

HOAX AND PRANK

The high comedy potential of hoaxes and pranks is partly related to their riskiness in terms of falling flat or giving offense. They may be rejected as not being at all funny, not merely by their victims but by a wider audience. Partly because of these serious risks of failure, when they do succeed without hurting, other than an acceptable loss of face, they are extremely funny indeed for all concerned. Despite this, many hoaxes are not at all funny, nor are they intended to be so: They are designed to further the interests of the perpetrators with serious deleterious consequences for the victims, as in business scams, swindles of individuals, and political dirty tricks. This entry considers only comic hoaxes and pranks. Hoaxes can be amateur or professional. The International Society of Pranksters and Hoaxers is devoted to celebrating the art of the hoax and regularly awards a Hoax of the Month and of the Year.

Etymology and Origins

The noun *hoax* is derived from earlier use of the word in the active sense of hoaxing someone and the 2002 online version of the OED suggests both noun and verb perhaps originated in the magician's mock-Latin expression "hocus-pocus" (an obsolete medieval term revived in the 19th century, meaning jugglery, trickery, or deception). Thus hoax may be a contracted form of hocus. The OED defines a hoax as "a humorous or mischievous deception . . . told in such a manner as to impose upon the credulity of the victim." At the end of the 18th century, the verb form "to hoax someone" meant to deceive or to take someone in by inducing belief in an amusing or mischievous fabrication or fiction.

Prank is more firmly associated with humor (at least on the prankster's side!). A prank may be no more than a "malicious trick; a wicked deed; a deception or scheme intended to harm, a hoax," or even "a practical joke; a lark; a capriciously foolish act" (OED)—not at all funny to the victim. But the use of the verb form without a subject (as in "she pranked and laughed") has meant "To play a trick or practical joke (on someone); to joke" from the early 16th century. The relatively new expression "to prank someone" was only introduced in America in the late 20th century and is firmly linked with humor.



A 2001 April Fool's Day prank in Denmark, regarding Copenhagen's new subway. It looks as if one of its cars had an accident and had broken through and surfaced on the square in front of the town hall. In reality, it was a retired subway car from Stockholm, Sweden, cut obliquely, with the front end placed onto the tiling and loose tiles scattered around it. The sign in the window refers to Gevalia coffee, which is known for its ads featuring vehicles popping up, with a tagline such as "Be ready for unexpected guests."

Source: Lars Andersen/Wikimedia Commons.

Evidently the meaning of hoax is bound up with deception, humorous or mischievous, playing on the credulity of victims, whether successfully or not. The connotations of "prank" are with caprice and foolishness, as well as with more physicality to the trickery. A prankster is also less serious than a hoaxer and their foolish acts typically less well considered, more associated with folly, and usually directed toward a specific victim.

Another difference between hoax and prank is that in a hoax audience members are made aware of their victimization and given an opportunity to respond, perhaps with humor, with feedback, and/or with revenge. They are both victim and audience and the perpetrator remains on the scene to receive direct messages from them. In a prank, the victim may actually be let off the hook at the very end and is not identical with the audience, who may be quite remote, as in the 1950s American TV show, *Candid Camera*, showing a televised prank played on an unsuspecting member of the public. In a prank, the revelation or dénouement is made to an audience that is separated from the prankster, who is likely to be immune to feedback or retaliation. However, in both hoax and prank, the humor of the idea or concept may fall short of actual implementation.

The related term *spoof* is classed as slang by the OED, which documents its invention by Arthur

Roberts (1852–1933), a British comedian. It originated in a card game called “spoof,” popular at the London Adelphi Club and spreading from there to America. From this, spoof came to mean a skit or “send-up,” especially as applied to a film, play, or other work satirizing a particular genre. Thus it relates more to parody or burlesque although in today’s usage, spoof can overlap with hoax (particularly when used as a verb), but not with prank.

Forms and Media

Both hoaxes and pranks can be performed, although many hoaxes are not. In the scholarly world great mirth (and anger) was created by the 1996 successful written hoax perpetrated on the postmodern academic journal *Social Text* by Alan Sokal (then of the Department of Physics at New York University), who submitted an article titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.” Despite its woolly expression, 220 references and 109 footnotes, it was accepted and published, and the author immediately revealed it as a parody of an article, intended to expose the extremist style of postmodernist critiques of the physical sciences. In fact, as Sokal himself acknowledged, the hoax achieved much of its serious aim, generating a still continuing productive debate about the need to respect science and scientific terminology and the importance of clear critical thinking and writing.

In one sense theater and mime depend on hoaxing their audiences at least temporarily. For example street mimes playing white or silver “living statues” challenge passersby to argue about whether the statue is “real” or human (a pleasing linguistic paradox). Theater audiences are all invited to self-delude and suspend disbelief, projecting themselves temporarily into an imaginary world.

Music has also known great hoaxes, such as the BBC Chamber Orchestra’s 1961 broadcast of a modernist piece by newly emerging Polish composer Pyotr Zak (alias Hans Keller 1919–1985), subsequently outed as a “zakophony.” The successful deflation of musical pretension was praised by Durham University’s professor of music, Arthur Hutchings (1906–1989), who himself confessed to using newly discovered “works” by Paul Hindemith to test his students (they were merely a pastiche of the rhythms and dynamics of a Beethoven piano sonata with nonsensically wrong notes).

Other media lending themselves to hoax include print and electronic media. A notable example was the Columbia Broadcasting System Halloween program, Sunday, October 30, 1938, adapted by Orson Welles from H. G. Wells’s short novel, *The War of the Worlds* (1898). The program purported to include real-time reports from the Mount Jennings Observatory in Chicago, Illinois, of explosions on Mars (as occurs at the beginning of the novel) and highly convincing reportage from the supposed landing site of a spaceship with police accounts of deaths. Despite Welles’s careful introduction and framing to the hoax, it was unfortunately taken as real by many listeners, many tuning in partway through and missing various hints. In any case, close to the outbreak of World War II, times were tense and science fiction was only just beginning to be understood as a genre. As noted by Stefan Lovgen, the program authentically simulates radio operating as a news medium in an emergency and must be classed as a successful—but ultimately unhumorous—hoax. Welles expressed his regret through the columns of *The New York Times*.

In the world of visual art, hoax, usually for the serious and fraudulent purpose of making money, is rife. By contrast, a positive creative prank was played by American artist Hugh Troy (1906–1964), famous as a student at Cornell University for various tricks, including creating a trail of rhinoceros footprints in the snow using a wastepaper basket made from a hollowed-out rhino foot (although some suspect Troy made up this story later in his life to burnish his reputation as a prankster). On February 5, 1952, he ran an anonymous ad in the theatrical page of the *Washington Post* advertising a “ghost artist service”: “Too busy to paint? Call on the Ghost Artists. We paint it, you sign it.” Heated debate ensued on the ethics of artistic fraud.

Advertising and public relations have often been subject to comic hoaxing, such as fake “old ads” promoting lifestyle items now recognized as deleterious to health, intended to provoke modern outrage (such as 1950s ads featuring cola for babies, seemingly endorsed by the “Soda Pop Board of America”). A set of videos online called “The Japanese Tradition” appears to instruct *gaijin* (foreigners) in the arcane culture of handling chopsticks with precision and measuring precisely how low to bow when offering abject apologies. These videos are in fact the creation of the Raamenzu comedy duo, Kobayashi Kentaro and Katagiri Jin (both

b. 1973), who performed the Japanese version of Apple's "I'm a Mac" commercials (2008–2009).

Urban legends communicated orally and via the Internet and social media are hoaxes that have no single known creator but succeed in taking in many people—usually quite harmlessly. A widely believed "real" story, which first circulated orally but now via the Internet and which is discussed in Jan Harold Brunvand's *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, is the case of the ghost hitchhiker who when given a lift home by a kindly stranger vanishes on arrival and is said by the family to have died some years before. Although locations change, the story is localized and received as true in each new time and place.

Hoax, Satire, Parody, and Pastiche

Many successful satires depend on temporarily hoaxing their readers before revealing their true purpose. Jonathan Swift's famous work, *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland From Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729), was deliberately shaped as a serious parliamentary pamphlet, published to contribute to the then-fashionable public debate on social issues that subjected them to fiercely rationalist economic analysis. Robert Phiddian has noted that on first appearance it seems to have been taken seriously by some.

Film and video, however, tend to deal more in parody and pastiche than in comic hoax: The mock-spy genre exemplified first by James Bond movies, and then by look-alikes *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997, dir. Jay Roach) and *OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d'espions* (*OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies*, 2006, dir. Michel Hazanavicius), are all deliberate spoofs whose humor relies on audiences recognizing the parallels and borrowings.

Contemporary Business Hoaxes

At its most moral, a hoax teaches its audience to think for themselves and to take nothing for granted until proven, as in the Sokal and Troy cases. Today's hoaxes often challenge the seemingly all-powerful role of the media, as when in 2008 U.S. vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was induced to take a 6-minute admiring phone call from French president Nicholas Sarkozy. This was in fact Marc-Antoine Audette, part of the French

Canadian radio comic team Les Justiciers Masqués (The Masked Avengers), who chatted about hunting, relationships, family, and politics before revealing his prank call, which Palin took in stride.

Because the development by the audience of a healthy sense of skepticism may follow a successful hoax, a well-designed hoax can be of value to the commercial world. Professional bureaucracies have widely replaced the past so-called machine bureaucracies and expect employees to think and judge for themselves rather than blindly follow instructions. Rodney Marks, a full-time business hoaxer and corporate impostor who has performed internationally, illustrates by describing one of his performances.

His brief from a corporation was to challenge the overconfident assumption among staff that their competition was handicapped. Taking this literally, the hoaxer attended a 2-day training event in a wheelchair as a management expert, Dr. Clarrie "Buzz" Claxton [sic], executive vice president—professional development of a plausible-sounding enterprise. After convincing but fraudulent workshops, the expert socialized with participants, despite the occasional accident with a urine drainage bag hung high above his wheelchair on a metal rod, overfilled with warm apple juice and occasionally spilling onto participants' sandal-clad feet. He also gave the final keynote address. Buzz began with the usual corporate weasel word salad, with more or less plausible analysis of the industry, the organization's services and products, and a dozen individual "roasts" of the firm's leaders. He summed up with "It's hard to identify whether or not an organization or a person is handicapped, and if so in what way and in which environment." With that comment, Buzz stood up and walked offstage, to thunderous silence. The applause eventually came after several shocked minutes. The experience became part of this company's corporate mythology, and the message of strategic humility was incorporated into its organizational culture.

Humor Theory and Comic Hoaxes and Pranks

A true hoax or prank will begin in all seriousness and does not draw attention to any play frame or prior signaling about its ultimate humorous purpose. In fact, the setup is deliberately misleading, establishing as thoroughly as possible false expectations of a serious event to follow. After such an

introduction, sufficient time, narrative, or action must be experienced by the audience to convince them that the hoax or prank is serious before its pretense is suddenly exposed and the hidden play frame revealed. Unlike satire, with the unmasking of the hoaxer the hoax is completed. Any subsequent interaction between agent and audience is of a different quality to that which has happened before.

As noted earlier, one implicit rule for the success of both hoax and prank is that there should be no real hurt or serious consequences to the victims/audiences. It was in this regard that the Orson Welles broadcast described earlier failed, as many listeners were not only alarmed but panicked, rushing to church to pray or to flee from their homes. In “Buzz” Claxton’s case, the greatest outrage during the 2-day hoax was from those whose feet had been “soiled.” Once exposed, the victims reflected on their victimization, thus becoming their own audience, relieved and amused.

In terms of humor theory, both the lighthearted prank and the more thoughtful comic hoax depend on incongruity created by the recognition and experience of a false pattern of reality, which is then exploded. Like all comedy, the hoax and the prank indulge the spirit of fun but combine it with a power game as the hoaxer pushes to see just how far the audience can be strung along before the hidden fiction has to either be revealed by the hoaxer—or reveals itself to the audience by the increased unlikelihood of the veracity of the narrative. The taut wind-up suddenly becomes unsprung.

A comic hoax will often have a slow-burning reaction, with some audience members understanding it and others remain naive and unaware. Then a domino effect has its own humor, as the newly in-the-know group feel superior to those who have not yet caught on. There may be some interplay unsolicited by the hoaxer, as aware audience members tease the still-fooled by collaborating with the perpetrator of the hoax and supporting the hoaxer’s story.

With a good hoax especially, after an initial explosion of mixed amusement and outrage, there is a period of critical reflection. Ideally this leads to acknowledgment—hopefully correction—of errors such as gullibility and excessive obedience to surface appearances. Certainly this is what is intended by the professional hoaxer. A prank, however, may have little critical or satirical intent, other than obliging the victim to put up with being laughed at.

Rodney Marks and Jessica Milner Davis

See also Advertising, Effectiveness of Humor in; College Humor; Creativity; Gag; Improv Comedy; Management; Parody; Play and Humor; Practical Jokes; Satire; Schwank; Spoofing; Subversive Humor; Tall Tale; Workplace Humor

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HOBBSIAN THEORY

Arguably, the most famous English theory of laughter and humor was enunciated by the post-16th-century modern English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679). Hobbes’s so-called sudden glory or superiority theory of humor represents the