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## Calamity Gene

By Marc Spiegler

To the Sven Birkerts of journalism, the tale of Australia's BioPEEP company seemed heaven sent. A BioPEEP employee distraught over his firm's work had quit and leaked information about its planned product: a genetically engineered poultry additive that reconfigures consumers' DNA, addicting them to the substance. Worse yet, the US military backed the project. Around the world, publications picked up the story; *The New York Post's* headline screamed "Zealots Cry Fowl over Flu Slaughter," while *The Australian* weighed in with "Genetic Conspiracy Turns to Fowl Play." Too bad BioPEEP was the latest hoax from New York's notorious prankster, Joey Skaggs.

Along with two public protests and a media-savvy fax campaign, a key element in the BioPEEP hoax was the Web site put up by the "activist group" People for Ethical Evolutionary Practices. Stopbiopeep.com leaked exhaustive documentation of the cabal's evil plot, including photos of the facility, complicated genetic-coding data, and confidential correspondence between BioPEEP honchos. Skaggs also recruited geneticist Larry Croft and real-life supercomputer jock Miso Alkalaj to contribute to the site.

Skaggs, who has pulled off such deceptions for decades as a way of calling attention both to specific issues and the general gullibility of the press, finally let the cat out of the bag this spring. "The Web is just ripe for these kinds of hoaxes," he marvels. "It has all the ingredients: The gatekeepers are relaxed about facts, the audience seems willing to suspend all critical analysis, and rumormongers help spread misinformation. It's profound and great that the Internet can make anyone a journalist, but buyer beware."

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