

# Joey Skaggs: Messin' With the Media

By ABC News

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July 12, 2002 -- Did you ever hear the story about the brothel for pets? Or the report on the business that sold apartments for fish? The stories had something in common beyond their wackiness: they were fictions created by master prankster Joey Skaggs.

Skaggs, a self-described satirist, has been yanking journalists' chains for more than three decades. He's fooled television networks, wire services, newspapers, magazines, and radio stations around the world. Good Morning America, CNN, and The Washington Post are among the big-time media organizations duped by Skaggs.

Skaggs says his hoaxes, which he sets up with the help of volunteers and friends, serve a broader mission: highlighting the vulnerability of the press to disinformation and the public's unquestioning acceptance of whatever it reads in newspapers or watches on television. "I'm a satirist and I use the media as a medium," Skaggs said.

## The Fat Squad and the Barking Bordello

Skaggs has pulled off quite a few capers on his media mission. Using the alias "Dr. Joe Bones," he invented the "Fat Squad" to razz the media for the endless attention it pays to diet fads. Skaggs promoted the Fat Squad as a group of commandos that dieters could hire to keep them away from food. Skaggs said, "It is a joke about how everyone is hyping this weight loss thing. All these books, you know, and the diets and all this stuff. So I said, 'I will have commandos assigned to you 24 hours a day, and they'll beat the crap out of you if you go for that chocolate cake, if it's not on your diet.'"

To promote his Fat Squad, Skaggs simply sent a press release to wire services, which then sent the story to newsrooms across the country. "The Washington Post and The Philadelphia Enquirer both fell for this," Skaggs said. "Another journalist wanting to do their own personal spin on it will call you up, verify that they spoke to you, and then repackage, re-can and put out the same story in essence," he said.

And what newspapers print, television regularly copies. Skaggs, posing as Joe Bones, appeared on ABC's Good Morning America, promoting his Fat Squad. The show's former co-host David Hartman introduced the story by announcing that "six Fat Squad commandos are here now, this morning, live, to maintain tight security around our Good Morning America refrigerator." Hartman displayed a bit of skepticism, asking "Bones" if the Fat Squad was legitimate, but that was the extent of the challenge.

Skaggs said the media "want to believe these stories." He said reporters may be "a little suspicious," but in the end Skaggs said they think "this is such a good story, I don't want to blow it by investigating too much."

Before long, the Fat Squad had grabbed attention around the globe. Japanese television reporters came to New York and taped Skaggs as a Fat Squad commando trailing a client.

Skaggs also got a lot of coverage for that "cathouse" for dogs. The hook for the cathouse was an ad offering a night with "Fifi, the French poodle," and "Lady, the Tramp." "No weirdos, please," Skaggs wrote in his ad.

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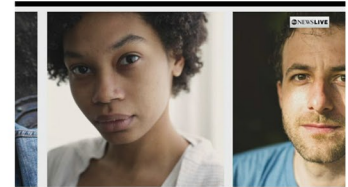


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Skaggs put on quite a show to attract media attention. "I had 25 actors and 15 dogs, and I staged, for the media, a night in a bordello for dogs. The media ate it up," he said.

This time, the media responded with a bit more investigative vigor. Some launched consumer investigations. A New York television station reported that the ASPCA was investigating Skaggs. Another report included a veterinarian who condemned the pet brothel. And the New York State Health Department reportedly claimed that Skaggs' vet was unlicensed and that he may be using illegal drugs.

To Err Is Human, to Correct Is ... Uncommon

While media outlets share an eagerness to report on Skaggs' zany stories, they often resist admitting they've been conned.

Even more surprising, the television journalist who reported on Skaggs' cathouse for dogs won an Emmy Award for the feature.

Skaggs said the media brushed off his assertion that his report was a prank, suggesting he was only saying it was a hoax to avoid prosecution.

Good Morning America admitted that it had been fooled by Skaggs and apologized to its audience for airing its report on the Fat Squad.

Other media outlets, including The Washington Post and The Philadelphia Inquirer, have also admitted their errors after falling for a Skaggs prank, but not all of them. "They either trivialize it, dismiss me, attack me," Skaggs said.

Several newspapers and television stations fell for a gag in which Skaggs posed as a priest working out of a portable confessional booth outside the 1992 Democratic convention. He appeared on a television newscast as "Dr. Gregor," in a nod to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, hawking a cure-all drug made from cockroaches.

And Skaggs says he'll keep doing his hoaxes until the members of the media are more careful about what they report.

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