American wit and wisdom began with some mass-mediated mischief. In the December 19, 1732 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Benjamin Franklin penned the following advertisement: “Just published for 1733: *Poor Richard: An Almanack* containing the lunations, eclipses, planets motions and aspects, weather, . . . [and the] prediction of the death of his friend Mr. Titan Leeds.” Writing under the name Richard Saunders, he not only narrowed down Leeds’s time of death to the date and time—October 17, 1733 at 3:29 p.m.—but also the exact moment when two worldly bodies aligned: “at the very instant of the conjunction of the Sun and Mercury.” Franklin was a rationalist product of the Enlightenment. He was a cynic who valued science over superstition, and heaped scorn on astrologers such as Titan Leeds. More crucially, Leeds was a business rival, and the printer’s way up the ladder of wealth was often achieved by stepping on his competitors. Franklin claimed that the two friends frequently debated when the cosmos had scheduled Leeds’s appointment with the grim reaper: “But at length he is inclinable to agree with my judgment. Which of us is most exact, a little time will now determine.”
Introduction

When Titan Leeds did not die on that date, phase two of Operation: Ridicule Astrologer kicked into gear. In the next Poor Richard’s Almanack, Franklin/Saunders bemoaned the fact that he couldn’t attend to his best friend during his final moments on earth. Oh, how he wished to give Leeds a farewell embrace, close his eyes, and say good-bye one last time! This infuriated the astrologer, who ranted in his not-quite-posthumous 1734 almanac about this “false Predictor,” “conceited Scribbler,” “Fool,” and—last but not least—“Lyar.” Poor Richard was shocked by these rude utterances. With a wearied tone, he wrote, “Having received much Abuse from the Ghost of Titan Leeds, who pretends to still be living, and to write Almanacks in spight of me and my Predictions, I cannot help saying, that tho’ I take it patiently, I take it very unkindly.” He added that there was absolutely no doubt Leeds had died, for it was “plain to everyone that reads his last two almanacks, no man living would or could write such stuff.” Franklin wasn’t the first to mock astrology, which by the early eighteenth century had become a time-honored tradition. Two centuries before, François Rabelais published at least two such lampoons: Almanac for 1532 and Pantagrueline Prognostication (signed “Maistre Alcofribas Nasier,” an anagram of his name). The satirist wrote vague forecasts such as “This year the blind will see very little, and the deaf will hear poorly” and “In winter wise men will not sell their fur coats to buy firewood.” 2

Rabelais’s lighthearted jabs, however, were nothing compared to what Leeds endured. Benjamin Franklin owned and operated the printing house that churned out his competitor’s almanac, giving him a crucial advantage in this war of words. This inside knowledge allowed Franklin to read his attacks and respond to them in Poor Richard’s Almanack before Leeds’s publication even went to press. “Mr. Leeds was too well bred to use any Man so indecently and scurrilously,” Franklin wrote, further egging him on, “and moreover his Esteem and Affection for me was extraordinary.” The astrologer’s protests continued to pour fuel on the fire, which by now had captivated much of the colonies’ reading public. Franklin kept this up for several years, even after the astrologer really did die in 1738. The 1740 edition of Poor Richard’s Almanack described a late-night visit from the Ghost of Titan Leeds, who entered Richard Saunders’s brain via his left nostril and penned the following message: “I did actually die at that moment,” he confessed,
“precisely at the hour you mentioned, with a variation of 5 minutes, 53 sec.” After this belated apology, the spirit issued one more prediction: John Jerman, another almanac maker who used Franklin as a printer, would convert to Catholicism. This was an outrageous claim to make during those antipapist times, and the author was not amused. Because of Franklin’s “witty performance,” Jerman huffed, he would be taking his business elsewhere.

**Learning from Pranks**

Benjamin Franklin’s ruse is one of the first modern examples of what I call a prank. In the groundbreaking book *Pranks!,* Andrea Juno and V. Vale suggest that the “best pranks invoke the imagination, poetic imagery, the unexpected and a deep level of irony or social criticism.” By staging these semiserious, semihumorous spectacles, pranksters try to spark important debates and, in some instances, provoke social change. Unfortunately, the word *prank* is more often used to describe stunts that make people look foolish and little more. I’m not interested in celebrating cruelty—especially the sorts of mean-spirited practical jokes, hazing rituals, and reality-television deceits that are all too common in today’s popular culture. Although “good” pranks sometimes do ridicule their targets, they serve a higher purpose by sowing skepticism and speaking truth to power (or at least cracking jokes that expose fissures in power’s facade). A prank a day keeps The Man away, I always say. Nevertheless, I should stress at the outset that this book is not solely about pranking. Many of the characters who populate these pages aren’t driven by noble impulses, and even those who are more pure of heart can muddy the ethical waters with dubious tactics.

With this in mind, *Pranksters* examines everything from political pranks, silly hoaxes, and con games to the sort of self-deception that fuels outlandish belief systems. Though these may seem like very different examples, they are linked by fact that all varieties of deceit engender confusion, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Spectators (whether they have been scammed by a swindler or have witnessed a satirical street-theater spectacle) can experience a single event in radically different ways. One person’s prank can become the fodder for another’s con or, as we will soon see, conspiracy theory. Pranks, hoaxes, cons, and conspiracy
theories share another key similarity: people buy into them when they resonate with their own deeply entrenched worldviews. Conversely, they can also push us to think more critically about how and why we come to embrace false beliefs—while at the same time reminding us not to repeat past mistakes. As the old proverb goes, “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” By viewing modern history through the lens of trickery, this book offers an offbeat and overlooked account of political, religious, and social life in the West. Yes, Reason and other Enlightenment principles shaped modernity, but so did chicanery and irrationality.

Mischief makers also left their mark on media. Most textbook histories offer a parade of Big Broadcasters, Great Men, New Technologies, and Noble Ideas. Lost in the cracks are the more peripheral figures who worked outside convention but still impacted the norms and uses of media. Subversive pranksters, opportunistic hoaxers, greedy con artists, and clever hackers all have played formative roles in the evolution of media. In 1903, for instance, a lone troublemaker helped kill off a sector of the wireless telegraphy industry before it got off the ground. Italian inventor Guglielmo Marconi was attempting to promote his patented radio system as a way to send confidential messages (even though total secrecy is impossible with broadcast media). During the device’s unveiling, moments before it was to receive a transmission from Marconi himself, the wireless telegraph mysteriously came to life, tapping away. It had been hacked! “Rats. Rats. Rats,” the message announced, followed by a series of obnoxious rhymes that began, “There was a young fellow of Italy, who diddled the public quite prettily.” It was a PR disaster for Marconi, and it doomed his company’s new product. The perpetrator was a stage magician named Nevil Maskelyne, who gleefully explained to reporters that he was trying to expose the invention’s fatal flaw. Maskelyne’s wireless-telegraph hack is a reminder that rule-breaking has long been a part of media’s DNA.

My history of trickery—or trickstory, if you will—starts at the dawning of the Age of Enlightenment and spans four centuries. Among other things, Pranksters chronicles the exploits of Jonathan Swift, Benjamin Franklin, and Mark Twain. It also explores P. T. Barnum’s humbugs and the nineteenth-century culture of cons, the youthful hacking adventures of Apple cofounders Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and a
number of politicized pranks orchestrated by WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power), and a dynamic duo named the Yes Men. In doing so, this book vividly illustrates how pranksters can stimulate constructive public conversations and, on some unfortunate occasions, unintended consequences—or what I call prank blowback. This occurs when a satire is taken seriously by its intended target and provokes a reactionary response. For example, the 1960s feminists who founded WITCH designed their outrageous protests to appeal to reporters and appall conservatives. Little did they know that their stunts (along with similar pranks pulled by others) would help jolt the Moral Majority into existence, reshaping American politics in the process. On a much grander scale, one can draw a twisted-but-unbroken line from today’s New World Order conspiracy theories to the mind-control paranoia of the Cold War era, the post–French Revolution Illuminati scare, and all the way back to a satirical prank pulled in the early 1600s, which kicks off chapter 1.

If reduced to a mathematical formula, the art of pranking can be expressed as Performance Art + Satire \times Media = Prank. Put simply, pranks are playful critiques performed within the public sphere and amplified by media. They allow ordinary people to reach large audiences despite constraints (such as a lack of wealth or connections) that would normally mute their voices. Storytelling is an important tool that makes this possible, especially when a prank produces memorable morals or lessons that cry out to be retold. I had this in mind when I successfully trademarked “freedom of expression.” My quiet little joke went public after I hired a lawyer who threatened to sue AT&T for using this iconic phrase in an ad without permission! In 2003, the New York Times broke the story with a wry article that began, “Freedom of expression, it turns out, may not be for everyone.” When wire services picked it up, more reporters came calling. This gave me a platform to say ridiculous, provocative things such as “I didn’t go through the time, effort, and expense of trademarking freedom of expression® just to have people use it whenever they want.” I dangled many more tasty hooks, but if journalists savored the humor of this serious joke, they also had to swallow the critique that came with it. The absurd nature of my fake lawsuit certainly got people talking, but all good things must come to
an end—including my beloved trademark. I forgot to file a “Section 8” form a few years into its lifetime, an oversight that terminated my ownership of the phrase. But there is an amusing silver lining. A U.S. government website now declares that freedom of expression is “dead” (in all caps, no less). Dead is just a legal designation for a lapsed trademark, but I prefer to think of it as an unintentionally hilarious example of bureaucratic performance art.7

Pranking is a form of edutainment—an instructive amusement that can make perpetrators, victims, and witnesses wiser. And as I said earlier, even hoaxes and cons can sharpen our critical-thinking skills. After Hurricane Sandy hit New York City in 2012, an obviously Photoshopped image of a scuba diver swimming in a fully submerged subway station circulated on social media. Rather than taking a few seconds to realize that every element of this picture was implausible, I quickly and credulously reposted it. I should have known better, especially because this happened while I was writing this book! Notorious publicist and self-proclaimed media manipulator Ryan Holiday discusses a tried and true technique that he calls “trading up the chain.” Holiday writes, “I can turn nothing into something by placing a story with a small blog that has very low standards, which then becomes the source for a story by a larger blog, and that, in turn, for a story by larger media outlets. I create, to use the words of one media scholar, a ‘self-reinforcing news wave.’” A 2010 survey of working journalists, for example, found that 89 percent admitted to turning to blogs and social media for story research. The speed at which news now travels makes antiquated concepts such as “fact-checking” and “verification” that much more difficult. If you trace the path of a news story back to its origins, more often than not a publicist is at the beginning of the chain (after all, “PR” is the first two letters of the word prank).8

Pranks encourage audiences to pause and reflect, even if it is only for a few seconds. Sometimes pranksters craft clear and direct messages that persuade, and sometimes they deliberately befuddle. The latter act is also useful—especially when an unexpected guerrilla performance jolts people out of their daily routines. When the world is temporarily turned askew, it can be seen from a new perspective. “Imagination is the chief instrument of the good,” philosopher John Dewey argued, emphasizing the transformative power of art. Drawing on Dewey, sociologist
James Jasper used the term *artful protest* to describe the same tactics I attribute to pranksters. “Much like artists,” he writes, “they are at the cutting edge of society’s understandings of itself as it changes.” Jasper believes that artful protestors offer us “new ways of seeing and judging the world.” One of the reasons why pranking can be so compelling for everyone involved is because it’s fun, theatrical, and participatory. By dispensing with stage lights and other barriers that separate audiences from performers, it lies somewhere between acting, gaming, and free play. A prank is like a humorous role-playing adventure in which people, ideas, and language all have leading parts. “Jokes are active, social things,” media scholar Stephen Duncombe argues. Humor requires engagement from spectators, especially when irony is employed (one has to figure out what the joke teller doesn’t believe to get it). With enough repetition, these cognitive acts can bleed over into the social world, moving people to action.9

**Silly Social Engineering**

Pranks also provide a real-life learning lab for conducting social experiments. Anyone with enough pluck, luck, and imagination can open the hood of the culture industry’s engine and watch the gears turn. One useful example is the Banana Hoax. In early 1967, a rumor circulated that one could get high by smoking banana peels—though, in reality, the only way to trip on a banana is to step on one. The instigators were most likely “Country” Joe McDonald and Gary “Chicken” Hirsh, from the acid-damaged jug band Country Joe and the Fish. In late 1966, they started spreading the word among friends that banana peels contained psychedelic ingredients. “Even if it didn’t work,” Hirsh said of their druggy effects, “it was great fun.” Not only would this fruit be absurdly difficult to outlaw, but the thought of puffing on bananas contained more than a whiff of slapstick silliness. The story initially traveled via word of mouth, and the first printed account appeared in a March 1967 issue of the *Berkeley Barb*. Conveniently, Ed Denson served as Country Joe’s band manager and also contributed a regular music column to that underground paper. “I was fully involved in perpetrating the hoax when I wrote that article,” Denson later admitted, though he denied penning a letter to the editor about a cop in a local food co-op who was “lurking...
in the fresh produce section.” The writer predicted that possessing large amounts of bananas would soon become a criminal offense.10

The smokable-banana myth is a bit frivolous, sure, but we can still learn a lot from how it took root. Historian John McMillian notes that this prank reveals much about the social and media landscapes of the time. Underground papers created a virtual community connecting weirdos, radicals, and dropouts living in cities, suburbs, and rural areas. This alternative communication network ensured that few things remained local. Mainstream outlets also propagated the put-on, starting with a San Francisco Chronicle article titled “Kicks for Hippies: The Banana Turn-On.” Within a month, Time and Newsweek piled on with a wink, and soon it was part of popular folklore. “From bananas, it is a short but shocking step to other fruits,” said Congressman Frank Thompson, who cheekily proposed the Banana Labeling Act of 1967. In a speech on the floor of the House of Representatives, he declared, “Today the cry is ‘Burn, Banana, Burn.’ Tomorrow we may face strawberry smoking, dried apricot inhaling or prune puffing.” Thompson claimed a “high official in the FDA” urged him to introduce the bill, but the Food and Drug Administration actually didn’t find the banana-smoking rumor very funny. The FDA posted a press release that soberly stated that it failed to find “detectable quantities of known hallucinogenics” in bananas. Pop music also helped to spread this mischievous meme. Donovan’s recent hit “Mellow Yellow” was widely rumored to be about you-know-what—“Electrical banana is gonna be the latest craze,” he sang—but the song was actually written before the prank was hatched. It was just a kooky cosmic coincidence. The constant repetition of “Mellow Yellow” on radios amplified the Banana Hoax as it spread through subterranean tributaries, corporate channels, and word of mouth.11

A famous rumor about the Beatles’ Paul McCartney, known as the “Paul Is Dead Hoax,” followed a similar pattern. In 1969, news spread that he died in a car accident and was secretly replaced by a look- and sound-alike. The story originally appeared in an Iowa college newspaper and fanned out through underground papers, freeform FM radio, and other counterculture media outlets. Time and Life magazines also ran with it, and soon legions of stoned hippies were poring over the Fab Four’s albums in search of clues about McCartney’s demise. It was all in good fun, but not everyone appreciated this kind of tomfoolery.
In the case of the Banana Hoax, some radicals even called it counter-revolutionary. Students for a Democratic Society president Todd Gitlin insisted that it was a politically misguided stunt that ignored the United Fruit Company’s unfair labor practices. “These circumstances come to mind,” he grumbled, “whenever bananas are flaunted with humor or symbolic meaning, as a means of liberation.” Although Gitlin did have a legitimate point, he was fighting an uphill battle. The ruptures produced by the gay and women’s liberation struggles, combined with the black power and antiwar movements, created multiple openings for irreverent tricksters. Many of them simply could not resist stirring it up—including a pair of computer nerds who embraced the counterculture’s worldview.

Before Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak built their first computer, they engineered pranks. Jobs started in elementary school, where he countered his boredom by making “Bring Your Pet to School Day” posters. “It was crazy,” he recalled, “with dogs chasing cats all over, and the teachers were beside themselves.” By the late 1960s, Jobs’s pranks were mostly technological in design, such as wiring his childhood home with hidden speakers and microphones to mess with his parents (they were not pleased). Jobs “likes to do pranks like you do,” a mutual friend told Wozniak, by way of introduction, “and he’s also into building electronics.” After becoming fast friends, Jobs and Wozniak targeted a graduation ceremony at Jobs’s Silicon Valley high school. Using ropes and pulleys, they planned to drop a bed sheet tie-dyed in the school’s colors—complete with a painting of a middle-finger salute and the words “Best Wishes.” (Alas, another student told on them.) Jobs said that it was “the banner prank that sealed our friendship.” Their pranking adventures continued after Woz created a device that could remotely screw up television reception. While in public spaces, like a dorm lobby, they would fill the screen with static—only to restore the picture once a frustrated viewer touched the television or made an awkward move. In doing so, the two Steves got their unwitting lab rats to contort themselves into human pretzels. Jobs said, laughing, “Just as they had the foot off the ground he would turn it back on, and as they put their foot back on the ground he’d screw it up again.” Wozniak recalls that a bunch of students watched “the second half hour of Mission: Impossible with the guy’s hand over the middle of the TV!”
Jobs and Wozniak transitioned into the world of hacking, a practice that is not unlike pranking. Hacking is often depicted as electronic breaking and entering, or cyber-terrorism, but this technique has a very different meaning in computing circles. It involves modifying software or hardware in a way that shows style, simplicity, creativity, and technical virtuosity. More generally, hacking can be defined as making a technology do things it wasn't originally designed to do. The term originated in the early 1960s at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where students messed around with computers and telephones (the latter pursuit is known as phone phreaking). Hacking has another important connotation. The Journal of the Institute for Hacks, TomFoolery & Pranks at MIT defines a hack as “a clever, benign, and ‘ethical’ prank or practical joke, which is both challenging for the perpetrators and amusing to the MIT community.” This might include covering the school’s giant dome with reflecting foil to make it look like R2D2 or placing a police car on top of it. “Hacks provide an opportunity to demonstrate creativity and know-how in mastering the physical world,” explains MIT alum André DeHon, now a University of Pennsylvania engineering professor. “An important component of many hacks is to help people see something in a different way, to give it a humorous, satirical, or poignant twist.” Another alum adds, “In their ideal form, hacks are a melding of art, inspiration, and engineering.”

Like pranking, hacking requires ingenuity and creative thinking—as well as a playful and rebellious attitude, which was certainly the case for Jobs and Wozniak. In the fall of 1971, Woz read an Esquire article about blue boxes, illicit devices that could hack the AT&T telephone network by using specific sounds. This mainstream magazine, with a readership of half a million readers, was the first to shine a light on the clandestine world of phone phreaking. Four decades later, Wozniak remains awestruck. “Who would ever believe you could put tones into a phone and make calls free anywhere in the world? I mean, who would believe it?” The duo’s very first business venture involved making and selling blue boxes (which Woz once used to make a prank call to the Vatican, almost getting the pope on the line). The pair marveled at how their homemade device could manipulate AT&T’s multibillion-dollar phone network. “I wanted to find out what the limits
of the telephone system were,” Woz says. “What were the limits of any system? I’ve found that for almost anybody who thinks well in digital electronics or computer programming, if you go back and look at their lives they’ll have these areas of misbehavior.” His comment highlights how mischief can remake media and, occasionally, transform an entire industry. “If it hadn’t been for the Blue Boxes, there wouldn’t have been an Apple,” Jobs said. “I’m 100% sure of that. Woz and I learned how to work together, and we gained the confidence that we could solve technical problems and actually put something into production.”

Though AT&T and the phone phreaks seemed worlds apart, they developed a mutually constitutive bond. This massive corporation provided a laboratory for hackers, whose illicit experiments pushed it to transition to a digital switching system that couldn’t be triggered by tones. AT&T rolled out this new technology in 1970, when phone phreaking was reaching a critical mass. Although the company claimed it would increase efficiency, hamstringing phone phreaks was a major motivation. This digital infrastructure eventually made it possible for computer modems to talk to each other over the telephone network, paving the way for a thing called the Internet. (Again, people don’t just make mischief with media; their mischief can also remake media in the process.) The spread of phone phreaking hinged on another dynamic: the convoluted interconnections that bind mainstream and alternative media and culture. That Esquire article drew many curious people into the phone-phreaking fold, and it also subtly influenced members of that subculture. They initially referred to themselves as freaks—with an f—but from then on these hackers proudly adopted Esquire’s spelling of phreaks. It was a feedback loop, sort of like how underground papers and establishment news media propelled the Banana Hoax into the pop-culture stratosphere. Cultural studies scholar Sarah Thornton argues that dichotomies such as subculture/mainstream do not do a good job of accurately describing the world, because social life is more complicated than simple binaries. Similarly, the distinctions between amateur and professional media makers tend to be overly exaggerated. Like mythological trickster figures, mischief makers in the material world constantly blur the borders between insider and outsider, center and margin.
Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin believed laughter has played an underrecognized role in steering history. When hilarity erupts, it can also interrupt the status quo. He claimed that the old feudal order wasn’t just brought down with cannonballs and Enlightenment thought but also by waves of uninhibited laughter. Medieval carnivals gave peasants the license to turn existing power relations upside down, if only for a day, by ridiculing kings and princes. Bakhtin noted that these festivities were marked by “a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.” They stood in stark contrast to the serious tone set by the ruling powers of Europe. “Besides carnivals proper, with their long, and complex pageants and processions,” Bakhtin writes, “there was the ‘feast of fools’ (festa stultorum) and the ‘feast of the ass.’” These raucous rituals occurred in all countries throughout Europe, creating an alternative space that thrived outside the official political and religious spheres.

Even Christmas had an early unruly incarnation. Although some Christians did piously observe this holiday and shunned the wild celebrations associated with it, those folks were few and far between. Late-December festivities took place for centuries, and they coincided with a moment of leisure and abundance that came with the end of the harvest. During this time of year, the social hierarchy was symbolically turned upside down. The lowly became “Masters of Misrule,” men dressed as women and vice versa, and children gained the status of their elders—who were ruthlessly mocked. At Christmastime, bands of boys and young men demanded food, drink, and goods from the rich, a tradition called Wassailing that continued into the modern era. In seventeenth-century New England, the holiday troubled religious leaders so much that they banned it entirely. Attention Fox News: the Puritans waged the first War on Christmas! Historian Stephen Nissenbaum notes, “when the Church, more than a millennium earlier, had placed Christmas Day in late December, the decision was part of what amounted to a compromise, and a compromise for which the Church paid a high price.” Folding a rowdy secular festival into this holy Christian holiday created serious headaches for religious authorities.
Despite the liberatory promise of medieval carnivals, they sometimes unleashed violent frustrations against Jews and other minority groups. These officially sanctioned subversions also functioned as instruments of social control (by letting people blow off a little steam before tensions exploded). Nevertheless, they did plant seeds that occasionally overturned the ruling order. As Lewis Hyde puts it, “Every so often Fat Tuesday does leak over into Lean Wednesday, and into the rest of the year as well.” In Germany, the ceremonial debasement of the pope helped lay the groundwork for the Reformation: “The ritual container broke, the pollution leaked out, and the Church itself was fundamentally altered.” It was the guffaw heard around the world, a reminder of media theorist Dick Hebdige’s claim that the “modern age was laughed into being.” Invoking Bakhtin, he writes, “The dust and the cobwebs, the angels and the devils, the necromancers and the priests, the barbaric inquisitions, the inflexible hierarchies, the sober, deadly serious ignorance of the medieval powers were blown away not by guns or great debates but by great gusts of belly laughter.”

Carnivalesque trickster figures—who appear in myths throughout the world, from Native American to Australian Aboriginal cultures—attack the things that society reveres most. The more sacred the belief, the more likely it will be profaned. Most trickster tales position a weak animal, such as a rabbit or monkey, against a physically powerful opponent. The prey becomes the hunter, and with mental jujitsu the king of the jungle can be knocked from his throne. Given the slave’s lowly position in American society, it’s no surprise that trickster tales such as those about Br’er Rabbit thrived in African American culture. These escapist fantasies made daily life slightly more bearable, and they offered practical models for resistance and survival (stealing food and other necessities were common themes). The escaped slave Henry “Box” Brown surely learned some valuable lessons from those stories. Brown secretly mailed himself from a Virginia plantation to Philadelphia’s freedom, then became a theatrical star in the North. He reenacted his escape in an elaborate one-man stage show, Mirror of Slavery, which functioned as both thrilling entertainment and artful propaganda for the abolitionist cause. Fleeing slavery in a shipping crate was an act of desperation, and not a prank, to be sure. Nevertheless, Brown’s unique form of edutainment aligned him with a long lineage
of political pranksters and trickster figures discussed throughout this book.20

During the 1960s, the counterculture perfected pranking as a form of progressive political action. In one infamous incident, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin tossed hundreds of dollar bills from the gallery overlooking the New York Stock Exchange. The white-collar workers became unwitting actors in this staged drama when they started diving for dollars (it stopped the stock ticker for a few minutes, costing millions in lost trading). During this Wall Street–Theater performance, the buttoned-down mob revealed the avarice that bubbled just beneath the Stock Exchange’s veneer of respectability. “Some stockies booed,” compatriot Ed Sanders recalled, “but others groveled on the floor like eels of greed to gather the cash.” Taking cues from the PR industry, the Yippies merrily used mass media to advertise alternative lifestyles, the peace movement, and other causes they held dear. The same was true of the radical feminist pranksters who founded WITCH. These women unnerved Mr. Jones and other squares by casting satirical hexes, wearing wicked costumes, and crashing bridal fairs.21

Two decades later, these tactics were adopted by ACT UP. This activist organization was founded in 1987 as a reaction to the pharmaceutical industry’s, government’s, and corporate media’s nonresponse to the AIDS crisis. Its members dispensed with conventional protest models by using novel, attention-getting tactics. ACT UP got a ton of press coverage after placing a gigantic yellow condom over the home of Senator Jesse Helms, who opposed public funding for safe-sex initiatives. At a different protest, police officers enacted their homophobia and hysteria over “catching AIDS” by wearing bright yellow rubber gloves during arrests. The activists spontaneously chanted, “Your gloves don’t match your shoes! You’ll see it on the news!”—a catchy hook that ensured it would be seen on the news. This sassy humor was also on display in ACT UP’s tradition of naming its subgroups. Echoing the feminists who founded WITCH, one splinter cell called itself CHER: Commie Homos Engaged in Revolution. Because the organization focused on issues of media representation, the New York Times was an early target. During one guerrilla sticker campaign, ACT UP members plastered the newspaper’s vending machines with the following message: “The New York Times AIDS REPORTING IS OUT OF
order." The last three words were prominent enough to discourage potential customers.22

In the twenty-first century, a decentralized collective named Anonymous has blurred the lines between hacking, pranking, and political protest. It uses inventive tactics to battle Internet censorship and other offenses perpetrated by corporations and governments. In 2011, Anonymous hacked the Syrian Defense Ministry website and replaced it with a flag associated with the country's prodemocracy movement. These hacktivists also took down the CIA's website for the better part of a day in 2012, which prompted a phone call between the FBI and Scotland Yard about how to take action. It turned out that Anonymous operatives were listening in, and they thumbed their noses at these agencies by releasing a recording of the conversation online. Their sophisticated programming skills allow them to trick computer networks into masking their activities so to remain, well, anonymous. That technique is aptly named "spoofing," and it has been used by many tech-savvy activists living under authoritarian regimes. Spoofing is one of many ways hackers have rewired the architecture of the Internet, or at least found cracks in the system that its designers were blind to.23

Pranks have their downsides, the most obvious of which are the dangers involved in baiting an unsympathetic audience. They require courage to pull off, especially in the face of hostile taunts and threats of physical violence—which shows how these provocations can tear at the social fabric. Another risk is losing control of how one's message is interpreted by the public, but there are ways of mitigating uncertainty after the prank's "big reveal." It is not enough to make people laugh or outrage them (though, admittedly, that can also be fun!). After the initial shock wears off, the next step is to explain the prank's purpose for as wide or—alternatively, specific—a public as possible. There needs to be an educational component, and this book is an extension of that oddball pedagogy. I hope to give you, dear reader, some conceptual gizmos to add to your critical-thinking toolkit. "I like to think people will learn something from my hijinks," pioneering prankster Alan Abel wrote in his 1970 book Confessions of a Hoaxer. "Because the next time around, their hoaxer might truly be diabolical and rob them of things far more important and meaningful." Abel is warning about everyone from underworld con artists to trusted authority figures of all stripes.24
Despite the productive potential of prankish tactics, they have been condemned on several fronts. In the book *Reclaiming Fair Use*, media and legal scholars Patricia Aufderheide and Peter Jaszi criticize copyleft activists, culture jammers, and others who gravitate toward monkey-wrenching and monkeyshines. More specifically, they describe and then dismiss the previously mentioned “freedom of expression” prank as being counterproductive. After conceding that my “antics did indeed provide a broad-brush critique,” Aufderheide and Jaszi claim that the prank also undermined possibilities for pragmatic reform. I would totally agree with them had I merely basked in the publicity surrounding the fake lawsuit, but that was just the beginning. In the wake of the coverage, I explained myself to a general audience whose eyes would normally glaze over during discussions of the free-speech implications of intellectual property law. It’s a trick I picked up as a teacher: finding creative ways to engage people with ideas that might at first seem “boring.” When working for change, a range of approaches is useful. That is more interesting than adhering to a programmatic One True Way ethic. For instance, the Old Left’s stoic denial of pleasure was inherited to a certain extent by the sixties New Left, which was sometimes at odds with the Yippies, Merry Pranksters, and other Groucho Marxists.25

The Full Spectrum of Trickery

By upsetting the apple cart, pranksters aspire to change the world—or at least to inspire visions of a better one. But even though I have a keen interest in critique and social change, *Pranksters* digs deep into the darker sides of deception. The origins of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for instance, highlight the disturbing ways trickery has shaped modern history. The causes of the Jewish Holocaust are complex, but *The Protocols* helped provide its social, ethical, and (a)historical justifications. And to be clear, this forged document does not count as a prank—which, as I have defined it, is a staged provocation meant to enlighten and stir up debate. A *hoax* is a kissing cousin of a prank, but its primary purpose is to fool people and attract attention. Lastly, I use *con* as an all-purpose term for a wide range of scams meant to defraud or gain an advantage. They all use similar methods to mislead, but the main difference lies in the perpetrator’s intentions and the audience’s
interpretations. Further complicating matters, mischief makers often have multiple motives, which was certainly true of Benjamin Franklin’s attack on Titan Leeds. Yes, he tried to educate the public by lampooning irrational astrological beliefs, but it was mostly a publicity stunt used to drum up almanac sales. To flesh out these differences, I’ll preview some of the key stories and themes that run through this book.

Pranks

Chapter 1 begins with a provocation that had unintended, earthshaking consequences. In the early seventeenth century, a small group of radical Protestants invented an “Invisible College” of mystical adepts known as the Rosicrucians. Their prank was meant to spur a public debate about scientific and theological ideas that the Catholic Church vehemently opposed. But in doing so, their fabricated fictions ended up fueling four centuries of paranoia—including the mother of all conspiracy theories, the Illuminati myth (which I’ll return to shortly). Keeping with the book’s chronological organization, I follow that account with a profile of the first prominent practitioner of the modern prank: Jonathan Swift. The early eighteenth century witnessed a revival of the classical tradition of satire and the rise of print culture, which multiplied the scope and size of audiences that could be duped and/or entertained. The boundary-breaking transgressions of pranksters and hoaxers shaped the popular culture of that period, which is why Benjamin Franklin holds a prominent place in this trickstory. He was an independent media pioneer whose do-it-yourself (DIY) style and shape-shifting persona created a template used by generations of pranksters, hoaxers, and confidence men.

Léo Taxil was one of the most notorious pranksters of the nineteenth century, though he is largely forgotten today. Starting in 1885, he posed as a whistleblower who uncovered satanic Masonic secrets for an audience of credulous French Catholics. Taxil invented his stories out of thin air, but they were still believed by conservatives who hated Freemasons—an organization of freethinkers that had a history of annoying the Vatican. After staying in character for a dozen years, he came clean at an 1897 Paris press conference. After “the sweet pleasure of pranking took over,” Taxil told the assembled clergymen and reporters,
he decided to stage “an altogether amusing and instructive mystification.” Like Benjamin Franklin, Taxil had multiple motives. Despite the “instructive” aspect of his prank, he also made a ton of money selling anti-Freemasonry books and pamphlets that were filled with hallucinogenic lies. Taxil’s right-wing audience lapped up his tales about teleportation, magical bracelets used to summon Lucifer, and a worldwide telephone system operated by devils. This imaginary communication network was allegedly used to carry out a global plot to destroy all established religions and create a one-world government. Despite being revealed as fabrications over a century ago, many of Taxil’s writings (or at least recycled versions of them) continue to be cited by contemporary conspiracy theorists.26

**Hoaxes**

Hoaxes resemble pranks, but the key difference is the perpetrator’s intentions. For pranksters, trickery is a means to an end: prompting discussion, upending the naturalized rituals of everyday life, enraging and educating, and so on. Hoaxers have no such pretensions. For them, the goal is to make others look foolish or to seek fame. The latter was likely true for George Psalmanazar, who took London by storm upon his arrival in 1703. This blond, blue-eyed man said he was a native of an Asian country named Formosa, and he explained away his pale features by claiming to be part of the upper class. The island’s elites lived in elaborate underground apartments, Psalmanazar said, while the dark-skinned working class slaved away aboveground, baking in the heat. Ridiculous? Sure. But rather than dismissing those who fall for pranks and hoaxes as dumb dupes, it’s more useful to understand why certain tricks work. A successful deception tells us much about the culture or people who embraced it. In Psalmanazar’s case, prevailing assumptions about race and skin pigmentation allowed this Aryan to pass as an Asian. It also didn’t hurt that his backstory had an antipapist spin, which involved being kidnapped by treacherous Jesuit missionaries. (The Catholic world, particularly France, was in the midst of a raging battle with Protestantism and, by default, England.)

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, newspaper hoaxes thrived. Most famous was 1835’s *New York Sun* Moon Hoax
(“POWERFUL TELESCOPE DISCOVERS LUNAR BAT-MEN!”) and the New York Herald’s Central Park Zoo Hoax of 1874 (“BEASTS BLUDGEON BYSTANDERS ON BROADWAY!”). Less well known is the devious etymological origin of the term miscegenation. In late 1863, two racist New York journalists invented the word to undermine Abraham Lincoln’s election campaign. It first appeared in an irony-filled pamphlet titled Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro. This supposed proabolition publication was explicitly engineered to outrage white supremacists (think Stephen Colbert, if he were a raging bigot who sarcastically “praised” race mixing). Newspapers regularly printed straight news alongside hoaxes and tall tales until the early twentieth century, when this brand of mischief making largely came to an end. Satirists such as Mark Twain, who hatched several surreal hoaxes as a newspaper writer, forced the industry to more clearly define the limits of journalism. New standards of professionalism moved these playful styles of writing to the proverbial margins of the paper or eliminated them altogether.

Cons

In the second half of the nineteenth century, P. T. Barnum built a hugely successful business that blurred the line between good-natured publicity stunts and devious confidence games. His traveling shows and Manhattan-based American Museum captivated crowds with a variety of far-fetched curiosities, including an alleged mermaid. The master humbugger’s mid-nineteenth-century popularity coincided with the emergence of confidence men who preyed on newly relocated big-city suckers. During this time, a criminal character named William Thompson roamed the streets of New York asking strangers if they had enough trust in him to loan their watch for a day. He then walked off, goods in hand, laughing. Thompson was playing a game of confidence, and the gullible were the losers. This naiveté had much to do with the fact that an increasing number of Americans were moving away from rural areas, where reputations were built and maintained within a tight-knit community. In urban settings, surface appearances were often used to judge a stranger’s character. As cultural historian Karen Halttunen has shown, the American middle class wanted to believe that respectable
exterior displays were projections of wholesome interiors. In this context, sharply dressed and well-mannered con men could easily relieve trusting victims of their possessions.27

P. T. Barnum’s humbugs were popular because they helped spectators navigate an unruly capitalist marketplace: misleading advertising claims, real-estate frauds, and all. Barnum biographer Neil Harris notes that many of those who bought tickets to his exhibits fully expected to be hoodwinked. Much of the entertainment value was derived from analyzing and deconstructing the deception. “The public appears disposed to be amused,” the showman observed, “even when they are conscious of being deceived.” His enteaniments functioned like an elaborate discursive game that encouraged people to spiritedly hash out arguments about social, technological, and economic transformations that were taking place in America. Audiences learned to make up their own minds about the veracity of Barnum’s displays, a skill that became useful in everyday life. But even though he claimed to be sharpening his customers’ wits, which is a key goal of pranks, that was merely a happy byproduct of his profitable amusements. In that regard, Barnum falls somewhere between a prankster, a hoaxer, and a con man—one whose spirit still haunts today’s media and entertainment landscapes.28

And Don’t Forget Self-Deception

As I suggested earlier, in order for audiences to be fooled by a prank, hoax, or con, it should resonate with one’s deep-seated assumptions about how the world works. This is also true of conspiracy theories, which are similarly rooted in fantasy, ideology, and myth (concepts that are not necessarily interchangeable but that still overlap). These paranoid fictions spring to life when a tooth-chipping kernel of truth is elaborated on by religious fanatics, political partisans, devious fakers, attention seekers, the mentally ill, or all of the above. Conspiracy theories are often organized around an impossibly perfect model of communication. Plots are flawlessly executed over the centuries and across the globe, letters always arrive, transmissions are clearly understood, and there is no chance of plans going awry. This is not how life works, but imagination is a powerful thing. The West’s most resilient conspiracy theory can be traced back to 1614, the year of the previously mentioned...
Rosicrucian prank. This “Invisible Brotherhood” created the blueprint for a paranoid worldview that is centered around an ancient satanic plot to create a New World Order. This grand narrative was cemented after the French Revolution, which destabilized that country’s traditional religious and political powers. Many conservatives believed that a subversive secret society named the Bavarian Illuminati was pulling the strings.

The religious right was also freaked out by Spiritualism, a quasi-religion that resonated with millions of people starting in the mid-nineteenth century. Cynics dismissed it as a hoax, but Spiritualism was deeply felt by believers—making it more of a fantasy than a straight-up hoax or con job. Women occupied leadership positions within this progressive movement because they were said to be sensitive to signals from the dead. The dream of spirit communication, which was inspired in part by the newly invented telegraph, helped promote feminism on both sides of the Atlantic. It also left an imprint on a twentieth-century mystic named Edgar Cayce. “The Miracle Man of Virginia Beach,” as he was dubbed, turned clairvoyance, channeling, past lives, and meditation into household words. He was a pivotal figure who deeply influenced the 1960s counterculture, and its adversaries. “The Edgar Cayce Foundation was making a big play for the minds of people,” fretted televangelist Pat Robertson, who also lived in Virginia Beach. “People were calling in from all over Tidewater pleading with us to pray because their loved ones were being caught up in séances and occult groups. The whole area was rife with Satan’s power.” Robertson is merely one in a long line of preachers who railed against devilish secret societies. In the late 1700s, a New England minister named Jedediah Morse caused a moral panic by claiming that the Bavarian Illuminati had infiltrated America. Samuel F. B. Morse followed in his father’s footsteps by writing two books of conspiracy theory before inventing the telegraph (which, ironically, indirectly ignited the Spiritualist movement).²⁹

In the 1960s, irreverent figures such as Church of Satan founder Anton LaVey pulled pranks and publicity stunts that fanned the flames of Illuminatiphobia. “The High Priest of the Church of Satan” was a former carny who freaked out his ideological opponents by staging events such as the “Satanic Baptism” of his young daughter. This Barnumesque showman had a knack for the spectacular, and he was well aware that
sex sells. For instance, his “Satan Wants You” promotional posters featured LaVey in a horned, black, pajama-like costume while pointing at the viewer, à la Uncle Sam (albeit with a buxom naked woman draped on an altar behind him). The existence of a radical feminist organization cheekily named WITCH also confirmed in the minds of religious conservatives that occult villains were the driving force behind that decade’s social upheavals. A ragtag group named the Discordians stirred up even more trouble. They worshiped the goddess of chaos, made fun of organized religion, and satirized what historian Richard Hofstadter calls the “paranoid style in American politics.” Among other things, these Discordian prophets mailed comical letters on Bavarian Illuminati letterhead to evangelical churches and organizations such as the Christian Anti-Communism Crusade.30

These sorts of impish acts triggered some serious prank blowback after their satires were misinterpreted by concerned conservatives. (One person’s humor can be another’s horror.) As a result, the religious right soon began pushing back against many of the sixties’ progressive advances. Mainstream media also stirred this movement into existence after esoteric ideas reached millions of people through popular culture. The Beatles placed Aleister Crowley on the cover of Sgt. Pepper, the Rolling Stones had a huge hit with “Sympathy for the Devil,” and sensational news reports regularly linked hippies with Satanism. Television pumped out lighthearted occult sitcoms such as Bewitched, I Dream of Jeanie, The Munsters, and The Addams Family, as well as the bleaker Outer Limits, Twilight Zone, and Dark Shadows. Rosemary’s Baby and other Hollywood films also popularized symbols that later resurfaced in the “recovered” memories of alleged ritual-abuse survivors. The devilish connotations of 666, for instance, were not widely recognized until its prominent use as a plot device in the 1970s Omen movies and their advertising campaigns.31

Conservative independent media, anchored by the John Birch Society’s vast publishing arm, distilled those pop-culture fantasies into chilling narratives. Churches also served as communication hubs by spreading these stories through Sunday sermons and word-of-mouth gossip. Others, such as Pat Robertson, fought Spiritualist mediums with electrified media. For over half a century, he used his Christian Broadcasting Network to call out the Illuminati, Satanists, One Worlders, and other...
conspirators. Fundamentalists have often been caricatured as antimodern, despite being early adopters of most every new medium that has come along (from tent revivals, radio, and television to mimeograph machines, roadside billboards, and online bulletin boards). Alternative media regularly gets framed as a liberal project, leading many people to ignore the influence of right-wing indie media. This is a huge oversight. Its existence helps explain why such a cohesive set of beliefs—centered around mystical, evil elites who steer world events—have remained so consistent throughout the modern era. Former vice president Dan Quayle expressed this conspiracy-steeped anxiety when discussing the Russian mystic Grigori Rasputin: “People that are really very weird can get into sensitive positions and have a tremendous impact on history.”

These fears climaxed in the 1980s during the Satanic Panics, when heavy metal, Dungeons & Dragons, and other nefarious pop-culture staples became sources of hysteria. Worries about Satanism largely subsided by the 1990s, only to be replaced by Illuminatiophobia. Pat Robertson and *Left Behind* coauthor Tim LaHaye implicated a web of secret societies, liberal elites, and United Nations technocrats in a plot to establish a godless global government. New World Order conspiracy theories bred like bionic bunnies on the newly emerging Internet, multiplying further in the Age of Obama. Tea Party foot soldiers railed against manipulative social scientists, shouted from the rooftops about the UN and the Federal Reserve, and obsessed over Rockefeller elites and Rothschild bankers. After Barack Hussein Obama became president, “Say No to the Social Engineers!” became an unlikely but winning Tea Party election slogan. Although Congressman Ron Paul put a less unhinged spin on these notions, he still earned legions of conspiracy-theory fanboys by warning of a coming global currency and plans for a multilane “NAFTA Superhighway.” This worldview seemed to erupt from nowhere, but it had been incubating for years—even though it was built on a house of cards, drawn from a deck full of jokers.