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JOEY SKAGGS - THE MOST NOTORIOUS SOCIO-POLITICAL SATIRIST TALKS TO JESSIE BRINTON



Jessica Brinton on 13/03/13 with comments

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Joey Skaggs, the self-described *"most notorious socio-political satirist, media activist, culture jammer, hoaxer, and dedicated proponent of independent thinking and media literacy in America"* is just the sort of person I like to spend my afternoons with. Maybe it's because he always seems to be having more fun than anyone else. In the late 1960s and 1970s, he protested the Vietnam War by attaching a 50 foot bra on the front of US Treasury, set up a Celebrity Sperm Bank, posed as a millionaire shoe shiner, and pretended to open a fake dog brothel. In the 80s, he invented a cockroach vitamin pill, designed furnished condominiums for fish, and started the annual April Fools Day, a celebratory march that has never actually happened. In the 1990s, he set up a confessional booth at the Democratic National Convention, launched a lottery to re-name the Brooklyn Bridge and sent actors onto a Christian TV channel talking about sex tapes. He has posed in the media as, among other characters, a psychic lawyer, a dog meat butcher, a windsurfer with a death wish, and the founder of a spoof disciplinary diet programme with henchmen to watch its clients 24 hours a day. Next Tuesday, March 19th, he will appear in conversation with PR guru Mark Borkowski at Advertising Week Europe, a 4-day gathering of marketing and communications leaders. After that, he's coming round to my house for tea.

Jessie Brinton: OK, what's your dream prank?

Joey Skaggs: One of the many I have in mind but haven't done yet. I'm issue-oriented, so things tend to percolate and evolve. Ultimately, what I'm after is doing a prank that deals with issues, has broad appeal, has an embedded universal truth, has elements of plausibility, is provocative and perhaps controversial, has a life of it's own, will be relevant for a long time, makes people think, give

us all a laugh, and inspires someone to change a pre-conceived opinion. [Check out Joey's *The Solomon Project* as an example].

Jessie Brinton: Have any of your pranks ever gone, ehem, too far?

Joey Skaggs: I hope so. Isn't that ultimately what a good prank needs to do? You really want to see the victims' brain short circuit. You want to see sparks come out of every orifice before their head explodes. [*Dog Meat Soup* demonstrates this pretty well!].



Jessie Brinton: What are your measures of success?

Joey Skaggs: I see myself on a battleground where in addition to whatever I've physically created for the piece, I'm incorporating public relations and advertising strategies to communicate a message that either makes fun of or runs in direct opposition to the status quo. My first measure of success is the knowledge that I came up with an idea that inspires me. I really need to have a lot of passion to take an ephemeral concept to fruition because it takes a lot of effort in planning, time, money, and production. The second level of success is in the execution and hooking the media to believe and disseminate it to the public. Then, more success comes when I reveal the truth and see what havoc that causes. Recording the reactions of various media outlets who have fallen for the prank is always rewarding. But it's not the gotcha moment that I consider the ultimate success. It's the "aha" revelation that people experience, the realisation that if my story is total bullshit, what other total bullshit have they believed in.

My work is essentially about this: What do you believe, how did you come to those beliefs? What are the sources of information on which you base your beliefs? And, do you ever question them? This is about media literacy and understanding the world in which we live. It's about recognising that we are the targets in a war of propaganda between marketers of all sorts of ideology, whether it's product-based, religious or civic. So did I succeed in getting someone to be a little more skeptical rather than blindly believe what they've been told? To have a more open mind and question authority? I really can't measure that success. I only get glimpses of it when I hear back from people. But ultimately that's the success I hope for. My success is in thinking that I've inspired someone else to realise that they have a voice and can creatively speak out, take some form of action about something they believe in and have it heard.

Jessie Brinton: Is there such a thing as ethical pranking?

Joey Skaggs: Many people think lying is an ethical transgression or a moral violation. And, in lots of instances, I agree. When I'm working on a prank, however, I think of myself as an ethical liar. Yes, I'm lying. But the lie is actually the message. And the message is that we're all being lied to. I always tell the truth in the end, which, to me, justifies what I do. It's the people who are fooling you that don't ever tell you they're fooling you that I believe are unethical, whether they represent the government, the broad world of corporate exploitation, the church, or just prejudiced opinion propagated via the news media. By revealing the truth and explaining my intent I can live with lying. Of course many people won't agree, but a tear just ran down my leg. What blows my mind are the lies people continue to believe in.

Jessie Brinton: What impact has social media had on the whole picture?

Joey Skaggs: With the advent of the Internet and new forms of communicating via social media, there's certainly more chatter in the universe. And, it doesn't take much of an effort to pull a funny prank and put it up on YouTube or on a bogus website. The world is not only smaller because of it, but also more entertaining. We all have access to a lot more laughs. For me, the advantages are plentiful. It's much easier to launch a concept and track what happens. If I take advantage of all of the social options, I can find an audience. And I'm able to communicate instantly with co-conspirators all over the world to create truly international hoaxes, such as [Stop BioPEEP](#). Then I can be a voyeur and see who's saying what where. The challenge, however, is breaking through all of the clutter. That's where know-how and luck come in.

I discovered this in 1993 with my SEXONIX! hoax. Turns out I created the first virtual reality Internet hoax. I said I had developed a revolutionary VR apparatus where people could have safe sex in the era of the AIDS epidemic, and was offering a new dawn of hope for the impotent and handicapped. The equipment was to be unveiled at the *Metro Toronto Christmas Gift and Invention Show*. But when I reported that it was confiscated at the Canadian border on the grounds that it was morally offensive to the Canadian people, I went online to several bulletin boards like the WELL and Fidonet, which were early precursors to Facebook, and asked for advice. I got plenty of support and empathy until someone thought they recognised my name and another person, an investigative reporter, attempted to research the truth behind my claim. He could never come up with any proof that it wasn't true (which is exactly what I had predicted would happen). But as they began to question my identity on the WELL, the users did not take kindly to the idea of being hoaxed. This was at a time when the people who were on the Internet thought it was their world, void of outsider infection, and that everyone in this inner sanctum only spoke the truth. As the reporter wrote, "*When you're jacked into Cyberspace, you are who you say you are. No exceptions. And if you try a street scam out here you're going to be held accountable. F--- with the WELL and you'll feel like you've been f---ed with an elephant prick.*" Pretty funny commentary taken into context today. You can read more about this story [here](#).

As technology evolves, the art of telling a story pretty much remains unchanged. You need a good story. And you need to be able to back it up with great visuals. I've written a satirical recipe called [The Well Cooked Journalist](#) which depicts this.

Jessie Brinton: Is there anything that is, for you personally, beyond pranking?

Joey Skaggs: If you mean is there anything off limits for me, the answer is no. What could possibly be off limits between life and death? I think as long as people believe in bullshit, it's all fodder for me to creatively satirise. There are good people with good intentions and there are a lot of perforated prophylactics who only think of themselves and will do anything to lie, cheat and steal to maintain their selfish ways. Bursting their bubbles, pulling their pants down, exposing them for what they are to the world, is a good thing and I don't lose sleep over it.

In terms of my life beyond pranking, I've always chosen not to limit myself to just one creative outlet.

I'm a fine arts painter, a sculptor, I like building things, and I like simple things like planting trees.

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Jessie Brinton: What five tips would you give to an aspiring prankster?

Joey Skaggs:

1. I have my own criteria and definition of what it is to be a prankster. I'm not out to simply humiliate, embarrass, or have a chuckle at someone else's expense. I differentiate between simple good time pranking and socially revealing satirical performances with a purpose. So my criteria always begins with intent. What is your purpose? What do you hope to accomplish? What results are you expecting? How are you justifying what you are doing?

2. Next, I never exploit people for money. That would be a scam, not a prank.

3. Further, I try not to commit a crime, even though some laws are meant to be broken. I'm pretty much useless if I'm incarcerated. To me it shows a lack of imagination if someone does something stupid and illegal and ends up in jail. Either find another creative solution to execute the idea or find another profession because you're not going to last long.

4. Next, I always try to find people who have the same agenda and who can keep a secret. You don't want someone to blow it for you by either leaking information or trying to hijack the action to suit their own interests.

5. And, finally, realise there are consequences for your actions. So, be prepared to face them.

Bonus Tip: Expect the unexpected and be prepared to improvise.

Jessie Brinton: Does "reality" still suffer the same fundamental problem it did when you started out in the late 60s?

Joey Skaggs: Yes, the social issues remain pretty much the same. There's widespread willingness to believe in imaginary things and to suspend critical analysis. People really believe there's a pill or a prayer that will grow hair, make you lose weight or make you more attractive. Meanwhile, there's widespread social injustice, hype, hypocrisy, disinformation and exploitation.



Jessie Brinton: Will we ever escape?

Joey Skaggs: It's really hard to imagine the consciousness of humanity evolving to the point where everyone is tolerant, considerate, compassionate, willing to reason and wanting to save the planet. I know how difficult it is to maintain a positive outlook and a sense of humor, but without it, life becomes pretty bleak. We have to make the most of it before we're either run over by a bus, blown up, hit by an asteroid, or die of boredom and apathy. Life is, after all, just a cosmic ha-ha.

Jessie Brinton: It's 2015. The system is teetering on the brink of collapse as a result of one of your pranks. How do you feel?

Joey Skaggs: Not guilty! Please don't shoot the messenger.

Jessie Brinton: Would you like to come round to my house for tea and crumpets?

Joey Skaggs: That's the most civilized come-on I've ever heard! Yes, I'd love to. Thank you.

Joey Skaggs official site joeyskaggs.com

Just fking with you: The Return of Joey Skaggs**

In conversation with Mark Borkowski, Founder BORKOWSKI.DO

at Advertising Week Europe

The David Lean Room

British Academy of Film and Television Arts

195 Piccadilly

London W1J 9LN

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