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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Arbiters of Truth at Play: Media April Fools' Day Hoaxes

Moira Smith

Abstract

On April Fools' Day, journalists from every media take advantage of the occasion to pass off fabricated stories as news. While entertaining, these media hoaxes flout journalistic ethics and disappoint the public's expectation that the media are reliable arbiters of truth. This play arises from and dramatises the incongruities of the journalistic obligation to entertain as well as inform. Further, hoaxes uncover the media's role in the social construction of reality. They challenge commonsense epistemology by proving that fiction can be indistinguishable from fact, even when it is news.

The world is a story we tell ourselves about the world (Vikram Chandra, novelist, b. 1961).

Introduction

April Fools' Day is the most widespread occasion for festive inversion in the western world today. Not only must one expect booby traps and fools' errands both at home and at work, but a glance at any of the mass media on this day quickly establishes a picture of the world turned upside down. In an American undergraduate college, the campus food service operator replaces all its workers with strippers. National Public Radio advises that New England maple trees are exploding because they have been left untapped. An Otago, New Zealand, paper announces that scientists have discovered an amazing link between printer's ink and weight loss, urging readers to soak their paper in water and wrap themselves in it to see for themselves. A finance company releases a sausage-scented scratch and sniff credit card. Nor is the Internet immune: the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* takes over Wikipedia, renaming the famed website Wikipaedia. Nature.com reports that bacteria from the Apollo missions are destroying the moon. Finally, European Union bureaucrats ban April Fools' Day because of the physical and mental injury suffered by the victims of all these jokes. [1]

All the above stories ran in one mass media outlet or another on April Fools' Day 2005, illustrating the extent to which the media exploit the temporary licence of the holiday to have a bit of fun at audience expense. Although folklorists and other observers have sometimes wondered whether this custom is in decline (Roud 2006, 95), in the current era April Fools' Day trickery has been embraced with enthusiasm by journalists in every mass media from the print newspaper to radio and television, and now the Internet, and the popularity of the holiday among journalists extends around the world (Stattin 1996, 125). In this paper I wish to delineate the history and characteristics of this public aspect of

April Fooling, and I will argue that for journalists the custom serves as a form of deep play (Geertz 1971) that dramatises and comments upon the epistemological tensions inherent in their profession.

Whether April Fooling is really dying out among the general public is a hard question to answer because of the shy, ephemeral, and fugitive nature of interpersonal practical joking. Folklore archives are full of accounts that show April Fools' Day is still observed in schools and within families. Children and teachers play jokes on each other, as do parents and children. For some, April Fooling is an annual family tradition. [2] However, the prevalence of this aspect of the tradition is difficult to measure because, like most interpersonal practical joking, this trickery remains a private matter invisible to the casual observer. In contrast, media April Fools' hoaxes are designed to get attention on a large, sometimes a global scale, and the folklorist's task is made even easier because journalists themselves endlessly rehash and discuss their own and others' tricks. A slew of media stories, popular books, and websites document this aspect of the custom (see for example, Fedler 1989; Boese 2002; Cozens 2004; Wainwright 2007).

A Brief History of Media Hoaxes

We may divide the history of media hoaxes into three eras. The first era corresponds to the early days of journalism, when hoax stories could appear at any time of year. In the second era, as journalists became more concerned with professional standards, hoax stories became more rare and retreated to the safe play realm offered by April Fools' Day. Finally, from the mid-1970s to the present, we are in a period where not only journalists but also advertisers, corporations, and Internet website owners have embraced the tradition of running spoof stories on 1 April.

The first era of hoax newspaper stories coincides with the rise of the penny press between the 1830s and 1880s, when cheap readily available dailies became possible. The point of these hoax stories was to increase circulation by making the news attractive. A famous example is a report about the escape of wild animals from the Central Park Zoo that appeared in the *New York Herald* in 1874. The lurid front-page story recounted the havoc wreaked by the animals on the population of the city and the heroic efforts to stop them, ending with a "partial list of casualties" including a "List of Slaughtered Animals" that began with "2 Leopards, 1 Grizzly Bear, 1 Bengal Tiger, and 1 African Lion" and also included "1 Prairie Dog, 1 Woodchuck, 4 Pinkfooted Geese, 1 Derbian Wallaby, 1 Nvigban, and 1 Guanaco." The fine print at the end of this story included as fine an example of deliberate discrediting as can be imagined:

Of course the entire story given above is a pure fabrication. Not one word of it is true. Not a single act or incident described has taken place. It is a huge hoax, a wild romance, or whatever other epithet of utter untrustworthiness our readers may choose to apply to it. It is simply a fancy picture which crowded upon the mind of the writer a few days ago while he was gazing through the iron bars of the cages of the wild animals in the menagerie at Central Park (quoted in Mott 1942, 48–9; see also Fedler 1989, 84–96).

This nineteenth-century tradition of journalistic hoaxes included such familiar figures from American letters as Edgar Allen Poe, Artemus Ward, and

Mark Twain. Twain's story about the amazing discovery of a petrified man—published in the Virginia City, Nevada, *Territorial Enterprise* in 1863—evidently took in both readers and the editors of rival newspapers, despite the story's humorous tone and other discrediting clues. For the latter, read closely the description of the position of the petrified man's fingers:

The body was in a sitting posture and leaning against a huge mass of croppings; the attitude was pensive, the right thumb resting against the side of the nose; the left thumb partially supported the chin, the forefinger pressing the inner corner of the left eye and drawing it partly open; the right eye was closed, and the fingers of the right hand spread apart (Mott 1942, 45). [3]

In other words, the mummy was cocking a snoot.

In his 1942 survey of facetious news stories, Frank Luther Mott noted that such burlesques fell out of favour as ideas about the sanctity of factual reporting took hold, observing that "tolerance of hoaxes has declined as the ethics of reporting have advanced" (1942, 46). However, the twentieth century saw a revival of journalistic hoaxes, with the difference that they were almost entirely confined to April Fools' Day. As new media outlets and technologies appeared, journalists exploited each of them in turn as opportunities for hoaxing. Thus the 1930s saw a number of stories based on doctored photographs that purported to show such extraordinary and newsworthy phenomena as sea monsters in Philadelphia or enormous fish and ancient Viking ships in Honolulu. In 1933 the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* published a picture of a man who appeared to be flying by his own lung power, and in the same year—also on 1 April—the Madison *Capital-Times* ran an illustrated story about the collapse of the Wisconsin state capitol building (due to a surfeit of hot air collecting inside). [4]

The third era of media hoaxing begins on 1 April 1977 when *The Guardian* published a seven-page "special report" about San Seriffe, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean that was shaped like a semi-colon with a capital city called Bodoni and two main islands called Upper and Lower Caisse. Continuing the theme of puns on printers' terminology, the report averred that the president-for-life was General Maria-Jesu Pica. Extending to several pages, the supplement covered all aspects of the geography, history, and culture of this fabulous island paradise:

Tourists fortunate enough to be permitted to visit the Flong settlements of San Seriffe during the summer solstice will be rewarded by the colourful spectacle of the Gallee sect stamping and shrieking in unison in the Dance of the Pied Slugs.

This traditional ritual (so unforgettably filmed by Hans Hasselblad in his seminal documentary of the '30s) is the subject of bitter anthropological dispute. Crabtree (1967) argues that the genesis of the dance transparently lies in East African gastropod fetishism. Jonas Hoe, the ethnomusicologist, counters this thesis with the assertion that the accompanying instrument, the Grot (it looks rather like a slide bagpipe), is clearly of Pacific origin. The maverick Australian ethnographer, Mervyn Bluey, has publicly speculated that the Pied Slugs may well be a vague folk memory of witchetty grubs...

But this, according to Lino Flatbåd of the University of Uppsala in Sweden, who has made a lifelong study of the components of the distinctive San Seriffe culture, is to carry comparative ethnology too far. "I could, for instance, compare the Grot to the Tongan nose-flute, but what would that prove?" he asked as we sipped bitter-sweet swarfeegas (a local liqueur scented with mangrove blossom) under the shade of the frangipanis on the western beach (Radford 1977, 276).

The San Serriffe spoof was the work of a great many co-conspirators, not all of them journalists. The report included not only bogus reporting but also four pages of bogus advertisements, concocted by such respected firms as Kodak, Guinness, and Thomas Cook. There was also a job advertisement from the University of San Serriffe's Department of Lunar Studies seeking a "Reader in Lunar Spectroscopy. With special emphasis on the extraction of energy from moonbeams." The remuneration included "free housing and use of outrigger." Among the many applications that arrived at the *Guardian* office was one that began "Although not a lunar spectroscopist . . ." and proceeded to ask whether any other positions were available.

San Serriffe generated an enormous response from readers congratulating them on the spoof, from others like the job applicants who were apparently completely fooled, and from some that entered into the spirit of the joke and extended it with spoofs of their own. *Guardian* columnist David McKie, remembering the hoax in a 2006 article, called the impact "quite astonishing":

The office all day was bedlam as people pestered the switchboard with requests for more information. Both travel agencies and airlines made official complaints to the editor, Peter Preston, about the disruption as customers simply refused to believe that the islands did not exist. Veterans of that time say there's never been a day like it in terms of reader response (McKie 2006).

Even allowing for the partisanship of a fellow *Guardian* reporter, there is no doubt that the San Serriffe spoof was phenomenally successful—success here being measured by the volume of positive attention that the paper received. Today, this spoof is widely credited for inaugurating the widespread popularity of April Fools' trickery in all media (Boese 2002; Wainwright 2007, 61–81). Not only did the *Guardian* try to repeat its success in the following year, but other newspapers quickly imitated them, first in the United Kingdom and soon afterwards in the United States, until today the phenomenon is truly global. For instance, the Museum of Hoaxes website listed forty-eight media hoaxes for 2009, including print, broadcast, and Internet media and including such tricksters as the *Taipei Times*, the *Moscow Times*, and the Swiss Tourism Board (Boese 2009). The wide extent of this catalogue across geographic and media lines, and indeed the existence of this annual catalogue itself, are indications of the popularity and status of April Fools' hoaxes today.

The contemporary popularity of April Fools' hoaxes is by no means confined to print journalists. For instance, advertisers and advertising agencies were a part of the San Serriffe phenomenon, and since that time many members of this profession have embraced April Fools' hoaxing with enthusiasm, believing its power to win both goodwill and publicity. In recent years, some companies—notably the British division of BMW—have carried out an annual series of April First spoof advertisements. The BMW advertisements include such technological must-haves as an inaudible beam that warns hedgehogs to jump out of the way of the car (BMW 2008). With the growing dominance of the Internet as the mass medium of choice, corporations in this medium have likewise adopted the tradition of April Fooling. Like BMW, the Internet giant Google ran an annual series of spoofs about its own products and services. On 1 April 2000, for example, they announced "MentalPlex"—a revolutionary new search technology that read

the user's mind, thus eliminating the tiresome step of actually typing in search queries. "Typing in queries is so 1999," the company's co-founder was quoted as saying. People who activated the MentalPlex search received one of the following error messages:

Error 01: Brainwaves received in analog. Please re-think in digital.

Error: Insufficient conviction. Please clap hands 3 times, while chanting "I believe" and try again.

Error 666: Multiple transmitters detected. Silence voices in your head and try again.

Error 006: Query is unclear. Try again after removing hat, glasses and shoes.

Finally, each error page directed readers to a list of Google search results for "April Fools'" (Google 2009).

April Fooling as Deep Play

Clearly, the people who invented San Serriffe and the Mentalplex were having fun, creatively wielding their imaginative powers as well as their professional skills in writing and reporting, but in a spirit of play. On April Fools' Day, years of professional skill and experience are unleashed; not for a utilitarian purpose but purely for enjoyment, to draw attention to themselves for their own sake.

Extending the fun is an extensive secondary discourse about media April Fools' pranks in the form of feature stories, popular books, and websites. When April Fools' Day rolls around, those journalists who are not busy inventing spoofs run feature stories about the origin and significance of this folk holiday, sometimes including expert opinions from sociologists, psychologists, humour specialists, and the occasional folklorist. A few add prank recipes—suggestions for their readers of ways to fool their friends and colleagues when the holiday dawns (for example, Gurwitt 2008). There are also a number of popular book-length treatments of the subject such as *The Guardian Book of April Fool's Day* (Wainwright 2007).

Above all, journalists devote column inches and airtime to celebratory accounts of the great media hoaxes of the past and, following the holiday, to rundowns of the current year's crop of spoof stories. In the recent history of media hoaxes, three examples are celebrated over and over again as classics. These revered ancestors are the *Guardian's* report on San Serriffe, the BBC spaghetti harvest spoof from 1957 that showed Swiss peasants harvesting spaghetti from trees and enjoying a festive meal to mark the spaghetti harvest—viewers who contacted the BBC about how to grow their own spaghetti were advised to put a sprig of pasta in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best (this was probably the first hoax story to appear on television)—and *Sports Illustrated's* 1985 story about Sidd Finch, the yogi-trained pitcher who had a fastball of 168 miles per hour (Plimpton 1985; Fedler 1989, 200–2; Wainwright 2007, 39–58). In addition, a number of websites are devoted to compiling lists of media hoaxes from around the world on an annual basis (for example, Boese 2009; Wikipedia).

As a genre of humour, practical jokes comprise both narratives and narrated events (Bauman 1986: 33–53; 2004). Just as interpersonal practical jokes and the narratives about them make up a coherent and connected discourse, so it is with

media spoofs and media histories of them. The narrated events—that is, the jokes themselves—are fleeting, depending for their humour on an incongruous mismatch between frontstage activity and a backstage domain that gives the lie to it. Full appreciation of a practical joke is only available to those who are privy to the backstage domain. The narratives accomplish this for a wider audience, beyond the circle of jokers and collaborators who happened to be present when the joke played out.

However, the metajournalistic discourse about media hoaxes does more than simply reprise the great fabrications of the past; it also discusses, evaluates, and comments on them. These commentaries touch on the same themes, notably critique of the hoaxes, with a stress on the consummate skill of successful tricksters and a significant note of pride in the achievements of the best media tricksters—mockery of the anonymous fools who were taken in, discussion of ethics, and lists of amazing but true stories that might have been April Fools' spoofs but were not. The discourse often also includes some reference to the ancient origins of the April Fools' tradition that regularly refer to the Hindu festival of Holi and the ancient Roman feast in honour of the goddess Hilaria as possible ancient urforms, as well as repeating the explanation that the modern European custom derives from the switch to the Gregorian calendar in 1582 (for example, Wainright 2007). Some folklorists have expressed scepticism about these various historical explanations for the customs (Dundes 1989, 101; Roud 2006, 94), but in vernacular usage these origin myths are themselves traditional, and they have the effect of claiming for contemporary hoaxing a mantle of licence guaranteed by tradition.

Traditional licence is a necessity in this genre because there is more going on here than just having fun. Media spoofs and hoaxes necessarily thumb the nose at journalistic ethics—despite the suggestion that journalists have mostly abandoned hoaxes as their craft has become more professional (Fedler 1989, 227–8). Accordingly, even on April Fools' Day, hoax stories risk significant sanctions—not all readers appreciate being fooled, and not all media corporations see the humour when their employees act the fool and flout professional standards of accuracy and honesty. In light of these risks, and considering the significant amount of attention that journalists devote to the subject, one is led to the conclusion that what is going on here is some kind of deep play (Geertz 1971), something that touches on serious and significant matters for the players. Although couched in light and playful tones, media spoofs together with the metadiscourse about them make up an exploration of some serious epistemological matters. While serving as a way to entertain the public and as an arena for journalistic play, they also enact and comment upon some of the incongruities of journalism, especially the media's role as arbiters of truth and in the social construction of reality. To explore these issues, I will focus on a single spoof story broadcast by New Hampshire Public Radio (NHPR) on 1 April 2008.

Square Trees Grow in New Hampshire

The story began innocently enough with the claim that the New Hampshire Forest Society, a venerable local conservation organisation, had succeeded in growing a stand of perfectly square trees at a secret location. "Research scientists planned

and developed this forest of square trees in a process that sounds strikingly similar to genetic engineering," the station's environmental reporter said. She went on to explain how the process worked, and then explored the economic advantages of harvesting square trees because more trees could be grown per acre, and transport and processing costs would be lower. However, industries that relied on wood waste to make pellets for stoves would suffer. The square trees also might have a negative effect on wildlife. "The interaction between square trees and wildlife could be really dangerous," said the director of the local Sierra Club chapter. "It could be difficult for bears to climb trees because it's not that easy; they're square." "We're all tree huggers at heart," admitted the spokesman for the Forest Society. "It just won't be the same hugging a square tree." I was alerted to the spoof by another reporter who had recently interviewed me for her feature story about April Fools' Day. Following up on this lead, I interviewed Amy Quinton, Jack Savage, and the news director at NHPR, Mark Bevis. Among the themes that emerged in these conversations were a discussion of the ethics and risks of broadcasting spoof stories, the pure fun and enjoyment that this play aroused for the tricksters, but also feelings of unease and ambivalence.

Like most media hoaxes, this one was a collaborative effort. The story was concocted by Savage, the vice president for communication and outreach at the Forest Society, and Quinton, senior environmental reporter at the local public radio affiliate. It began with an idea that came to Savage in the fall, but it was not until a week before April Fools' Day that he decided to take the plunge, writing an extended press release and pitching the story to the news director at NHPR. Almost immediately, he agreed to be in. Quinton recorded interviews with Savage (pretending to be walking in the snow-covered forest of square trees), and with representatives of three other interested organisations, all of who were in on the joke. After editing, the story was run at 5.15 during the 1 April news broadcast. Thereafter, a transcript and recording were added to the NHPR website, complete with a link to the "official" press release on the Forest Society's website.

The Risks of Flouting Ethical Standards

The square trees hoax was very successful. The NHPR website received thousands of hits in the days following the broadcast, making it the most viewed of all their web pages. "Wonderfully clever!" said one person posting a comment to the website. "I had a hard time hearing the entire story because I was laughing so loud. Keep up the excellent work." Savage told me that the number of hits on the Forest Society's website tripled. Bevis, the news director at NHPR, was hoping for more reaction than they got—"I wanted *someone* to be a little angry," he told me. Both Quinton and Savage received calls and emails from people who either congratulated them on the story or wanted to check on their suspicion that it was not a *bona fide* report after all. But they did not receive any negative comments at all, even from people who had been completely taken in.

Nevertheless, both Quinton and Savage told me that they hesitated about going ahead with their spoof and worried that it might backfire. Amy's expression for this risk was being "War of the Worlded," a reference to Orson Welles's infamous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast that has become a byword for all that can go

wrong with a media hoax. Savage also admitted to being very concerned about whether or not his idea would backfire. "The credibility of this organisation [the New Hampshire Forest Society] is my responsibility," he said.

We've been around for more than a century, and we're considered a credible source of credible information about New Hampshire forests. As a joke, this has some residual value in terms of PR, in terms of people realizing that we have a sense of humor, in people's attitudes towards us. Humor's a wonderful way to get people to relax and realize that you're human. So, am I putting that at risk? So I was very ... I was worried. I was concerned that it could backfire.

Whatever the medium, media hoaxes depart from the standards of seriousness and responsibility expected of journalists. As far back as 1949, New Zealand's radio station 1ZB was reprimanded for flouting professional ethics after a deejay announced that a mile-wide wasp swarm was headed toward the city of Auckland. He urged listeners to bring in their washing, leave honey-smearing wasp traps outside their doors, and wear their socks over their trousers as they left for work. The New Zealand Broadcasting Authority was not amused, denouncing the hoax as undermining the rules of proper broadcasting. From then on, the Authority issued a memo each year before April Fools' Day reminding radio stations of their obligation to report the truth, and nothing but the truth (Sullivan 1999; Wainwright 2007, 55).

"The journalists who create a hoax no longer are rewarded for their creativity," argues Fedler (1989, 228). "Instead, most are fired." While such sanctions may be automatic on other days of the year, the widespread popularity of media hoaxes on April Fools' Day seems to suggest that the holiday does convey a licence to play jokes on the public. Yet, as Fedler reports, this licence is not without limits. Like all practical jokes, April Fools' Day spoofs are risky. More than once, journalists have been fired for perpetrating spoof stories without editorial approval (Fedler 1989, 32-4), and members of media audiences have also expressed displeasure at the practice. *Sports Illustrated's* story about Sidd Finch inspired a reader to write, "I have concluded that April Fools' Day will come again, but not your magazine. Cancel my subscription immediately." Some fellow journalists called it a puerile exercise worthy of a high school newspaper and complained that it cast doubt on the credibility of sports journalism. When the *Patriot* in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, ran a doctored photograph purporting to show the Pennsylvania capitol in ruins after an explosion caused by a build-up of hot air (a 1976 re-run of a spoof first published in 1933 by a newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin), readers complained that the paper was both insulting state politicians and also "confusing fun with irresponsibility." Two days later the paper published an apology and promised, "Clever or not, there won't be another one" (Fedler 1989, 201-3).

The Trouble with Disclaimers

Accordingly, there was some discussion at NHPR about whether and how to add a disclaimer to the square trees spoof. "Should we tell people?," they asked themselves. Savage and Quinton told me that their strategy had been to start the story with more believable claims and "end on the ridiculous" such as the alleged effect on bears and squirrels. As an additional indirect disclaimer, the story ended with the sober statement that "the square trees will be ready to harvest on April

first of next year." Originally, the transcript on the NHPR website was identical to the broadcast version, but someone evidently had second thoughts about that. Some days later, an editor's note appeared at the foot of the transcript saying, "If you haven't figured it out by now . . . April fools!" (Quinton 2008). [5] The station also added links from phrases at the beginning and end of the piece that went to Wikipedia's entry on April Fools' Day.

Media tricksters usually take care to distinguish themselves from liars of a more reprehensible sort. The category of *hoaxes* includes not only playful spoofs, but also exploitive deceptions perpetrated by the unscrupulous for personal gain. Infamous examples of the latter include the Hitler Diaries and Clifford Irving's fake biography of Howard Hughes, among many others that are universally deplored (for example, Fedler 1989, 229–34). To make sure that they are not lumped into this disreputable company, media tricksters, like other practical jokers, almost always discredit their own fabrications, but, unlike interpersonal practical jokes, when the target is an anonymous mass audience this task is more difficult. The problem that faced the NHPR trickster was how to make sure that their story would be discredited without compromising its ability to fool at least some of their radio audience.

The square trees story ended up using all three of the kinds of discrediting devices favoured by media hoaxes. The first of these is to build absurdity into the story—as Quinton and Savage did with the "ridiculous" image of squirrels trying to run around a square tree. The second device is to make some kind of reference to April Fools' Day—much as an interpersonal April Fools' trick is brought to a close with the formula, "April Fool!" Finally, they settled on a direct disclaimer, but only after the fact.

Each of these discrediting devices is problematic in its own way. Publishing a disclaimer (or an apology) a day or two after the original spoof, or even at the end of the spoof itself, has the disadvantage that the listeners may not stay to hear the end of the story or check back later (thus, Welles's *War of the Worlds* dramatisation backfired because audiences missed the disclaimers that framed the story as fiction). For that reason, it is more common to build discrediting devices into the original story. However, when the trick is in the public domain, a direct disclaimer can also be too direct—readers might see it too soon, and, in any case, how would tricksters ever know whether anyone had been fooled? For this reason, media tricksters usually prefer more subtle clues to the bogus. Instead of saying "April Fool," they may simply insert pointed references to the date of 1 April, counting on the wide recognition and close association that this date has with trickery. Anagrams of "April Fool" are also popular devices, leading to stories peppered with such names as Lirpa Loof (or Loof Lirpa), Pia Larooft, Olaf Priol, Yardis Alpolfo, and the like. Alternatively, the tip-off may be a reference to deceit, credulity, or joking hidden in names like "Oolfay" ("fool" in Pig Latin), "Jo King," or "Jurgen Fallforit" (Wainwright 2007, 10–11).

These built-in discrediting clues are rhetorically necessary because they show that the hoaxers were merely joking and never intended to be believed. But since a hoax story must also be believable, the clues to the joking frame must be disguised, sometimes extraordinarily so. George Plimpton's celebrated story about wonder pitcher "Sidd Finch" in *Sports Illustrated* contained an elaborate example of this contrivance. The story described an amazing young pitcher who

could throw a fastball at 168 miles an hour, thanks to his training in yoga. The clue was hidden in the initial letters in the subhead, which spelled out "HAPPY APRIL FOOLS DAY—AH FIB": "He's a pitcher, part yogi and part recluse. Impressively liberated from our opulent life-style, Sidd's deciding about yoga—and his future in baseball." Arguably, this "clue" would have been too subtle for most readers. In fact, the Sidd Finch story was one of several occasions in which media hoaxers had to repudiate their hoax directly the next day, but when they did so the built-in wordplay bolstered their claim that the story was a trick rather than a lie.

For a practical joke to succeed, *somebody* must be taken in, but at the same time it is advantageous if the trickster's audience also contains people who saw through the joke all along—thus bolstering the trickster's claim that only a fool would have missed the obvious fiction, that the fabrication was just a joke and not a more malicious kind of lie. The ideal, then, is to fool some, but not all:

If it fools nobody, but is amusing, it may be a good hoax story and worth two hundred words, boxed, on the front page. If it fools the more credulous, but allows readers of sharper wits to congratulate themselves on how much smarter they are than some others, it is a successful and memorable hoax. But if it fools everyone, it is a fake, and highly reprehensible from the point of view of ethical journalism. In this third case, the story is so good that it is very bad indeed and the reporter will probably lose his job (Mott 1942, 46).

Others do not distinguish between the unintentional fake, the serious fake, or the deceptive story that is meant as a practical joke—all are lumped together in the category of hoaxes (for example, MacDougall 1940). From the point of view of the perpetrators, such ambiguity is useful; if no-one is fooled, the piece stands as a more or less skilful and amusing spoof or burlesque of the newsperson's art. The aim is to walk a line between fooling nobody and everybody.

Despite the traditional claim that "we never expected anyone to take this seriously," the April Fools' Day discourse regularly reports the number of people fooled and it does so with pride, not regret. The presence of a sizeable number of dupes is evidence of the skill that went into a hoax story. An April Fools' story that fooled no-one might be appreciated as a parody or burlesque of journalism, but there is more to journalism than just writing or otherwise constructing stories. The journalist's job is also to inform, and to do this their work must be credible. Similarly, the job of the advertising copywriter is to persuade. Spoof stories and advertisements put the credibility-enhancing techniques of these two professions on display. And somebody must be fooled for this display to be worthwhile. Dupes prove the efficacy of journalistic skill, contrasting it with the gullibility of the public. The metajournalism about April Fools' Day spoofs is suffused with a note of pride and self-congratulatory prose about the accomplishments of fellow-professionals that successful spoofs represent.

The built-in discrediting of media spoofs gives the tricksters a rhetorical advantage because it allows them to claim that the joke was obvious. They express surprise that anyone would be taken in by these obvious fictions. One baseball writer said of the Sidd Finch hoax that "anybody who knows anything about sports, or physiology, or just has much common sense at all" would have known the story was phoney. Yet plenty of people are taken in. Given the enormous size of the target populations, statistics are on the side of the media tricksters. The same

numerical advantage also ensures that a goodly number of people will not be fooled, thus bolstering the jokers' claims that the absurdity is obvious.

Journalists at Play (But with a Purpose)

The square trees spoof was also an occasion for play. When I asked Amy why she had done the story, she paused before answering, with a laugh:

Just because it was fun. It was a *relief* from the day-to-day news that we do. I mean while I was writing it I was *laughing*; cause I was coming up with stuff to say. Like, I can write this any way I want! It was just *fun*.

Savage echoed this idea that the spoof was a welcome departure from the constraints of his daily work. Unlike most press releases, he said, he could write this one very quickly and easily.

People in my organisation were convinced that this must have taken me weeks to do . . . What takes me weeks to do is get the facts right—fact-checking. When I'm making stuff up it takes me an hour! I wrote that press release in an hour! This was easy. Coming up with things that might be true is far easier than actually getting things that are true.

"None of that pesky fact checking?," I asked. "Exactly!" he replied, laughing.

This journalistic play was a social occasion as well. The spoof involved collaborators from local organisations—the Forest Society, the Timberland Owners Association, and the Sierra Club—who, although they have a reasonably friendly relationship, have also sometimes been at odds with each other. The joke gave them an opportunity to put their differences aside and play together, and it is evident that they all enjoyed themselves. None of the interviews that were recorded for the story were scripted; instead, each of the colluding players took Savage's original idea and improvised on it. They were fellow players.

Yet, being contemporary Americans and therefore enculturated into the protestant work ethic, both Quinton and Savage found ways to rationalise their play, arguing that the positive publicity it generated was beneficial to the missions of their respective organisations. The publicity generated by the square trees was very desirable to both NHPR and the Forest Society, since the business of both media and public relations is to win audiences. "From a PR standpoint, that's what you want," Savage told me. "You put something out that then engenders discussion that brings attention to your organisation. And your mission. From that standpoint it worked perfectly." Despite the fun of the piece, he emphasised that it contained serious but hidden and "subversive" messages about the value of forests. "I'm reminding people that forests represent, not just the birds and the bees and everything, but part of our economy. So even in that joke, I'm pushing mission, mission, mission."

Ambivalence and Unease

Nevertheless, there was an undercurrent of ambivalence in the New Hampshire tricksters' comments about all this exposure. "I'm pitching stories all the time and I'm trying to get media to cover our land protection activity," said Savage.

I pitch a story about protecting a thousand acres, that includes water supply for tens of thousands of people, and wildlife habitat and working forests and this that and the other, and I get ten seconds. I pitch a story about square trees, I get four minutes.

Amy was similarly ambivalent about all the attention. "It's so funny," she commented:

I have never gotten more response, on any story I've ever done, than this one. [Laughs] Which is sort of sad, when you think about it. [Laughs] I mean, I consider myself as a good reporter; why aren't they talking about the good stories? [Laughs.] Instead of the joke stories.

These comments express frustration with the media audience. While they welcomed the attention, both the publicity director and the radio reporter lamented that their real news, news that had significance in the real world, did not get the same notice. They saw their jobs as the discovery and promulgation of facts, but the listeners preferred jokes.

This ambivalence about the success of the spoof story reflects a built-in incongruity in the journalist's role, because their job is not only to deliver the facts but also to win audiences, as Noam Chomsky famously observed (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 303 and 337). In the aftermath of their hugely successful spoof, Savage and Quinton discovered that these two goals are at odds. Quinton happened to mention that her usual work was "hard news," not "fluffy featury stuff," but, as she was no doubt aware, newscasts and newspapers are full of such material. The media bring us not only news and information, but also entertainment and advertising. "Hard news" reporters may decry the public's insatiable demand for infotainment, but editors and publishers recognise that it is necessary to win and keep audiences (Roscoe and Hight 2001, 83).

Further, news stories, press releases, and news broadcasts do not write themselves. Even in hardcore reporting, unadorned facts win few readers. Compelling stories require craft, and April Fools' Day spoofs put this craft on display. When journalists play on 1 April, they are uncovering the constructions—the "fictions" that lie behind the news. Freed from the requirements of research and fact checking, they can highlight their other professional skills of recording, writing, editing, and presenting data; skills that they use every day to attract interest and create credibility. As Elliott Oring recently observed, "art and factuality are often at odds" (2008, 154). The everyday documentary or factual mode requires these skills to be muted, even hidden, but April Fools' Day confers a temporary licence to strut them openly.

Arbiters of Truth

Yet there is more going on in the tradition of April Fools' Day media hoaxes than simply showing off, and the unease goes deeper than concerns about mixing the techniques for creating fiction and reporting facts. There is more at stake: if news is constructed rather than simply reported, what does that say about its truth value? In Boston, in 1989, a white man named Charles Stuart shot and killed his pregnant wife and claimed that an unidentified black man was the killer, sparking a fruitless and controversial manhunt and fooling the police, the media, and the public for months. Writing about this infamous hoax, James Cooper asks whether the news itself is not "a deception, a sustained and commonly held hoax" (1996, 77).

Pointing out the limitations of human perception, he described news making as a process in which “delimiting, inaccurate, and relative reductions of reality somehow become miraculously converted to ‘reliable sources,’ ‘official spokespersons,’ and ‘eye witness accounts’ in the fictional construction of news” (Cooper 1996, 77).

Cooper’s analysis expressed a deep-seated unease with the ontological status of news as factual discourse. What he recognised—and what media spoofs enact—is that the news is not merely reported, but constructed. The epistemological ramifications of this observation are far-reaching, because most of us rely on the media to inform us about the state of the wider world. The news, in other words, forms part of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann 1967). For their part, many members of the public rely on the media to serve as arbiters of truth, and hoaxes betray that trust. The reaction to the 1995 New Zealand “mocumentary” *Forgotten Silver* illustrates the degree to which some viewers can feel betrayed by media spoofs. Directed by filmmakers Costa Botes and Peter Jackson of *Lord of the Rings* fame, the film claimed to have rediscovered a forgotten Kiwi genius—one Colin McKenzie from Geraldine—who, working alone in the back blocks of the South Island, pioneered several advances in filmmaking between 1901 and 1931. Although the film included digitally enhanced clips from McKenzie’s oeuvre, the story was a complete fabrication. In a bold move, the nationally owned television station TV1 screened the film not on April Fools’ Day, but in late October—thus eschewing the protection that the traditional licence of the April date would have lent them.

Reaction to the hoax was mixed. While some praised the filmmakers’ creativity and skill, others were outraged at the arrogant way they had toyed with the television audience. Many of the negative comments centred on TV1’s irresponsibility and on the way the spoof had destroyed trust in the media. The trick was seen as placing the national television channel’s credibility in doubt. “If this sort of thing is allowed to develop where will it end?,” asked one letter-writer to the *Timaru Herald*.

From now on anything that the media produce, whether it be by word or film will be regarded with disbelief. This is a sad state of affairs when we can’t believe what we read, see or hear.

In a similar vein, a correspondent to the *TV Guide* said that the joke had “made me unable to trust anything that TV1 puts on again.” “I really expected a better standard of honesty from the people who are in control of television programmes,” said another writer. By the same token, supporters viewed the film as a salutary lesson. “*Forgotten Silver* is a reality check; to constantly reassess our level of willingness to suspend disbelief,” said one. “Can the mantle of documentary really allow automatic acceptance?” Another praised the producers for “showing how easy it is to hoodwink a viewing public that has been conditioned to believe that anything labelled ‘documentary’ is necessarily the truth” (Hight and Roscoe 2001). [6] In other words, the filmmakers and some of their supporters argued, it was healthy if the spoof had eroded trust in the television documentary genre, because the public tended to trust the media too readily.

Trust is essential to social life; but at the same time, no one wants to be a sucker (Vohs, Baumeister, and Chin 2007). Experience and common-sense teach us that trust can be misplaced, even in those that are closest to us. The plethora of how-to

books that promise to show how one can detect deceit in others shows both that deception is expected and that people are motivated to avoid being taken advantage of. Dupes commonly blame themselves for failing to detect deceitful untruths. Nevertheless, a state of constant scepticism is unsustainable; it would be personally exhausting as well as socially unacceptable. The normal attitude is to trust others, and it takes an unusual circumstance to impel us toward scepticism. Practical jokes comment upon this paradox, that trust is both essential and risky. Playful hoaxes and practical jokes depend upon the readiness of people to place their trust in others, but they also exploit that everyday confidence to deliver a visceral lesson in the limits and dangers of trust—albeit one that is coated with a playful, joking frame. Similarly, Cooper was genuinely anguished by his recognition of the constructed nature of news, but media spoofs and the discourse about them are a more relaxed and playful exploration of these issues.

The metajournalistic discourse about media hoaxes contrasts the tricksters' skill with the public's gullibility, presenting the spoofs not as dishonesty but as tests of the public's acumen—witness the 2008 round up of April Fools' media hoaxes (also published in the *Guardian's* online site) headlined "Were You Fooled?" (Cozens 2004). BMW's annual tradition of April's Day spoof car advertisements also makes use of this theme. Not content with the advertisements, the company website has a detailed FAQ file explaining and defending the tradition. "The April Fool's day concepts are designed to teeter on the verge of credibility, therefore taking in scores of slightly less vigilant readers," explained the FAQ. The advertisements are:

primarily aimed at BMW drivers as a once-a-year opportunity for them to drop their guard and have a laugh at themselves. They have all the wit generic to many of BMW's brand adverts and allow the intelligent owner to feel part of the BMW tradition (BMW 2008).

With these words, the trickster company divides and conquers its potential critics, enlisting the "intelligent owner" who can see the joke to join in the mockery of the "scores of slightly less vigilant readers" who were taken in. In this discourse, BMW's rhetorical position rests upon the notion that fact and fiction are readily distinguishable and that one can spot untruths—at least on April Fools' Day—because they are obviously absurd, ludicrous, and ridiculous.

But the April Fools' discourse both draws upon and undermines this common-sense position. For example, many roundups of great spoof stories also include lists of "weird but true" news stories and "stories that could be pranks—but aren't" (BBC News 2005; 2008; Wainwright 2007, 152–60). To add another twist, some of these lists also warn readers that one or more of the absurd but true stories are actually spoofs, thus pulling the rug out from under readers just as soon as they thought they had reached a firm epistemological foundation. In the introduction to his *Guardian Book of April Fool's Day*, Wainwright warns readers that "there are one or two small tricks ... in this book and one rather bigger one," promising a free meal for the first reader to spot them and write to his publisher (2007, ix–x). Thus he exemplifies the humour frame's ability to subvert everything it touches, including itself, leading to confusion between what is serious and what is not. Here, Wainwright playfully switches between analytical levels—from talking about tricks to sneakily pulling them on his readers—with the added dimension of challenging readers to be able to spot when the switch

occurs. Similarly the Google company, which has become celebrated in the annals of April Fooldom for their regular spoof announcements, chooses 1 April not only for spoofs like Mentalplex but also for genuine announcements of new products and services—for example, their free Gmail service with 1 gigabyte of storage per person (Wainwright 2007, 155–6). The tactic is designed to ride the free publicity provided by the rumour and web chatter that such confusion would incite. So the dizzying confusion of truth and untruth, factuality and fiction continues endlessly.

These shenanigans are the natural extension of the process of crafting effective April Fools' Day spoofs. What makes these stories closer to practical jokes than to parody is the way they tread the line between the credible and the ridiculous, a task whose success is measured by the numbers of people who are fooled as well as by the presence of readers or viewers who can spot the joke. The spoofs that number both groups in their audience have reached the desired degree of epistemological ambiguity, existing precariously betwixt and between fact and fiction. Like the interpersonal practical joke, impersonal public hoaxes or spoofs require belief as well as disbelief, credibility as well as scepticism. The moral is that fact and fiction are not as readily distinguishable as we like to think. Humour offers a safe arena in which to literally play with alternative realities, but the epistemological unease that such experiments might arouse is muted and rendered harmless by the comforting claim that this is nothing but a joke. [7] At the end of the day, the mocking laughter directed at the dupes reassures us that all is well with our everyday epistemology after all.

Notes

- [1] All of these stories appeared in the mass media on 1 April 2005 in: *The Otago Daily Times*; Manhattan College Quadrangle; Virgin Group's Australian Finance Division; NPR news program "All Things Considered"; Wikipedia.com; Nature.com; and the Sun. All were included in a lengthy roundup of annual April Fools' hoaxes in Wikipedia ("Portal: Current Events April1, 2005"). See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/index.php?curid=1675324>; [14 March 2009].
- [2] The folklore archives at the University of California Berkeley and the Wilson Folklore Archives (Brigham Young University), as well as my own fieldwork, document that the custom is alive and well in the U.S. Jochum Stattin (1996) found that the same was true in Sweden.
- [3] Twain wrote the story as a satire against the then contemporary mania for petrified man stories, and also to ridicule the local coroner, with whom he had a falling out. He also professed to be amazed that anyone believed this "string of roaring absurdities" (Fedler 1989, 44).
- [4] For reproductions of these doctored pictures, MacDougall 1940, frontispiece, opposite p. 8, and opposite p. 9.
- [5] A copy of the website printed on the 2 April 2008 contains no disclaimer; another printed on 13 June does.
- [6] Letter to the editor, *Timaru Herald*, 6 November 1995. The full text of these and other responses to the film may be found on Hight, Craig, "Forgotten Silver", <http://www.waikato.ac.nz/~film/mock-doc.shtml>; INTERNET. Accessed 14 September 2009.

- [7] In *Redeeming Laughter* (1997), Peter Berger argues that the comic provides a safe arena wherein we can glimpse alternative realities. Similarly, Elliott Oring, (1987) has suggested that disaster jokes challenge the media-dominated definition of the world.

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