BBC’s 1957 April Fool’s “spaghetti-tree hoax” is more relevant than ever

reader comments

75 with 49 posters participating

Share this story

[embedded content]
The BBC’s *Panorama* program spoofed the UK on April 1, 1957, with a segment on the so-called “spaghetti tree hoax.”
We here at Ars do not typically indulge in the online prankery that comes with April Fool’s Day and are even less inclined to do so in the current climate. But it does provide an opportunity to revisit one of the most famous media hoaxes of the 20th century: the so-called “spaghetti-tree hoax,” the result of a two-and-a-half-minute prank segment broadcast on the BBC’s *Panorama* current-affairs program on April Fool’s Day in 1957. It’s a fun, albeit cautionary, tale of not believing everything you see on television (or read online).

The man largely responsible for the hoax was Austrian-born *Panorama* cameraman Charles de Jaeger, who liked to play practical jokes. As a kid, one of his school teachers used to tell the class, “Boys, you’re so stupid, you’d believe me if I told you that spaghetti grows on trees.” De Jaeger had always wanted to turn this into an April Fool’s prank, and in 1957, he saw his chance. April Fool’s Day fell on a Monday, the same night *Panorama* aired. He argued that he could do the shoot cheaply while working on another assignment in Switzerland,

and *Panorama* editor Michael Peacock approved a tiny budget of £100 for the project.

The sequence was shot at a hotel in Castiglione on the shore of Lake Lugano. De Jaeger bought 20 pounds of uncooked homemade spaghetti and hung the strands from the branches of the laurel trees around the lake to make it seem like they were “spaghetti trees.” (Cooked spaghetti just slipped off the branches. De Jaeger had to keep the uncooked fresh spaghetti between damp cloths before shooting to ensure it didn’t dry out.)

Then he hired local women to dress in the Swiss national costume and pretend to “harvest” the spaghetti, filling wicker baskets and then placing the strands out in the sun to “dry.” All the actors were rewarded with a spaghetti feast, which also became part of the final segment.

- Setting up the cameras.
- Local women were hired to pretend to “harvest” the spaghetti.
  YouTube/BBC
- An early spring, viewers were told, resulted in a bumper crop.
  YouTube/BBC
- “There’s nothing like real home-grown spaghetti.”
- “After picking, the spaghetti is laid out to dry in the warm Alpine air.”
  YouTube/BBC
- The hoax was covered by local newspapers.
  YouTube/BBC
- *Panorama* editor Michael Peacock reminisces about the famous hoax.
  YouTube/BBC

Most accounts of the hoax point out that in the 1950s, spaghetti was still a fairly exotic food in the UK, as an

explanation for why audiences proved so gullible. But *Panorama* anchor Richard Dimbleby deserved a chunk of the credit for making the segment work. He was a revered and trusted public figure, sort of the Richard Attenborough of the 1950s, with "enough gravitas to float an aircraft carrier," per *Panorama*'s producer, David Wheeler.

So when he authoritatively informed viewers that spaghetti trees were experiencing a bumper crop that year because of an early spring and "the virtual disappearance of the spaghetti weevil," viewers were inclined to believe him, despite Dimbleby pointedly noting the date as he signed off. I particularly love this bit from the script:

> *After picking, the spaghetti is laid out to dry in the warm Alpine air. Many people are very puzzled by the fact that spaghetti is produced in such uniform lengths. This is the result of many years of patient endeavor by plant breeders who succeeded in producing the perfect spaghetti.*

Peacock hadn't told his superiors at the BBC that the prank segment was going to air, lest they nix the idea. So the public broadcaster was not prepared for the immediate flood of calls from viewers. Some caught on to the joke, but according to the BBC's Leonard Miall, "Mainly the calls were requests for the BBC to settle family arguments: the husband knew it must be true that spaghetti grew on a bush because Richard Dimbleby had said so, and the wife knew it was made with flour and water, but neither could convince the other." A few wanted to know where they could get their own spaghetti tree. BBC operators were told to respond, "Place a sprig of spaghetti in a tin of tomato sauce and hope for the best."

> *"I think it was a good idea for people to be aware they couldn't believe everything they saw on the television."*

The BBC's own director-general, Sir Ian Jacob, was taken in—at least at first. He and his wife tried to look it up in the

Encyclopedia Britannica, only to discover that the encyclopedia at the time didn't even mention spaghetti. "The spaghetti harvest was a splendid idea, beautifully shot and organized," he later wrote to De Jaeger. "This item has caused a great deal of delight, one way and another."

The BBC came in for a fair bit of criticism for its decision to air a prank segment at the end of an otherwise serious news program. But Wheeler, who wrote the script, remained unrepentant, telling the BBC in 2004, "I think it was a good idea for people to be aware they couldn't believe everything they saw on the television and that they ought to adopt a slightly critical attitude to it."

The world has changed a lot since 1957, and the rapid spread of misinformation across the Internet, especially via social media, means more people than ever are exposed to pranks, hoaxes, conspiracy theories, and outright lies on a daily basis. In the midst of a pandemic, that can cost lives. There's now a valid argument to be made that perhaps serious news outlets shouldn't indulge in such pranks at all, even if it spoils the fun for April Fool's fans. In that respect, the lessons of the spaghetti tree hoax are more relevant than ever.

Listing image by YouTube/BBC

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1664768