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's 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, where we are accustomed to using e-mail and websites for information, we can be similarly gullible. E-mail is a well-established channel for both scams and hoaxes, some of which can be seen as contemporary folklore (Kibby 2005). Hoax websites mimic authentic sites to engage or fool readers. Malepregnancy.com uses the interface layout of a typical hospital website and includes links to and facsimiles of fake media coverage of the medical miracle of male pregnancy (see INTERFACE). Bonsaikitten.com, a site that went viral as horrified cat lovers shared it with their friends in 2005, claimed to sell body-modified kittens, shaped by having spent their early weeks in jars, and appropriately 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 (see BLOGS). An 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 2002, 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 in 2006 as the YouTube diaries of a teenage girl, Bree, where the creators turned out to be professional film directors and actors. When fans discovered that Bree was played by an actress, they were as furious as Kaycee Nicole's online friends had been at what they experienced as a betrayal of trust (Rettberg 2008). 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, a medium that both demands and denies the possibility of authentic self-disclosure and stable identity (Nunes 2010). Lonelygirl15 continued as a clearly fictional web series until 2008.

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 the marketing campaign VisitDenmark. Though heavily criticized, 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 tactical media or as propaganda, where false information is presented as reality, as with the white...
supremacist organization Storm-front’s site on Martin Luther King Jr.

See also DIGITAL FICTION, NARRATIVITY, NETWORKING, VIRAL AESTHETICS

References and Further Reading


Jill Walker Rettberg

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


Copyright © 2014 by Johns Hopkins University Press

https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/hoax