

Duped! When Journalists Fall for Fake News

Quill

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Media hoaxes expose gaps in verification processes and remind us that American journalism is built on trust and the freedom to make mistakes.

A few years ago, an outfit called Investors Real Estate Development nounced it was planning a cemetery amusement park, featuring gaudy memorials designed by artists, roller coasters, a souvenir shop, and refreshments at "Dante's Grill It was all on a Web site along with investment information and contacts for both company officials and the tombstone visionaries.

The Associated Press picked up the story in October 1999, as did the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Herald, and a number of smaller papers, magazines, and broadcast news outlets. It was a story about greed, narcissism and sacrilegious profiteering. The funny thing was that we all wanted it to be true.

As it turns out, not a word of it was.

The theme park was the brainchild of Joey Skaggs, a conceptual artist and media hoaxer. The development company was a phony. The company phone line was Skaggs' own, and Skaggs portrayed both the company spokesperson and the marketing director for interviews. The artists who submitted gravesite designs were all his co-conspirators. Fake press releases and advertisements were all the bait Skaggs needed as one journalist after another failed to detect the ruse. I was one of them.

In January 2000, I was the research editor of Mother Jones magazine, and I managed the magazine's fact checkers. One of the pieces to be checked that month was a 150-word bit on the cemetery theme park. It was written by a fellow editor and illustrated with a tombstone concept from the Web site, a bright blue neon sign that proclaimed, "Nick is Dead."

Months later, Skaggs revealed the hoax in a press release. He described the cemetery amusement park as a satire on "the corporate and church sponsored death care industry" taken "to its truly outrageous conclusion."

Besides the listing of duped media outlets, there wasn't much journalism analysis in Skaggs' press release. We at Mother Jones wondered exactly what it meant that we, and so many others, had been fooled in this way. What were the failures of the journalistic system, and how could they be remedied? Media hoaxes are nothing new. Both Ben Franklin and Edgar Allen Poe wrote satirical yarns and passed them off as news articles. And in the 19th century, frontier newspapers

were filled with tall tales of murder and mayhem. It seems that as long as there's been mass media in America, there's been somebody around to monkey with it.

Yet there is something new, as it turns out. In recent years, the public's confidence in and regard for news media has plummeted. The General Social Survey, conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, shows that public confidence in the press has been dropping fairly steadily for almost two decades. A recent study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors reported that 73 percent of Americans say they are more skeptical than ever about news accuracy. A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press shows that between 1985 and 1999, the percentage of the public who think the press helps democracy dropped from 54 to 45 percent.

This is how Skaggs described journalists in an interview posted on his Web site: "They are the status quo with capped teeth and hair spray. ... They are the puppet presenters of misinformation, propaganda, lies, deceit and commercialism."

One thing is certain; getting hoaxed by Skaggs hinted that some introspection was in order.

The first step in understanding media hoaxes is to lay out who is hoaxing whom - and why they are doing it. I believe there are five kinds of hoaxes. The first type of hoax is the fame grab, perpetrated by a member of the public seeking fame or publicity, such as a person who falsely claims heroism or a secret connection to some celebrity. Closely related to the fame grab are moneymaking scams like false corporate press releases created to manipulate the stock market.

I would call the third type of hoax "fake news" - stories, characters and quotes created by journalists who hope to spice up their stories and jumpstart their careers. Then there are jokes by journalists, which typically aren't meant to be believed even when written in a newsy style. April Fools Day stories come to mind.

And finally, there are hoaxes staged by non-journalists to satirize the press or some other segment of society. The stunts Skaggs pulls belong in this last category.

Fame grabbing, scamming, and journalistic fraud are almost universally condemned and followed by a flurry of jeremiads imploring journalists to get back to basics and verify stories. Jokes, when they are clearly marked, are typically passed over with a laugh and a shake of the head.

But satirical hoaxes - nobody seems to know how to react to these.

Journalists, naturally, tend to view such antics with consternation. We've been lied to, and we don't want it to happen again. Rule number one of the ethics code for the Society of Professional Journalists, after all, is "Seek Truth and Report It" So the usual reaction is to examine the day-to-day newsgathering and editing operations in order to avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

We had this reaction at Mother Jones. It's a worthwhile process, but it leaves aside some very important questions: What kind of press would never get hoaxed? Is it possible? And would we want that kind of press? I have attempted to add these considerations to the mix. I examine hoaxes as an issue of journalistic credibility, with special attention to reportorial shortcuts, the impact of the Internet, and the role of fact checking. But I also discuss hoaxes in terms of what the news is and what we think it ought to be.

In his book "Jamming the Media," Gareth Branwyn has a chapter on media hoaxes that begins with a quote from Joey Skaggs: "Get some out-of-state newspaper to run a story on something sight unseen, and then Xerox that story and include it in a second mailing. Journalists see that it has appeared in print and think, therefore, that there's no need to do any further research!"

Skaggs' how-to statement is a good description of "pack journalism," where one reporter follows up the work of another reporter without questioning the story's foundation. Pack journalism is often a pseudonym for lazy or sloppy reporting, but to a certain extent it's how mass media works.

Very few news outlets have the resources to investigate every story. Every day, newspapers, broadcast news and online news postings are filled with echoes of stories taken from a comparatively tiny number of sources such as The Associated Press and The New York Times. Thus, a hoax picked up by one of the wire services is almost immediately repeated by media outlets across the country, and it is repetition more than anything else that gives information life.

Gary Hill is the director of investigations and special segments at KSTP-TV in Minneapolis and the chair of the Ethics Committee for the Society of Professional Journalists. "To some extent," said Hill, "we're victims of regarding each other as professionals. ... Skaggs has hit upon the soft underbelly of the press."

Branwyn, whose book is a guide to "do it yourself" media such as zines and low-powered radio stations, puts the idea somewhat differently. Skaggs' hoaxes, he said, show that "the mainstream media is choking on its own exhaust."

Many commentators predict a greater reliance on pack journalism as more media outlets are purchased by giant, publicly held corporations that gut newsroom staff in order to cut costs and increase profits. But reliance on reportorial shortcuts isn't limited to far-flung media empires. Mother Jones, for instance, is run by a nonprofit foundation. The staff is small and most of the articles are written by

free-lance journalists. The magazine certainly didn't have the means to send a staff editor across the country to report on a 150-word story about a cemetery theme park.

Alastair Paulin, now the managing editor at Mother Jones and the unfortunate author of the Skaggs piece, believes he would have done some on-the-spot reporting if the planned development hadn't been 3,000 miles from his office. Nevertheless, he admits that this would have had more to do with writing a good story than in unmasking a fraud.

"Maybe I wouldn't have been consciously thinking, 'I need to know if this is real,'" he said. "But if you can actually do some on-the-ground reporting rather than talking with someone on the phone, you're going to get more color, you're going to understand the subject better, and you're going to write a better piece."

As it turned out, none of the New York media outlets that covered the cemetery theme park sent anyone across town to check out Investors Real Estate Development. Like Paulin in San Francisco, these New York journalists did their reporting with a telephone and the Internet - and some, Skaggs claims, didn't even bother with the phone.

A common excuse for this kind of corner cutting is deadline pressure. A 1999 report by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Examining Our Credibility," reveals that journalists and the public agree that it is more important for news outlets to get the story right than get it first. Yet many commentators believe that journalism is becoming a 24-hour competition for fragmented audiences, which may continue to dilute journalistic credibility despite the best intentions.

In their book, "Warp Speed" Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel write that mushrooming news outlets and the immediacy of the Internet "batter down the very notion of journalist as gatekeeper." They continue: "In the continuous news cycle, the press never rests to sum up; here is what we know at the end of the day. It is forever pushing forward, grasping."

The idea that technology might be subverting journalists' ability to avoid dubious news stories made me wonder about the Internet's role in media hoaxes. The centerpiece of Skaggs' hoax, after all, was the company Web site. And Internet-borne hoaxes, often spread by e-mail, have grown so prevalent that they have fostered a new segment of online security organizations - "hoaxbusters."

"With the Internet, everything's much more imprecise," said Hilary Abramson, managing editor of Pacific News Service an alternative newswire in San Francisco. "Now everyone has all this information and once something's in there, it gets repeated and repeated and repeated."

Nevertheless, there are journalists, such as David Weir, former managing editor of the Internet magazine Salon.com, who say the Internet might actually improve journalistic credibility. Weir, who's now the editor-in-chief of the new San Francisco city magazine 7x7, argues that unlike the few angry letters to the editor sent to a newspaper or magazine, the cascades of negative reaction to inaccurate news stories that are possible online will foster a kind of media "brand awareness" that might spur better reporting and increased credibility.

"A greater diversity of voices has emerged over the past seven years thanks to the Internet," Weir said. "Citizens are better able to gain access to broad categories of useful information than ever before."

Branwyn, the proponent of do-it-yourself media, takes a middle road in his evaluation of the Internet's impact on journalism.

"I hate it when people say the Internet is one thing," he said. "It's a technology that carries a whole spectrum of media. ... It's true that there's a lot of crap and half-truths online, but more so than in mainstream media? I think not."

Nevertheless, Branwyn says that journalists and news audiences have yet to adjust themselves to the realities and limitations of the Internet.

"I think it will take some time for people to develop new-media literacy skills," he said, "to be able to better discern real news and information from the dross online."

Still, what does all this talk of deadline pressure and the 24-hour news cycle have to do with Mother Jones? The magazine comes out every other month, which is about as slow as it gets in the news business. While money and other resources are certainly an issue there, time shouldn't be. How did Skaggs' story make it past a fact checker who'd been trained to look at every word of an article with a skeptical eye? The answer reveals that fact checking is no real defense against a well-crafted hoax.

Magazine fact checkers are typically junior staffers or interns, as they were at Mother Jones. I had been an intern fact checker at Pittsburgh magazine and later a fact checker while on staff at the Atlantic Monthly. Like the much-vaunted New Yorker fact checkers, we at the Atlantic were taught to be extreme. I tried to pass on that extremism to the checkers at Mother Jones. Never accept a clip as a source. Check every spelling letter-by-letter. If you don't think 60 cents is the "bulk" of a dollar, pick up your red pencil and say so.

Nevertheless, fact checkers have a fatal flaw. They are beholden to the words on the page. They make sure the reporter didn't flub any arithmetic, misrepresent somebody's opinion, take statistics out of context or make other common errors. But a fact checker's purpose has never been to uncover deliberate deceit. For

example, if the story says that small-town Mayor So-and-So thinks such and such, the fact checker is going to call up Mr. So-and-So, check the spelling of his name, his title, and ask a few questions to see if such and such is really what he thinks. The checker is not, however, going to call a city council member and ask if Mr. So-and-So truly is the mayor.

In the case of Skaggs' hoax, the article in Mother Jones quoted the fake company's Web site, listed details from the fictional business plan (also on the Web site) and offered a quote from an artist co-conspirator. In the hoax's aftermath, I struggled to draw up a fact-checking lesson from the experience and finally joked that the interns should close every future interview like the movie detective Columbo. "Oh, I have just one last question for you," they could growl at the source. "Are you Joey Skaggs?"

I believe fact checking is invaluable to good journalism, and yet any sense that it is a defense against a well-planned hoax is wrongheaded. Plus, as I mentioned above, it's difficult to imagine the press operating without occasional reportorial shortcuts. I've used them myself - in this very article. Even knowing what I know about Skaggs, for instance, I conducted my interviews with him entirely by phone and never once traveled to New York to verify his identity by checking his driver's license or stealing his mail (as one Skaggs profiler did). In fact, when I consider how little immediate contact I've had with so much of what's in this article, a little shiver runs down my spine.

The more I work as a journalist, the more I realize that while we may pride ourselves on skepticism and double checking, we rely to an even greater degree on trust, faith, convention, and construct.

Certainly Paulin, of Mother Jones, did. "If people tell you something, your initial reaction is to believe what they say," he said. "It's only the highly suspicious or paranoid who automatically approach everything they're presented with in life with 'is this for real?'"

A run-in with Skaggs reinforces the need for more careful reporting and zealous fact checking. And yet, I suspect that any news outlet that endeavored to make itself truly hoax proof through these means would be almost paralyzed by its zeal.

"There's never any excuse for sloppy reporting," said Branwyn. "If one prints a story, one should make every reasonable effort to make sure what you're telling readers is accurate. ... That said, life is complicated, and all romantic notions aside, when it comes down to it, journalism is a job, and we're all lazy sometimes.

In "The Art of the Con," published in the March/April 1999 edition of Extra!, Skaggs writes that the secret to fooling the media is to package a story in "a

funny, sexually suggestive, controversial or highly technical wrapping ... giving [the media] what they want - a provocative story with great visuals that's outrageous yet plausible."

When I read that quote to Paulin, his assessment was quick and to the point.

"Perfect," he said. "You know, I think that Skaggs really is excellent at what he does. And I'm not just saying that because he fooled me, but because he obviously does put a lot of thought into calibrating what people would go for."

"One reason we got tripped up," said Paulin, "was our desire to do something a little lighter." The cemetery amusement park story ran in the visually driven "Exhibit" section of Mother Jones, before the columns and features. These articles, Paulin explains, are "the stuff that leavens the serious and somewhat dreary and rather earnest reporting that we normally do."

What's selected as "news" by the mass media is one of Skaggs' sticking points. He told me he believed that the television news model has been adopted by media everywhere. "It's scripted," he said. "Start with the big news of the day, then give a little fluff for the people. Have an animal story, a kid story. It's infotainment."

According to a study by the Committee of Concerned Journalists, from 1977 to 1997 the percentage of all news stories that could be categorized as just straight accounts of what happened dropped from 52 to 32. Following up on that theme, Paulin proposed that a news outlet that covered nothing light or entertaining, which ran none of the "outrageous yet plausible" stories, might avoid hoaxes of the satirical, Skaggs variety.

And yet, many journalists, including Paulin, believe that entertainment and news can and should coexist.

"Look at this issue with the hoax piece," he said and read through the table of contents. There are articles about NAFTA's effects on factory workers, the business failings of George W. Bush, the "disappeared" in Pinochet's Chile, and a photo essay on "The Troubles" in Northern Ireland.

"You know, those are all pretty grim subjects and not easy things to read about," Paulin continues. "But that's part of the mission of this magazine - to confront tough stories, but to do it in an attractively packaged and well-written and good-read kind of way. And no matter what they say, any media outlet is going to have that as part of its agenda."

Abramson, of Pacific News Service, says it took her many years as a journalist to understand the value of entertainment to her craft.

"In the old days, I would have said, 'screw entertainment, it takes up valuable space.' Now I have more of a sense of the real world and all the kinds of things a paper should be to people."

Most journalists would argue, furthermore, that the media is not one, monolithic creator of mass messages, and that Skaggs' leveling of its quality and motivations is inaccurate.

Skaggs, however, pokes fun at it all, not just the fluff, "mainstream" media or television news. When I asked whether he saw any differences between, say, a local television news report and The New York Times, he replied, "[My art] is a criticism about media, but not just about media, it's about society. Whether the media is big, corporate groupers or large-mouthed minnows, I just put it out there for whoever nibbles and takes the bait."

"It's a business," was his description of Mother Jones, "just like all the rest." One of his biggest criticisms, in fact, was of a mailing the magazine sent out to promote itself as an alternative news source. "We'll give you the real news;" he said, parroting the mailing. "Total bullshit."

The news, Skaggs believes, is not separate from the rest of society's foolishness. It's an integral part of it. A satirical hoax targets the whole shebang in order, as Skaggs puts it, "to show how ridiculous we really are."

This is where the tangled challenges of the high-minded call to "seek the truth and report it" coalesce. Not only is complete accuracy impossible, but accuracy does not equal truth and never will. As journalist and press critic Walter Lippmann wrote in his seminal book "Public Opinion" (1922), "[T]he real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. " The press, he believed, was "like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of the darkness into vision."

And thus, it's a catch 22, since a Skaggs-proof press would still present the public with what Lippmann termed "a pseudo-environment" - only it would be a pseudo-environment that lacked reminders of its built-in artifice and its inevitable subjectivity. It's a paradox that Skaggs tacitly admits when he criticizes the press so vehemently about being sloppy and gullible while declaring that he hopes it never changes.

"I'm very happy to use [the media] as a vehicle to reach a larger audience with my messages about humanity's inherent foolishness," he's told reporters before.

Satirical media hoaxes, like those perpetrated by Skaggs, leave me conflicted. I never want to encounter Skaggs again. Yet I also think that he reveals the need to mingle critical thinking with free speech, particularly in this information age.

While we may never be able to escape from a mediated "pseudo-environment," I still believe that journalism, when done thoughtfully and well, is integral to a free society. Then again, I suspect that the occasional hoax is no less integral.

"Maybe a controlled press, like in China, would not fall for Skaggs," said Weir of 7x7. But, he added, "I wouldn't enjoy the kind of media where Skaggs couldn't succeed. Freedom includes the freedom to make mistakes."

"Everybody needs to be a critical reader," Weir concludes. And I agree.

"It's human nature," Skaggs told me. "We are designed to deceive ourselves and we deceive others. Everything goes through the filter of your mind and emerges as your take on reality. I mean, can you imagine a world without satire?"

[Sidebar]

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GARETH BRANWYN

[Sidebar]

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JOEY SKAGGS

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