

Email Fact or Fiction: Getting It Right

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Have you ever received an email that:

- Warned you about the danger of using your cell phone near a gasoline pump?
- Told you that a particular political candidate single-handedly destroyed the vaccine industry through a frivolous lawsuit?
- Offered you money from Bill Gates for forwarding a message to all of your friends and colleagues?
- Told you to boycott a large coffee chain because they don't support the troops?

The odds are that you've received many of these messages from well-intentioned friends or business associates. The amazing thing about them is that they're all false. In addition to wasting millions of hours of our precious time, forwarding bogus emails harms our personal reputations while rapidly spreading harmful misinformation throughout the world in record time. To be blunt – you end up looking dumb, getting less done, and the liars win.

Fortunately, the team that brought you the hit book: *The Hamster Revolution: How to Manage Your Email Before It Manages You* (Berrett-Koehler, 2007, \$19.95) has compiled a list of fact-checking sites that you can use to turn the tables on the fakers.

But first, it's important to understand some of the newer, more insidious tactics being used by cyber scam artists. One tactic is to create a political, religious, or social rant and attribute it to a celebrity like George Carlin, Robin Williams, or Andy Rooney. Adding a trusted name gives a hoax email a better chance to spread virally throughout cyberspace. Another tactic is to describe exaggerated evil behavior without describing the evil-doer until the very end of the message. Usually key facts are carefully omitted. This tactic is designed to stoke your anger so that when you finally discover that message is about George Bush or Hillary Clinton – you're more likely to change your opinion or vote. In my experience 75% of these messages are false. Perhaps the cruelest technique is to play upon your good nature. A message and picture of poor little Penny Brown – an abducted child - was circulated by millions of heart-sick emailers. The only problem -- Penny Brown is a complete fabrication.

Fight Back: So what can you do? First, you can be wary of any message that blames all of the world's problems on one person or group of people. If the message appeals to your sense of what actually is wrong in the world – ask this question: Is it too good to be true? Could that person or company really be so completely evil? Would creating a false story benefit some person or group? Am I being manipulated? Are people playing on my good nature?

Next, take 30 seconds and visit a *fact-checking website* like the ones listed below. We can tell you from personal experience that it feels good to expose a hoax or scam – especially when you see all of the people on the distribution list who blindly forwarded it to their entire address book! Finally, make sure that you respond politely to the sender with a link to a fact-checking site or better yet – this report. They will be embarrassed but at least you’ve helped them control the damage to their reputations in the future. Remember, the world will be a better place if we all embrace the truth.

Fact Checking Websites Recommended by The Hamster Revolution Team

General Scams and Hoaxes

www.snopes.com – “Snopes” focuses on email hoaxes. You can read carefully researched analyses of just about any popular email message floating around the web. Urban legends, political myths, folklore, and plain old misinformation are carefully taken to task by the Snopes.com team. Snopes is a grass roots effort by Barbara and David P. Mikkelson that is supported by some advertising revenue.

www.about.com: A commercial “portal” which features a search engine and a number of general channels like religion and business. Good, solid well-researched information. About.com also has a helpful urban legends and folklore section. Just go to About.com and search for ‘urban legends’. It’s a good alternative to Snopes.

www.truthorfiction.com: Internet users can quickly and easily get information about eRumors, warnings, offers, requests for help, myths, hoaxes, virus warnings, and humorous or inspirational stories that are circulated by email.

Healthcare Info

www.medlineplus.gov : A service of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. Pre-formulated MEDLINE searches are included in MedlinePlus and give easy access to medical journal articles. MedlinePlus also has extensive information about drugs, an illustrated medical encyclopedia, interactive patient tutorials, and latest health news. Before you buy into the latest healthcare fad, experimental surgery, herbal miracle cure, or drug company claim – take a moment to surf this non-commercial government site.

www.webmd.com: Provides a very contemporary and comprehensive commercial site on health issues that is supported by sponsor revenues. The sponsors are unobtrusive and are listed as links at the bottom of the page. The information appears to be well-researched by medical professionals but keep in mind that you check with your doctor before making any major changes to your healthcare regimen.

Political Fact and Fiction

Note: Some political fact checking sites can have a political orientation. We recommend reading several of them to get a broader bi-partisan view of politics.

www.factcheck.org: This site claims to be a non-partisan, nonprofit, "consumer advocate" for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. They monitor "TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews, and news releases." They strive to provide an ethically and politically balanced view of the political world.

www.cjrdaily.org: According to their website, CJR Daily is a real-time critique of journalism and a continuing discussion and analysis of where journalism is as a craft and a business, and where it's going. Operating under the auspices of the Columbia Journalism Review, the focus is on three areas: political journalism; the larger forces -- political, economic, technological, social, legal -- that affect journalism; and the business and financial press. (Politics)

Disclaimer: We present these websites for you as a convenience that you have asked for. We do not represent these sites in anyway. These are not "sponsors" of Cohesive Knowledge Solutions or the authors of The Hamster Revolution. Even though we have found these websites helpful in discerning the truth, they are not perfect and we cannot be held liable for any actions taken as a result of visiting these sites.