

Technology Corner
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E-Mail and Urban Legends

Urban legends have existed throughout history, but now the primary method of distribution is through e-mail. An urban legend is a story that appears mysteriously, is presented as true, spreads spontaneously in various forms, and is usually false. Urban legends often involve stories that are guaranteed to get an immediate gut-level reaction from the reader, for example race, gender, pets, or children. Unlike phishing attacks, urban legends rarely ask for money or personal information, but often request that the legends be forwarded.

A recent urban legend is that Bill Gates wants very much to share his fortune. The e-mail said in part: "For every person that you forward this e-mail to, Microsoft will pay you \$245.00. For every person that you sent it to that forwards it on, Microsoft will pay you \$243.00 and for every third person that receives it, you will be paid \$241.00. Within two weeks, Microsoft will contact you for your address and then send you a check." The e-mail goes on to say that the sender was not a believer, but within 30 days received a check from Microsoft for \$241,000. This legend is totally false.

Urban legends like to attack well-known products, institutions and people. Here is a recent attack on Coca Cola.

Coca-Cola has a new patriotic can coming out with pictures of the Empire State Building and the Pledge of Allegiance on them. But Coke forgot two little words on the pledge, "Under God."

Coke said they did not want to offend anyone. If we do not buy any Coke products then they will not receive any of our monies. Our money, after all, does have the words "Under God" on it.

If you agree with this policy, please pass this word to everyone you know. Coke doesn't have the right to rewrite the Pledge Of Allegiance!! If you do not agree, just erase or delete this message.

This information never had anything to do with Pepsi or Coca-Cola. Neither soda company is producing, or has ever produced, cans bearing any portion of the Pledge of Allegiance or an image of the Empire State Building.

Another recent example is the urban legend widely distributed was that cocoa bean mulch has killed many dogs that have eaten it. Cocoa bean mulch is preferred by gardeners because it is long-lasting and adds nutrients to the soil. The ASPCA says that dogs rarely eat cocoa mulch and none have died from it.

Another urban legend concerns a missing young girl named Ashley Flores. The text in part is as follows.

“My 13 year old girl, Ashley Flores, is missing. She has been missing now for two weeks. It is still not too late. Please help us. If anyone any where knows anything, please contact me at: HelpfindAshleyFlores@yahoo.com I am including a picture of her.

All prayers are appreciated!! It only takes 2 seconds to forward this. If it was your child, you would want all the help you could get.”

This urban legend is also false. There never was an Ashley Flores. A clue to the falseness of this message is that no information was given that could help locate the girl, such as location of abduction, age, height, weight, etc.

Some urban legends are true. One concerns a 3-year-old girl named Reachelle Marie Smith who was missing from her Minot, North Dakota, home. The e-mail said in part:

“AMBER ALERT!!!! Body: I need everyone’s help!!!! Please repost this ASAP. This is the daughter of a very close personal friend. Her worst nightmare came true as a parent. Her little girl was abducted by what they thought was a family friend. We need to get the word around so we can get this sweet little girl back to her family. Follow the instructions at the bottom to repost this message please!!”

Tragically, her abductor was found dead by suicide and Reachelle was never found.

Another long time legend is that more collect phone calls are made on Father’s Day than any other day of the year. This is true.

There are many, many more urban legends concerning topics such as race, gender, love, immigration, and religion that circulate widely because people want to believe them. You can see more about these and many other urban legends at www.snopes.com .