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The art of the perfect prank

[COMMENTS \(97\)](#)

As April Fools jokers hatch their plans, what's the secret to a perfect prank, asks broadcaster Toby Amies. And how far do the very best tricksters go in preparing their practical jokes?

This article is not a hoax. I promise you. It's a serious work about the practical joke.

How far would you go to pull off a prank? The dole queue? In 1987, a young British broadcaster called Chris Morris let off helium into the BBC Bristol studio, causing the newsreader's stories to reach a higher and higher pitch. Chris lost his job. And started his career in satire.

Would you risk prison? Pranks are often protests, against unfairness or authority or reality. And protest is increasingly risky in the 21st Century.

As the film director Billy Wilder said: "If you are going to tell people the truth, be funny or they will kill you."

Whether personal or public, the prank has a point to make, but if you're planning on tricking someone, it's best to ensure everyone gets the joke.

Russian Art Collective Voina might have gone furthest in making fun of the unfair. Two of their members went to prison.

Although Voina's manifesto is political, their activities make more immediate (non)sense, from launching live cats at workers in McDonald's to their most notorious "action" - daubing graffiti on a raised bridge opposite the headquarters of the federal security service in St Petersburg, with an enormous, crude phallus that erected every time the bridge did.

Perhaps inevitably, two Voina members were arrested - not for the abstract insult of the penis but for overturning police cars. Voina's name means "war" and they see themselves as part of another Russian revolution, one that refuses to take the very serious seriously at all, even if it means loss of liberty.

The pranksters have been bailed out of prison by the world's most internationally famous "anonymous" street artist, Banksy.

With its roots in the mythological trickster who mediated between Heaven and Earth - known by many names in many cultures, like Loki, Anansi, Prometheus, Coyote, Eshu or Brer Rabbit - a good prank allows boundaries to be crossed, including the ones between art and crime, or amateur and professional.

When unemployed Mancunian Karl Power became, for a brief moment the 12th man in Manchester United's team against Munich in 2001 by walking on to the pitch at the right moment in the right kit, he turned every fan's fantasy into reality.

But it was the result of two years of careful strategy, he said. "We planned it like a military campaign and brought three United kits with us - red, white and blue." The choice of three kits meant Karl the imposter could blend in with the reality of a Champions League match unnoticed till it was too late.

Legendary American media hoaxer Joey Skaggs has devoted his whole life to the prank. For more than 30 years, Joey's been making up ridiculous lies that get disseminated so far by the mass media we are forced to wonder if the same media might not be fact-checking every other story so closely.

"I am an artist. To me the media is a medium and I create plausible but non-existent realities and I stage for the news media to make social, political, satirical commentary."

Joey simplifies the process as "the hook, line and sinker".

The hook has the bait, a ready-written story, so sexy that a journalist wants it to be true so much they don't bother to check.

The line is a record of the process. Joey uses clippings services and devices like Google alerts help him chart the reach of the hoax. "I watched how the news media would change the intent, content, meaning of the message to suit their own agendas."

Joey has duped the media into covering an embarrassing number of weird but wonderful stories, from his canine brothel, The Cathouse for Dogs, to his celebrity sperm bank, and probably several other stories that are works in progress that have yet to be revealed.

The sinker is the reveal, the moment when the lights go on and we all realise how easy it is to be fooled.

It's hard work to overturn reality. Joey creates shell companies, puts out official press releases, hires