

Urban Legends & Internet Hoaxes

The Disinformation Superhighway

Heard about the free pair of shoes Nike will send you -- if you send them a used pair for recycling?

What about Gerber Products, the baby-food maker, settling a class-action lawsuit by giving a \$500 savings bond to every child born between 1985 and 1997?

How about the guy who was slipped a mickey in a bar, woke up covered with ice in a hotel bathtub and found that his kidneys had been removed to be sold on the black market?

You couldn't have missed the Good Times or Pen Pals computer viruses, that will erase all the files on your hard drive if you read email with those subject lines.

These are all hoaxes. Welcome to the Disinformation Superhighway.

Hoaxes Are Nothing New

Hoaxes have been circulating via email and USENET newsgroups since these services began. Some experts estimate that at times half of all email traffic in some areas is comprised of resends of popular hoax messages -- especially those that request prayers for dying children, free clothes and software from name-brand vendors, and warnings of imminent computer virus attack.

Hoaxes are spread quickly by well-meaning readers who don't know that they're being duped, usually by a young kid who's getting a kick out of seeing how many copies of his message are being sent around the world.

And the number of copies can be staggering. The Good Times virus hoax has been around since December '94. Since then, tens of millions of copies of the message have been retransmitted.

Stop & Think Before You Forward

Internet Email and newsgroups are great sources of valuable information—but they're also dumping grounds for useless drivel. Before you forward that next virus warning or humanitarian request, be a little cynical. Does this *really* ring true? Was the originator just a *little too emphatic*?

Sample Hoaxes

FREE GAP CLOTHS - FOR REAL!!!

Abercrombie & Fitch have recently merged to form the largest hottie outfitter company in the world! In an effort to remain at pace with this giant, the GAP has introduced a new e-mail tracking system to determine who has the most loyal followers. This e-mail is a beta test of the new clothing line and GAP has generously offered to compensate those who participate in the testing process.

For each person you send this email to, you will be given a pair of cargo pants. For every person they give it to, you will be given an additional Hawaiian print T-shirt, for every person they send it to, you will receive a fishermans hat! Yadda yadda yadda...

Good Times

Apparently, a new computer virus has been engineered by a user of America Online that is unparalleled in its destructive capability. Other, more well-known viruses such as Stoned, Airwolf, and Michaelangelo pale in comparison to the prospects of this newest creation by a warped mentality. What makes this virus so terrifying is the fact that no program needs to be exchanged for a new computer to be infected. It can be spread through the existing e-mail systems of the InterNet.

Luckily, there is one sure means of detecting what is now known as the "Good Times" virus. It always travels to new computers the same way - in a text e-mail message with the subject line reading simply "Good Times". Avoiding infection is easy once the file has been received - not reading it. The act of loading the file into the mail server's ASCII buffer causes the "Good Times" mainline program to initialize and execute. Yadda yadda yadda...

Where To Get Help

The next time you get a request for prayers or a virus warning, do a little checking to see if the message has been reported as a hoax.

Damar Group has created an anti-hoax webpage. I'll keep it up to date with references to reputable hoax debunking websites: dgl.com/docs/hoax.html

If you'd like to discuss hoaxes or other Internet-related topics, including e-commerce opportunities, feel free to call me at 410.290.7000 or drop me a note at dave@dgl.com.

