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A Kafkaesque Tale Of Health Faddists Eating Cockroaches

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And Journalists Eating Crow, As the Story Turns Out To Be a Teacher's Hoax

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NEW YORK—As Joseph Skaggs awoke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into a gigantic media event.

The Chicago Tribune, May 29, 1981: "A New York group called Metamorphosis led by one Josef Gregor, 40, who has a Ph.D. from an unnamed South American university, is madly chowing down 'cockroach' pills. The 70 persons believe that those interesting qualities that make the cockroach impervious to man's assaults will get them past the nagging everyday pain of acne, anemia, and yes, the misery of nuclear fallout."

Josef Gregor . . . Metamorphosis . . . the cockroach?

Yes, the roach story was a hoax, perpetrated by Joseph Skaggs, a teacher of journalism at New York's School of Visual Arts with a fondness for Franz Kafka and strong opinions about the gullibility of the press.

To his glee, the same story appeared in the Washington Star, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Pittsburgh Press and about 175 other newspapers around the country, courtesy of the United Press International wire service.

"I guess no one reads Kafka anymore," laments Mr. Skaggs, who believes that the American news media will fall for just about any zany story—even if it isn't true. Mr. Skaggs may have proved his point.

Missed Clues

Certainly, a sizable number of the nation's editors missed his blatant clues: In the Czech author's famous "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa is the character who awakens one morning to discover that he has become a giant insect resembling a cockroach.

"The media depend on people believing what they say," says Mr. Skaggs, a 35-year-old who spends his time painting, teaching or hoaxing. "Frankly, I think I'm helping the media out."

Most editors who were duped concede that the hoax reflects badly on their newspapers. "We frequently have to fill up pages with anything we can, and that's where the problem starts," says Charles Redden, news editor at the Dallas Times-Herald. The story showed up in its May 31, 1981, editions under the headline "Roach pills fill the bill."

But most also are quick to put the blame on UPI, which sent the story over its wires on May 28. UPI has yet to send out a correction, even though Mr. Skaggs has told its editors the story was spurious. UPI, however, sees no reason to correct the item. "The story was accurate at the time," says Donald Reed, UPI's managing editor.



Joseph Skaggs

It all began when Mr. Skaggs broached the idea of the roach hoax to his 50 students last March. "I'd been telling them how easily the media can be duped," he recalls, "but I wanted to show them." So he devised an idea that involved a mad scientist (Dr. Josef Gregor), an institute for research (Metamorphosis) and a wondrous cure for mankind (cockroach juice).

About 70 students and friends were enlisted in the project, and Mr. Skaggs threw in $3,000 of his own money to pay for it. They rented an apartment for the press conference, ran off dozens of press releases, created "roach art," and prepared presentations designed to fool even the most skeptical reporter.

The press conference was set for May 22, and every major news organization in New York was invited. A press release even wound up at The Wall Street Journal, where a reporter was told to check out the story. But the Journal reporter wasn't able to confirm any of the "facts" in the news release, so he skipped the press conference. The Associated Press, UPI's competitor, also chose not to cover the press conference.

Among the five reporters who did show up was Ed Lion of UPI, accompanied by an agency photographer. After taking notes on Mr. Skaggs's brief appearance—dressed in a T-shirt and jacket, floppy hat and mirrored sunglasses—Mr. Lion interviewed some of his followers, all of them Mr. Skaggs's friends and students. One of them was quoted in the UPI story as follows:

" 'This isn't some sort of cult group or a crackpot idea—the pill really does work,' said one of his (Dr. Gregor's) followers, Diane DiLauro, 34, a registered nurse who says she and her dentist-husband have taken the pill for a year.

" 'I used to have a lot of allergies and colds, but since taking this I haven't had one.' "

Mr. Skaggs had to duck out of the press

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conference early to appear on WNBC's local news program in New York "Live At Five." Wearing his costume, he told the TV audience about the miracle roach cure. Fred Farrar, the show's co-producer, says, "We knew it wasn't for real. We made that clear to people by winking a lot." But he admits that the show's hosts have yet to inform viewers of the hoax on the air.

Newspapers from the Bend (Ore.) Bulletin to the Louisville Courier-Journal published versions of the story after it appeared on the wire. Most were accompanied by a UPI photo showing "Dr. Gregor" holding up a dish containing a "super roach," according to most captions.

Donald Reed of UPI insists that the story was carefully checked before it went out on the wire. "We looked into his references and educational background," he says. But Mr. Skaggs says he only provided fictitious references to those who asked. The UPI reporter, Mr. Lion, is vacationing, and Mr. Reed says "he doesn't have any comment."

Many editors object to the wire service's handling of the incident. "They should have sent out a correction," says Denis Horgan, a columnist for the now-defunct Washington Star, who wrote a piece based on the original wire story that was published in his paper. "When something's wrong, the reader has a right to know about it," he says, "no matter how minor a story might be."

Mr. Reed of UPI says that even though "we occasionally get the facts fouled up," UPI rarely sends out corrections. In this instance, the service sent out a general story on newspaper hoaxes in August that mentioned the cockroach incident in passing. The news service says that since many of its stories change several times during a brief period, it doesn't routinely correct stories, rather, it updates them. In this instance, UPI says the four-month period between the story and the revelation of the hoax was the deciding factor in not issuing a correction.

This isn't Mr. Skaggs's first hoax. In 1976, he took out newspaper ads for a "bordello for dogs" that won him mentions on local TV. In 1977, as Giuseppe Scaggoli, he made Ms. Magazine for founding a "Celebrity Sperm Bank."

The School of Visual Arts heartily approves. "We all see the fallibility of the media every day," says David Rhodes, the school's president. He adds that Mr. Skaggs's class "helps our students to understand the media better, and that's what we're here for." The school chipped in $500 to pay for a clipping service to track down newspaper accounts of the Dr. Gregor story. The articles will be assembled for a school exhibit later this year.

Not content, Mr. Skaggs is even now plotting a new stunt. All he will say is that it "has something to do with world hunger" and will take place on Thanksgiving Day.