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Artist's Hoax Ties NYU Law to "Solomon Project"

BY ALLISON PENN '98
AND ANNE E. BEAUMONG '97

What's in a name? Plenty, if you ask NYU officials, who had been troubled by the emergence of an organization unaffiliated with NYU, but which called itself "NYULaw Artificial Intelligence Research." According to a recent press release, the organization is a media hoax perpetrated by "conceptual performance artist" Joey Skaggs, posing as computer expert "Joseph Bonuso." In a telephone interview with *The Commentator*, Skaggs described the main point of the Solomon Project by saying, "It's satire!"

The organization and the putative Mr. Bonuso launched a publicity campaign this fall to promote its "Solomon Project," a computer program designed to eliminate the need for a judge and jury. According to a letter circulated to media companies and deans of various law schools, the Solomon Project is a library of case law, ethics and factual precedent that "will single-handedly reestablish the public's failed confidence in the judicial process."

When Vice Dean Oscar Chase heard about the letter, he contacted the University's legal counsel. In a November, 1995 letter, the counsel's office told Bonuso to stop using the "NYULaw" name. "I suggested to him that perhaps he was breaking the law," said Kathy Schulz, NYU associate general counsel.

But it seems Schulz's message might not have sunk in, although Bonuso apologized in an early December 1995 letter and promised his organization would

refrain from using any reference to "NYULaw" in its name. "Subsequently, we found out he appeared on CNN," said Schulz. In a Dec. 29 broadcast, Cable News Network referred to Bonuso's project as "the Solomon Project at the New York University Law School." Prior to the unmasking of Skaggs' hoax, both Chase and Schulz said the University had not taken formal legal action against Bonuso, but they were "concerned."

Christine Negroni, a CNN reporter who worked on the show in which Bonuso appeared, said the program was taped the week of Dec. 26. Negroni confirmed that Bonuso did nothing to disabuse the network of its belief that his group was linked to NYU. "There was no reason for us to think he did not work at the school," said Negroni, adding that her research materials included an article from the *San Francisco Chronicle* that said the project was affiliated with NYU Law School. (The *Chronicle* has since printed a correction.)

"In retrospect, someone should have fact-checked," Negroni concedes. "If we said he was associated with New York University and he was not, it would be my feeling we should correct that." But, Negroni added that the decision to make a correction is not up to her, and referred inquiries to a CNN managing editor, who did not return a call from *The Commentator*.

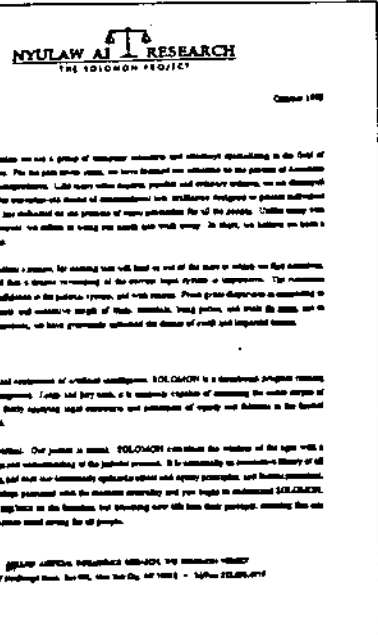
"I never interviewed him," said Negroni, who notes that several reporters worked on the broadcast. "I'm just the unfortunate person whose voice went on the story."

In a telephone interview with

The Commentator, Skaggs denied that the possibility of legal action by NYU led him to pull the plug on his "project" last week. He said, "That never bothers me at all—I never break the law to my knowledge." Skaggs suggested that his project was protected by the First Amendment. When pressed as to whether it might nevertheless have violated trademark laws, Skaggs said he had "run it through the Solomon computer," which found

"no problem." The press release in which Skaggs unveiled his hoax makes no mention of Skaggs' attempt to link the hoax to NYU.

Skaggs criticized the post-unveiling coverage of the hoax as "missing the point." He said that



the media "attempt to trivialize or dismiss the message because I am threatening their credibility as an investigative news source." Skaggs' press release expresses his "regrets that Solomon is not a real technological advance."