaxed journalists) don't really understand what I do or why I do it. And my notoriety could spark serious repercussions. So, rather than attempting to do any new public pieces right now, I've put all the work I was developing on hold. I may even decide this is no longer an avenue I wish to pursue. The threat of the penalty is far too severe if my work was misunderstood.. I'm, instead, offering to provide public commentary on this subject about which I know quite a lot.

Years ago, numerous cities stopped people from pulling fire alarms on street corners by removing the fire boxes. We can't do that. The only thing we can hope to do is to help lessen the inequities people all over the world perceive to be caused by the United States' foreign policy. And, on a domestic level, we must use education to raise consciousness and thereby eliminate the need some people have to take advantage of others. Other than that, we need to be vigilant and have a support system in place to deal with any real threats.

I sincerely hope that this current reality of paranoia and political correctness will be short lived. Humor is essential. Pranks provide a wonderful and necessary jolt to awareness. Hopefully the future will offer the opportunity for pranksters to pull off constructive, positive, responsible, funny ones, and that we can once again appreciate irony and satire.