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Media Watchdog
Joey Skaggs Dupes Unsuspecting Journalists



July 15 — **Joey Skaggs** has conned journalists at TV networks, wire services, newspapers and radio stations around the world for more than three decades.

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 the media.

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"I'm a satirist and I use the media as a medium," he says.

ABCNEWS.com hosted a live Web chat with Skaggs on Monday, July 15. The transcript follows.

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Moderator

Welcome Joey Skaggs! Thanks for joining us.

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Joey Skaggs

Hi. This IS Joey Skaggs — the real deal. Thanks for tuning in.

Moderator

How do you come up with the ideas for your hoaxes?

Joey Skaggs

I think it's important to let people know that I'm an artist. I have an art school background. I went to the High School of Art and Design in New York City and the School of Visual Arts (also in New York). I have taught at the School of Visual Arts and Parsons.

"I'm an artist and this is my art. The hoaxes are designed as a social commentary."
— *Joey Skaggs*

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My approach to social, political and satirical commentary comes as a result of my being an artist. Ideas are easy. There's enough material around all of us. It's about how you take a

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concept/issue and make it happen.

I use many skills I've used as an artist — layout, writing, design, photography, painting, sculpting.

Moderator

What's your favorite hoax to date?

Joey Skaggs

It's always the next one. That's what excites me.

Marc asks:

What media outlet has been the most difficult to con? (e.g. radio, TV, etc.)

Joey Skaggs

I haven't had difficulty fooling any of them. Essentially, everyone wants a good story. So I provide a good story with good visuals. A good press release and the promise of a good visual is what gets their attention.

A story that's improbable but plausible will get them. Sex gets them; new technologies get them, etc.

Ryan from Kauai asks:

Will your exposure on *20/20* hinder any further attempts to fool the media?

Joey Skaggs

Absolutely not. The point of what I do is always to expose that a hoax has been perpetrated. I make a point of always revealing that it's me after I've succeeded in fooling the media.

I've been doing this for decades and I've done numerous shows where I speak about my intent. I'm known to many in the news business, which makes it even more outrageous that I continue to succeed in hoaxing them.

Brian C asks:

Are you safe from civil or criminal liability in your endeavors? Have you been sued or arrested for your pranks?

Joey Skaggs

I've gotten into trouble many times, simply because of the nature of what I do — it's provocative and confrontational. My work confronts people and their belief systems and hopefully challenges them to look at things in a different way.

Obviously, some people get very upset and angry, and their response usually is to strike out. So the media is sometimes used as a law enforcement arm to try to get me.

I've been arrested, subpoenaed and deposed for numerous hoaxes when the media thought that they were real. In "cathouse for dogs" example, there was no law in the books against operating a bordello for dogs, but the concept morally offended a large segment of the population.

People were outraged — so the media, in conjunction with law enforcement in New York City, busted me. There are other examples, such as "dog meat soup" and "comacocoon."

I make a point of trying not to do anything illegal. I don't want to break the law. But I don't mind being busted for them thinking that I have broken the law. Getting busted also gives me the opportunity to speak about issues that I think are important.

Zorach asks:

Your pranks are great, but how do you make a living otherwise? Do your pranks pay off for you in cash? In addition, what prank ideas have you passed on because you thought they were just too gross or over-the-top?

Joey Skaggs

None of my performances were ever conceived of to make money. I'm an artist and this is my art. The hoaxes are designed as a social commentary.

But everyone has to eat. I'm fortunate enough to be able to use my imagination and creativity to earn a living.

For example, my "fish condos" satire, where I created aquariums that depicted living rooms, bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens for upwardly mobile "guppies," was a satirical commentary on the gentrification of neighborhoods ("everything going condo") and inadvertently became a financial success.

They were featured in *New York* magazine, *Life* magazine, *Good Morning America* and shown in museums and galleries around the world. In addition, they were featured in the 1996 Neiman Marcus Christmas Catalogue, and I sold the individual prototypes for many thousands of dollars a piece.

I also lecture about what I do — and why I do it — at colleges, festivals and conferences around the world.

Doing a hoax is like trying to solve a puzzle. How do I create a scenario that addresses issues that I think need to be addressed? How do I access the media?

As I attempt to solve these problems, I usually try to have many possible solutions. But as I examine them closely, I many times realize that I can't do the hoax in a particular way because it could possibly endanger other people — or be illegal. I certainly don't want to be writing my memoirs from behind bars.

For example, many years ago I wanted to do a commentary on the absurdity of the art world. So I created a new art movement called the "Bowel Movement."

In my first piece, to be called "Obstruction Art," I thought about driving through the Holland Tunnel with a giant fish or tampon or cork on the back of a truck and have my friends toss it off into the tunnel blocking the traffic, therefore creating an enormous traffic jam. I would be on the other side of the tunnel waiting for the emergency vehicles to "unplug" the

tunnel.

I could visualize the story on the 6 o'clock news and knew it would be a gigantic success in the media. But the more I thought about it, I realized someone could have a heart attack or there could be a fire in the tunnel, and ultimately I would be responsible for that.

Bill S asks:

Do you think that unreliable "news" is a common feature of the media these days, or do you think that the news is primarily fair, objective and reliable?

Joey Skaggs

Ha ha. The news is made up of people. Are people reliable? Some are, some aren't.

We're talking about propaganda, misinformation, hype, hypocrisy, special interests, commercialism, public relations — so of course it's gonna be a polluted version of reality.

Jeremy Birdges asks:

Any advice for a aspiring prankster?

Joey Skaggs

Like in all things, you must be willing to face the consequences of your actions. Responsibility and ethics are important ingredients in everything we do.

Good luck!

Aaron asks:

Do you find that you end up feeling frustrated after some of these great gigs? I mean, if I did something like this and then the media outlet didn't admit they had been fooled or wouldn't retract the story, it would drive me crazy. I'm sure I would find myself trying to continually dog the outlet I had fooled instead of just coming up with another great idea and moving on. How do you keep from getting frustrated, and how often do you think you're just spinning your wheels? Awesome work, by the way.

Joey Skaggs

There are so many elements to perpetrating a hoax on a national or international scale. So there's lots of opportunity for laughs and frustration.

Fortunately, there are many different media outlets. So if the exposé is ignored by some media outlets, there are usually other media outlets willing to speak about the purpose of the prank.

Frustration is a natural part of anything you attempt to do. But the satisfaction far exceeds it.

Mike asks:

Mr. Skaggs, as a high school media literacy teacher, I find your work both invigorating and saddening. While it reinforces the important work my media students and I do, it also highlights the sad state of our media

saturated culture and the ever-present pressures that come with it — the pressures to be first rather than factual are so great in the competitive news-media terrain, that we as consumers must take on the responsibility of getting good information ourselves; surely the media can't do it.

Do you have any suggestions for enriching material or activities for my students and me? Thanks, and keep up the good work.

Joey Skaggs

Thanks, Mike, for a wonderful statement and question. The focus of my work is about media literacy. It's about issues that affect all of us.

I think the most important thing we can do besides questioning authority is to be independent thinkers, become better media consumers, and look to many sources to get a variety of perspectives.

It's important to be open to change. We should always review our own beliefs and be willing to change. Otherwise, we perpetuate prejudices and pass them on.

From your question, it sounds like you're doing a great job.

My Web site may contain answers to questions I haven't had the opportunity to answer during the chat. (www.joeyskaggs.com).

I'm certainly available to answer people's inquiries by e-mail. Thanks for the opportunity to talk about what I do.

Moderator

Thanks to Joey Skaggs and all those who participated in the chat. If you'd like to join another live discussion, please visit our [community index](#). ■

Moderated by ABCNEWS.com's Saira Stewart.

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