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If the Media Are Clueless, How Bright Is the Public?

By John Elvin

Hoaxster Joey Skaggs calls them 'performance art'; editors call them pranks. Whatever they are termed, Skaggs' little tricks have earned high marks on the scoreboard of irony for unstuffing media shirts.

Fish condos. Just imagine you're a harried, hassled editor at a fast-paced major newspaper or television network and a story comes across your desk about some guy who's marketing "fish condos — housing for upwardly mobile guppies." In the nanosecond you devote to such a deci-

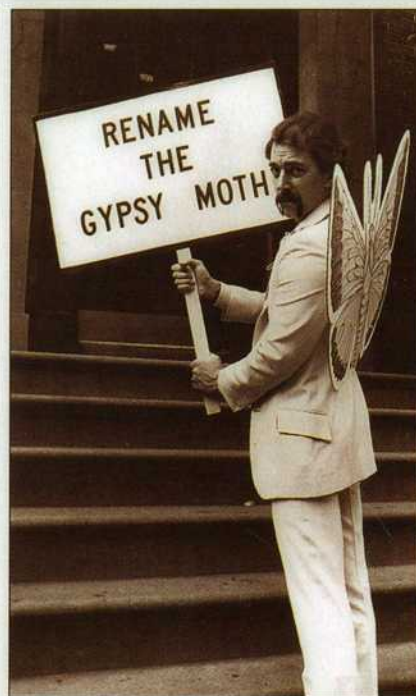
sion, you decide it's cute, it's clever, it's human interest ... let's do it.

Joey Skaggs has "gotcha!"

Skaggs, the acknowledged master of exposing media gullibility, is a self-described "social-political satirist." Conned reporters and editors term him, often acerbically, a "prankster."



True confessional? Skaggs pedals his brand of religion to the believing masses.



Jo-Jo the Gypsy wondered about the political correctness of a bug name.

He frequently finds himself the target of reporters' mockery and put-downs because he confronts them with an ugly fact: News today is more sensation than information, and feeding the readers the next quick fix has replaced old-fashioned dicta of the news trade such as "Check it out."

Skaggs, who hardly worked up a sweat getting serious media attention when he announced the "cockroach hormone cure" as a panacea for killer diseases, can take the heat. He says it's the price he pays for fabricating "totally plausible concepts that are then made real by the news media." The cockroach concoction, complete with a fancy-looking medical laboratory and press-conference testimonials from cured "patients," was Skaggs' protest of the press' unquestioning acceptance of so-called wonder cures. "People say they have a cure for cancer, for AIDS ... 'just give us your money.'" He says these stories often result in further emotional pain and financial ruin for desperate victims "whose lives are at stake. The media's helping to exploit them."

From Skaggs' perspective, which he steadfastly believes reflects the greater reality shared by all, the media are conduits for any baloney that catches their fancy or serves their purposes. Those purposes may be ideological or commercial — reporters and editors, he believes, tout their objectivity while tailoring the news to suit their own comfort zones. "They

act as a conduit for people with all kinds of different agendas who want to sell you goods, services, philosophies," Skaggs tells *Insight*. "You get a lot of propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, hype, hypocrisy, sales pitches, conflict of interest."

To prove his point, Skaggs has duped a vast number of reporters, talk-show hosts and even the game show *To Tell the Truth* — in the latter instance by successfully sending an imposter to confess the pranks Skaggs has played. So let the reader beware; any quotes herein technically should be attributed to "a person purporting to be Joey Skaggs, reached at his apartment war room in New York City."

Just as mystery writers know they can drop large clues that readers will overlook in their rush toward a "solution," Skaggs is confident he can return at will to the scene of the crime — the media spotlight, in this case — and, even using his real name, address and telephone number, perpetuate another captivating hoax that will be bought lock, stock and barrel. It is not a challenge to be ignored, as he has demonstrated time and again. "None of my hoaxes have failed," Skaggs declares. In his analysis, that's because his audience — the media and those who follow them hypnotically — doesn't retain information. Friends assure him he won't be able to perpetrate a follow-up hoax, to which his response is: "Watch."

Among his many successes:

- "Port-o-fess," a mobile confessional booth attached to a bicycle pedaled by "the Rev. Anthony Joseph." In this widely accepted guise, Skaggs patrolled the streets outside the 1992 Democratic National Convention in New York for the benefit of the press and delegates who otherwise wouldn't have time to make confession: "Religion on the go for people on the move!" was his motto.

- Hair Today Ltd. was accorded a substantial amount of airtime and ink as a firm specializing in the cure of baldness through hair transplants from cadavers.

- Baba Wa Simba was welcomed into the media limelight as a New Age guru who could cure "the wounded animal in all of us." Baba Wa found an especially appreciative audience in Europe, Skaggs notes, because of the appetite for "wacky American stories."

- The Celebrity Sperm Bank, where the sperm of famous rock stars was available at auction. Skaggs drew a mob of fans, police and press to the bank's spurious headquarters by announcing that it had been robbed.

- The Bad Guy Talent Agency, a bogus agency specializing in providing the entertainment world with especially vile characters. This stunt backfired when the agency became an overnight commercial success, attracting attention from potential "talent" as well as the entertainment industry.

- The Cighthouse for Dogs — an agency that auctioned services of its canine coterie to owners of sexually deprived pooches. This scam so outraged public officials that Skaggs had to depose under oath that it was a hoax.

- Jo-Jo the Gypsy, who found an eager media audience for his protest focused on the political incorrectness of the term "gypsy moth."

Sometimes Skaggs works alone at his stunts, conducting mass mailings, monitoring news accounts as they progress from the sublime to the ridiculous. In other instances, he recruits a band of accomplices — actors, technical assistants and a camera crew — for assistance and to add credibility to the project.

The presence of a camera crew, pos-



Sausages! Dog-meat prank outraged.

ing as news representatives of a television station, buoyed acceptance of Skaggs' role as Dr. Joseph Bonuso, a research scientist who had developed a way to determine the proper outcome of court cases by using the "Solomon" computer program. This scam capitalized on the media frenzy surrounding the first O.J. Simpson trial. At its peak, the hoax involved some 25 grim-faced actors pumping data into computer terminals as CNN cameras recorded the performance. With its voracious, round-the-clock news appetite, the cable network repeatedly has fallen for Skaggs' tricks; a forthcoming documentary illustrates half a

dozen of his appearances in different roles. "It gets pretty frightening when you see it in retrospect," he notes.

For his "Solomon" computer hoax, as cameras rolled and reporters queried, "Professor Bonuso" explained that he could establish guilt in criminal and civil cases through a revolutionary new process involving neutral computer analysis of the facts in the case, coupled with voice-stress and lie-detector assessment of testimony by all witnesses, attorneys and judges involved. As the media lapped it up, "Bonuso" announced that "Solomon" had arrived at various verdicts: O.J. Simpson, guilty. Mike Tyson, not guilty. William Kennedy Smith, guilty. The Menendez brothers, guilty. Klaus von Bulow, guilty. The officers in the Rodney King case, guilty.

Amusing, maybe, but what, exactly, was the point? Simply to give the press another hotfoot? Skaggs says he was protesting "the fact that criminal and civil-court cases are played out before our very eyes as though they are sporting matches. The truth no longer provides the key to justice."

Among dozens of other pranks, probably one of the most successful and outrageous was the Dog Meat Soup Co. Posing as a South Korean entrepreneur, Skaggs wrote letters to 1,500 animal shelters across the country offering to buy stray dogs at 10 cents per pound. Skaggs believed the American public, with its own prejudices regarding what animals may be consumed, would go bonkers when confronted with the dog-meat proposal — and he was right on target. Animal-rights groups and public officials took the story completely out of his hands — in the process, he believes, exposing their own racism and cultural bigotry.

One of the messages of the prank, Skaggs maintains, was that "we are culturally intolerant. It was about prejudice," he says, "as illustrated in the letters, faxes and calls I received."

Those who fell for the hoax generally were not too forthcoming about admitting their gullibility. "The media were totally irresponsible in their approach," Skaggs says. "They never once actually verified that this existed." He never took calls; the "Dog Meat" phone line was answered by a taped message — and yet, he says, stories appeared in which reporters and officials claimed to have spoken to company representatives. "They said they spoke to Koreans. They never spoke to anyone. I have tapes of all the phone calls. All they got was our outgoing message."

As often is the case, Skaggs' new-fangled morality play went slightly

awry. Editorialists criticized him for endangering the lives of Asian Americans by perpetuating a stereotype that their neighbors might react to with suspicion and possibly violence. Some reporters implied, wink-wink, they knew it all along. Others simply refused to admit they'd been had.

If there is one point to which Skaggs returns time and again, it is insisting that his efforts are an art form. His work spans 30 years, growing out of protests he developed as a Greenwich Village antiwar demonstra-

tor. A teacher and lecturer, Skaggs has been an instructor of media communications at New York's School of Visual Arts and Parson's The New School. "There are all kinds of people doing all kinds of pranks," Skaggs says. "I really draw a line

between what I do and what others do. There is a huge difference. I really consider it my art; I use theater; I use public-relations and advertising techniques to create an illusion." Skaggs also frequently makes the point that "I never break the law and I never take money" in the course of the hoaxes.

"I let the media go with it; I judge success by how many people I'm able to reach with the message." And the message? "Question authority in all its shapes and forms. Don't suspend critical thinking for wishful thinking," Skaggs says. He sees his role as that of the archetypal trickster, a character found in the literature and mythology of most cultures whose role is to jar his fellows out of the workaday rut of their routines, such as accepting "news" as gospel. He speaks seriously about his "pranks," describing their function, at best, as to raise the consciousness of those — most people, apparently — who are "sleepwalking on automatic pilot."

Skaggs makes the point that if he can con the media as one lone activist with a fax machine, perhaps readers and viewers can learn to be a bit skeptical of news orchestrated by vast government, political and business empires.

To Skaggs, the ultimate stage in a prank is when it is exposed — when he finally confronts the media and confesses. He tries to choose the moment, like an artist adding the final touch to a canvas. The revelation often receives the least attention from the press

corps, because his victims don't want to deal with issues of "ethics and responsibility and the potential for the media to misuse power," he says.

So this man with a sense of humor is as much philosopher as prankster. But it is difficult to tell where the absurdity ends and life begins. As if to prove that life imitates art, particularly when the media help in the project, Skaggs has seen one of his pet projects become a consumer reality. Initially his "fish condo" was a satire on the yuppie-gentrification phenomenon, a protest against the destruction of affordable, diverse neighborhood housing to create expensive condos for the better-off.

It's apparently a crusade that Skaggs took quite personally because such homogenization, he says, "has a tendency to force the creative people, the artists, out of neighborhoods. The artists tend to be the pioneers, going into neighborhoods that nobody else goes into, and then the community becomes hip, and then the doctors and lawyers and dentists and accountants take over. The prices go up, the rents go up."

In protest, he created housing for "upwardly mobile guppies."

"It was a joke," he muses. "Condos for fish? Give me a break. It's about people getting evicted. But people miss the satire. It's a joke with tremendous com-

mercial appeal." So fish condos became a mail-order product — for \$5,000 a pop, "Fish not included" — through the exclusive Neiman Marcus "1996 Christmas Book" catalog. There are four different units, sold individually. There's a guppy-sized living room, a cozy little kitchen, a parlor and a bedroom, all appointed with furniture, fixtures and even decorations — including framed portraits of cats.

Skaggs says he's honored to have been included in the luxury department-store chain's exclusive compendium of consumer fantasies, a glittering 100-page collection of Steuben glass, Calvin Klein clothing, diamonds, pearls, gourmet mail-order steaks, caviar and other delicacies and adult toys ranging from \$35,000 to \$50,000. There's even an incredibly customized Airstream trailer priced at \$195,000. "To be able to do my art and make sociopolitical satirical statements is great, but it doesn't earn a living," Skaggs says. The fish tanks actually are selling — "To me, it's a great irony."

Well, it is kind of magical, isn't it? Struggling artist protesting against the evils of modern civilization, and he comes up with a concept that catches on, that pays the freight, that gets him in the Neiman Marcus catalog. The catalog entry is fairly straightforward, emphasizing the high-play aspects of the product but making no reference to the underlying subversiveness that inspired Skaggs to create it.

Ironic, indeed. Taking an idea and turning it into money, it's the American Dream. It's opportunistic capitalism. It's ... it's what Skaggs has been fighting all these years.

That observation isn't lost on the trickster. "I'm competing with reality," he observes, "and it's getting harder and harder. Life is getting more and more bizarre. The hoaxes have to get bigger and better."

Wait a minute ... bigger? ... better? So we should be on the alert? "Always," Skaggs assures us.

So we dial the toll-free number. "Neiman Marcus, this is Catherine. How may I help you?"

It's a pleasant-sounding voice with a gentle Dallas twang.

"I'm a reporter for *Insight* magazine. I want to verify that you take orders for item #135, the fish condo?"

Not a moment's hesitation: "Oh, yes, sir, we surely do."

Hmmm. Well, okay, Joey. If this is another of your scams, it's so good you deserve to get away with it a while longer. ●



Catalog offers condos for the rich and slick.