

When Urban Legends Meet the Internet...

Susceptibility to Stories Results in Net Losses

By Craig "Hackin Boo" Harrison

It's a fact we're story lovers. Put another way, we're suckers for a good story. And that's usually a good thing. It's why we attend story concerts, story festivals and story conferences.

Yet there are other times our fondness for stories makes us susceptible to canards and fraud, deception and trickery. A case in point: bogus e-mails.

Every day new users enter the cyberworld, green and susceptible to ruses, scams and various false promises. For neophytes and veterans alike, there's nothing that draws us in like stories. So please, let me alert you to a few apocryphal stories you will likely encounter on the 'net so when they next arrive in your in-box you'll see them for what they really are. Some prey on our sympathies, others on our fears. Still others entice us through an appeal to our own greed.

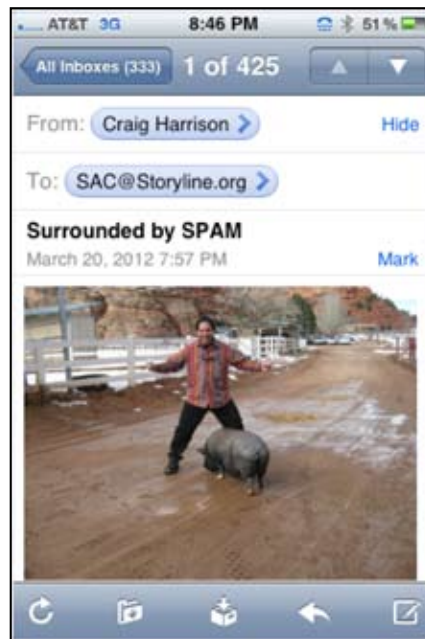
Will The Chain Letter Be Unbroken

The little boy dying of cancer in England is no longer either. (Well, we believe he's still in England.) In 1989, a 9-year-old British boy, Craig Shergold, was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. To cheer him up, people close to Craig came up with a sweet idea: a campaign soliciting get well cards from the public in hopes of landing his name in the Guinness Book of World Records.

<http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/errata/a/craig_shergold.htm>

The campaign went swimmingly. A chain letter started by Craig's friends and relatives netted well over a million cards in under a year, and he won the world record handily. But in 2012 the cards still arrive! To date the now 22-year old has received over 350 million!

We'd all like to think our e-mail or card makes a difference in someone's life. We love stories of triumph and success. It's just too good not to forward. But please don't!



Spilling the Beans on Kidney Theft Ring

Sorry. There is no kidney theft ring in New Orleans (or Las Vegas or Houston or Antioch). In a nutshell, here's the story: An unsuspecting

tourist was drugged in his hotel room by a prostitute and woke up the next morning, supposedly, in a bathtub full of ice, minus a kidney. And they're on the loose, and they're coming to your city too, looking for more victims. GREAT story. It has colorful characters and a tragic surprise. And, it's bogus. Want corroboration? Click here: http://urbanlegends.about.com/od/horrors/a/kidney_thieves.htm

This one has been around since the late 90s. Sure, your friend's cousin swears it's true. Yet the National Kidney Foundation has repeatedly issued requests for actual victims of organ thieves to come forward and tell their stories. None have. That's "none," as in "ZERO". "Nada!" Not even your friend's cousin Zed.

This cautionary tale undoubtedly keeps married partners loyal to their spouses on the road. But it's a tall tale.

A Nigerian Story of Universal Appeal

One popular scam story predates the Internet. Called the Nigerian hoax, it may come from any country and refer to any country's customs. And these days, the scam is not always betrayed by poor writing and punctuation.

In short, an unsolicited e-mail arrives masquerading as some manner of business proposition, request for assistance, notice of a potential inheritance, or opportunity to help a

Beware Sir Spamalot!

charity. (There is a seemingly endless array of cover stories scammers use in order to draw potential victims into the con.) The messages all claim that your help is needed to access a large sum of money, usually many millions of dollars.

They offer to let you keep a significant percentage of the funds in question in exchange for your assistance. Once you take the bait, and initiate a dialogue with the scammers, he or she will soon receive requests for “fees” that the scammer claims are necessary for processing costs, tax and legal fees, or bribes to local officials.

What story lover isn't drawn to the pot of gold, the hidden treasure to be shared? This story, like many, sounds too good to be true because it is. It's fueled by greed. And it's bogus. Don't send money!

The \$250 Cookie Recipe

Perhaps you've heard the revenge story of the mother and daughter who loved the cookies in a Neiman Marcus restaurant so much they asked, at meal's end, for the recipe. Told they had to buy it and it cost “250,” they were shocked when it showed up on their charge card statement as \$250. So they decided to give it away to everyone!

Cute story, but it's bogus. Neiman Marcus doesn't sell a \$200 cookie recipe. Truth be told, the recipe ain't all that! See for yourself: www.bl.net/forwards/cookie.html. If you need a recipe, you're better off with Craig's Eggnog recipe, AKA CraigNog: <http://bit.ly/CraigNog>

Viruses That Go Viral

There is no “Good Times” virus. Yet, like a good story, we just can't resist forwarding it to others when it arrives in our e-mail's in-box. You should

never, ever, ever forward any e-mail containing any virus warning unless you first confirm it at an actual site of an actual company that actually deals with virii. Try: www.symantec.com/avcenter/hoax.html and even then, don't forward it. We already received 10 copies from other BASF committee members.

The Big Company Chain Letter

Intel and Microsoft do not do business via chain letters (where if you e-mail their message to 10 of your closest friends to send to their 10 closest friends...) they will give computers to your local school in need). So NO, Disney will not award you a free vacation for your forwarding their e-mail to 99 of your best friends.

And on this subject, I regret to inform you no baby food maker will be issuing class action checks. There's no need to pass it on “just in case” it's true. We know a close friend of your brother-in-law, twice removed, swears its true and checked it out on Snopes.com.

We want to believe in Santa Claus. We want to believe big companies will perform good deeds for those in need. It tugs at our hearts. That's what compelling stories do. But no, it ain't so.

Friends in Faraway Places...

Please Send Money

One of the most believable hoaxes appears to arrive via e-mail from a friend of yours. It bears his or her e-mail address and asks for your urgent help. They've lost their wallet or purse overseas and need you to send money via wire transfer.

Alas, it's a fake. They've hacked your e-mail address book and aren't who they say they are. It's best to simply call your friend first to confirm their situation.

Bright Lights, Big City

Another story circulating through e-mail around the world suggests that if you're driving at night and see a car without its lights on, flashing yours or beeping your horn could trigger a youth gang initiation ritual whereby they follow your car and shoot you!

Instead of being pursued by a fire-breathing dragon you, the Good Samaritan, may be accosted by a two-ton missile on four wheels. Alas, it's another urban legend.

We're All Hicks For Hoaxes

Space doesn't permit me to list all the categories of story hoaxes found on the 'net. There are dating scams, lottery scams, phony petitions, celebrity hoaxes and more. And the most compelling ones utilize touching stories to draw us in, tug at our heartstrings and prey on our humanity. Lest I leave you more cynical than I found you, rest assured that there are sites to help you verify what's legit and what's not. When in doubt, check these:

<http://snopes.com/>

<http://www.foax-slayer.com>

http://www.symantec.com/security_response/

And this is how we will live happily ever after!



Craig “Hackin’ ‘Boo” Harrison thanks you in advance for checking the legitimacy of e-mail warnings before forwarding them to other committee members. Otherwise, e-mail Craig@HackinBoo.com for a personalized response.

Note: Craig wrote this article, in part, based on an email he read on...the Internet.