

Hoaxes

500 words

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We are used to being able to easily tell the difference between truth and fiction, but in the early years of a new medium, these boundaries are sites for negotiation. Hoaxes and scams play with these boundaries, and range from aesthetic or satiric to criminal. The following will focus on aesthetic and playful hoaxes on the internet.

An infamous hoax from the early years of radio was Orson Welles' Halloween 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*, which had thousands of panicked listeners believing that Martians had invaded Earth. Welles had his actors break into a radio concert for supposed "live news" of the attacks. On the internet, websites such as malepregnancy.com or bonsaikitten.com (now offline) use other strategies to support the illusion of authenticity. Malepregnancy.com uses the **interface** layout of a typical hospital website, and includes links to and facsimiles of fake media coverage. Bonsaikitten.com, a site that went viral as horrified cat-lovers shared it with all their friends in 2005, claimed to sell body-modified kittens shaped by having spent their early weeks in jars, and fittingly used the layout of a typical small online store, including photos of cute kittens, a phone number to call and explanations of the process and how to order your own modified kitten.

Blogs and video diaries also provide a rich basis for fiction, with or without artistic intent. A early and renowned blog that turned out to be a hoax featured Kaycee Nicole, a dying teenager who blogged about her battle against cancer, and her mother, Debbie, who started a companion diary about caring for her child with cancer. When Kaycee eventually died in 2012, her online friends were devastated. When they found out that Kaycee and Debbie were fictional, they were furious, and felt deceived and used. Unlike Kaycee Nicole, Lonelygirl15 was a project presented as the YouTube diaries of a teenaged girl where the creators turned out to be professional film directors and actors. As with Kaycee Nicole, the discovery that Bree, who used the screenname Lonelygirl15, was fictional made her up until then loyal followers furious at what they experienced as a betrayal of trust and abuse of their empathy. This shared anger and the accompanying gathering of evidence of how the hoax was conducted can be argued as allowing an audience to construct itself as a community (Nunes 2010).

Marketers have used similar strategies to encourage user engagement, and this can also cause severe backlashes when people find out that they have been fooled. An infamous example is the 2009 video featuring a Danish woman looking for her baby's father, a tourist to Copenhagen whose name she has forgotten. After being seen close to a million times, the video was revealed as

part of a marketing campaign VisitDenmark. Though heavily criticised, the campaign certainly got media attention.

Many internet hoaxes are clearly presented as satire, such as the Twitter account @Queen_UK which allegedly belongs to the Queen of England and offers mild critique of royalty: "No, Occupy London, one does not "have room at the Palace for a few tents"" (February 28, 2012). Hoaxes can also be used as **tactics** or as propaganda, where false information is presented as reality, as with the white supremacist organization Stormfront's site on Martin Luther King.

References

Nunes, Mark. 2010. "This is Not a Blog Hoax: Narrative 'Provocations' in a Participatory Media Culture." *Explorations in Media Ecology* 9 (2): 71-86.