

PCWORLD Top 25 Web Hoaxes and Pranks!

These online spoofs and shams have made the rounds on Web sites and through e-mail. Perhaps you even believed one or two of them yourself.

Whether they take the form of a comic image of a giant cat or a desperate plea from a sick child, chain e-mail messages and Internet frauds are elements of the online landscape that we've all encountered. No topic is off limits: a medical warning, a promise of free money, or a believably (or shoddily) Photoshopped image. But at the end of the day, they're just elaborate hoaxes or clever pranks--and we've collected 25 of the most infamous ones ever to have graced the Internet or our inboxes.

Though some of these deceptions originated years ago, the originals--and dozens of variants--continue to make the rounds. If you keep a patient vigil over your e-mail, you too may eventually spot a message urging you to FORWARD THIS TO EVERYONE YOU KNOW!!! And if you haven't had enough when you finish reading this article, take a [hoax test](#) at the Museum of Hoaxes, and then hop over to [Snopes](#), the premier myth-dispelling site for coverage of zillions of other falsifications.

Hoaxes 1 Through 5

From the supposed last photo taken at the top of the World Trade Center to the endlessly revised request for assistance from a Nigerian functionary, here are our top five Web and e-mail hoaxes.



1. The Accidental Tourist (2001)

Quite possibly the most famous hoax picture ever, this gruesome idea of a joke traveled around the Web and made a grand tour of e-mail inboxes everywhere soon after the tragedy of September 11. It depicts a tourist standing on the observation deck of one of the World Trade Center towers, unknowingly posing for a picture as an American Airlines plane approaches in the background.

At first glance it appears to be real, but if you examine certain details, you'll see that [it's a craftily modified image](#). For starters, the plane that struck the WTC was a wide-body Boeing 767; the one in the picture is a smaller 757. The approach of the plane in the picture is from the north, yet the building it would have hit--the North tower--didn't have an outdoor observation deck. Furthermore, the South tower's outdoor deck didn't open until 9:30 a.m. on weekdays, more than half an hour after the first plane struck the WTC. The picture is a hoax, through and through--and not a particularly amusing one, under the circumstances.

Image courtesy of Snopes.com.



2. Sick Kid Needs Your Help (1989)

This gem had its roots in reality. It all began in 1989, when nine-year-old cancer patient [Craig Shergold](#) thought of a way to achieve his dream of getting into the Guinness Book of World Records. Craig asked people to send greeting cards, and boy, did they. By 1991, 33 million greeting cards had been sent, far surpassing the prior record. Ironically, however, the [Guinness World Records](#) site doesn't contain any mention of Craig Sherwood or a "most greeting cards received" record, presumably because the fine folks at the site don't want to encourage anyone to try to break his mark. (Astonishingly, Guinness doesn't have an entry for world's stoutest person, either, but it does honor the [World's Largest Tankard of Beer](#).)

Fortunately, doctors succeeded in removing the tumor, and Craig is now a healthy adult, but his appeal for cards has turned into [the hoax that won't die](#). Variations on the theme include a sick girl dying of cancer, and a little boy with leukemia whose dying wish is to start an eternal chain letter. A recent iteration tells a tragic tale of a girl who supposedly was horribly burned in a fire at WalMart, and then claims that [AOL will pay all of her medical bills](#) if only if you forward this e-mail to EVERYONE YOU KNOW!!! Okay, enough already.

Image courtesy of Snopes.com.

3. Bill Gates Money Giveaway (1997)

No, it's true. I thought it was a scam, but it happened to a buddy of mine. It seems that Microsoft is testing some new program for tracing e-mail, and the company needs volunteers to help try the thing out. He forwarded me an e-mail that he received from Microsoft--and get this, [from Bill Gates himself!](#) Two weeks later, as a reward for participating, my pal received a check for thousands of dollars! Sure he did. Another version of this hoax claims that AOL's tracking service is offering a cash reward. Tell you what--when you get your check, send me 10 percent as a finder's fee, okay?

4. Five-Cent E-Mail Tax (1999)

"Dear Internet Subscriber," the e-mail starts. "The Government of the United States is quietly pushing through legislation that will affect your use of the Internet." It goes on to reveal that "Bill 602P" will authorize the U.S. Postal Service to assess a charge of five cents for every e-mail sent. Not a bad way to cut down on the number of dopey e-mail chain letters and lame jokes people let loose on the world. But credulous curse averters and connoisseurs of boffo laffs can relax: This e-mail alert, which popped up in 1999 and comes back for a visit every year or so, just isn't true. Still, it sounded plausible enough to [fool Hillary Clinton](#) during a 2000 debate when she was running for the Senate.

5. Nigerian 419 E-Mail Scam (2000)

"DEAR SIR," the e-mail starts. "FIRSTLY I MUST FIRST SOLICIT YOUR CONFIDENCE IN THIS TRANSACTION; LET ME START BY INTRODUCING MYSELF PROPERLY..." I'm sure you've received one of these--a confidential, urgent e-mail message promising you a reward of mucho dinero for helping this person convey money abroad. All you need do in return is entrust your name and bank account number to the government bureaucrat (or his uncle, aunt, or cousin, the ostensible "credit officer with the union bank of Nigeria plc (uba) Benin branch") who needs your help.

It's the Nigerian con, also known as an Advanced Fee Fraud or [419 scam](#) (so called because of the section number of the Nigerian criminal code that applies to it). Ancestors of these scams appeared in the 1980s, when the media of choice were letters or faxes--and they're still wildly successful at snagging people. In fact, [Oprah](#) recently featured a victim of the Nigerian scam on her show. And if you think that smart, educated folks couldn't possibly fall for it, you'll be surprised when you read "[The Perfect Mark](#)," a New Yorker magazine article profiling a Massachusetts psychotherapist who was duped--and lost a fortune.

To see how the hoax works, visit [Scamorama](#), a fascinating site that features a progression of e-mail messages stringing along 419 scammers, sometimes for months at a time. Finally, check out the [3rd Annual Nigerian E-Mail Conference](#), an absolutely perfect spoof.

Hoaxes 6 Through 10

The lower half of our top 10 ranges from a kidnapping scare to a cookie recipe worth its weight in saffron.

6. It's Kidney Harvesting Time (1996)

The subject line is laden with exclamation points: "Travelers Beware!!!" If that's not enough to get your attention, the

chilling story certainly will. The message warns that an [organ-harvesting crime ring](#) is drugging tourists in New Orleans and Las Vegas, snatching their "extra" kidneys, selling the organs to non-Hippocratic hospitals, and leaving the victims to wake up in a bathtub full of ice and find a brief note that explains the situation and conveniently identifies the phone number of the nearest emergency room. Hey, maybe they'll get lucky and the hospital will have a compatible replacement kidney on hand. But travelers, fear not!!! According to the National Kidney Foundation, this scenario has never actually occurred--though it does have the makings of a great horror flick. (Freddy's Last Harvest, anyone?)

7. You've Got Virus! (1999 and on)

There's isn't a Teddy Bear virus. Nor is there a [sulfnbk.exe](#) or A Virtual Card for You ("the "WORST VIRUS EVER!!!...CNN ANNOUNCED IT. PLEASE SEND THIS TO EVERYONE YOU KNOW!!!").

The [jdbgmgr.exe](#) hoax (also known as Teddy Bear because the [jdbgmgr.exe](#) file is represented by a teddy bear icon) warned recipients of the e-mail message that they were at risk of infection from a virus sent via address books or Microsoft Messenger, and that they should delete the file immediately. But in reality there was no virus--and unfortunately, [jdbgmgr.exe](#) was a necessary Java file. The [sulfnbk.exe](#) hoax nailed even advanced users with its insistence that the file--a legit one that's used for fixing long file names--was a virus. Lots of people removed it. Similarly, [A Virtual Card for You](#) claimed that McAfee had discovered a virus that, when opened, would destroy the hard drive on an infected system and would automatically send itself to everyone on the user's e-mail contacts list. Of course, it didn't do anything except scare people. So before you forward an e-mail virus warning to anyone (especially to me),



8. Microsoft Buys Firefox (2006)

Talk about scaring the entire open-source community. In October 2006, a [previously unknown Web site](#) popped up, announcing Microsoft's acquisition of Firefox and promoting the company's new Microsoft Firefox 2007 Professional. The site talks glowingly about the browser's new features and provides a video advertisement for the product. It was a great prank, and the image of the Microsoft Firefox 2007 box was so elaborate and professional looking that the blood pressure of real Firefox users went sky-high.



9. The Really Big Kitty (2001)

There are big cats and then there are *even bigger* cats. This one, reportedly tipping the scales at almost 90 pounds, was enormous. The claim seemed plausible and even snookered a lot of e-mail cynics (I'm raising my hand)--until they read the accompanying copy, that is. With nonsense about the owner working at Atomic Energy of Canada Limited, and more

balderdash about nuclear reactors, the jig was up. Eventually, the cat's owner fessed up to a [creative Photoshop session](#), though he claimed that he never expected anyone to believe the photo was real.

Image courtesy of Snopes.com.

10. \$250 Cookie Recipe (1996)

The woman loved the cookie she had just nibbled at a Neiman Marcus cafe in Houston, so she asked her waiter for the recipe. "Two-fifty," he said, and she agreed without hesitation, instructing him to add it to her tab. But when the woman's Visa bill arrived, [it read \\$250](#), instead of \$2.50. Bent on revenge, she proceeded to ask you to blast the recipe to--okay, ready?--EVERYONE YOU KNOW!!! Like many hoaxes, this one predated the Internet, only to resurface in the electronic age. It appeared in a cookbook in the late 1940s as the \$25 fudge cake, popped up in the 1960s as the Waldorf-Astoria red-velvet cake recipe, and re-emerged in the 1970s as the Mrs. Fields cookie recipe.

Hoaxes 11 Through 15

This group of five begins with a phony e-mail message promising money and other prizes from Disney, and ends with the classic deaf-to-reason arguments of the Apollo moon landing deniers.

11. Free Vacation Courtesy of Disney (1998)

Dear Goofy... Forward this e-mail chain letter to everybody under the sun and, once 13,000 people have received it, [Walt Disney Jr.](#) will send five grand each to 1,300 lucky people on this list. And "the rest will receive a free trip for two to Disney for one week during the summer of 1999." Is that Disney World, Disneyland--or Walt's house? The "Jr." after Disney, in reference to a nonexistent person, ought to have been the first clue that this was a hoax. And the misspelling of "receive" was the clincher (remember, hoaxers, "i" before "e" except after "c"). Yet people forwarded the message around the world using the time-honored e-mail chain letter adage: I'm sending it to you... just in case it's true.



12. Sunset Over Africa (2003)

Now *that's* a dazzling photo of Africa and Europe, taken right around sunset from the Space Shuttle Columbia. What makes the image especially amazing is that, while London remains in daylight, night has fallen in Italy (a little to the southeast) and the bright lights of Rome, Naples, and Venice are blazing. Too bad [it's a digitally altered photo](#), most likely layered from multiple satellite images. To see an accurate, computer-generated illustration, check out the [World Sunlight Map](#).

Image courtesy of Snopes.com.

13. Alien Autopsy at Roswell, New Mexico (1995)

Roswell, New Mexico: ground zero of UFO controversy. It's also where the movie of the Roswell alien autopsy was filmed 60 years ago. The story goes that a UFO crashed at this site, and the U.S. government performed a hush-hush [autopsy on the dead alien](#). In the mid-1990s, unnamed individuals "discovered" the [secret film](#) and posted it for the edification of a disinformed public. Looks pretty real, right? Now fast-forward to 2006 and a conspiracy-deflating admission: The movie is a hoax [created in 1995 by John Humphreys](#), the animator famous for Max Headroom, in his apartment in north London. ...Or was it???

14. Real-Time GPS Cell Phone Tracking (2007)

Have you heard about the Web site that can track the location of your cell phone in real time? It uses satellite GPS in combination with Google Maps, and it's amazingly accurate (not to mention a disturbing invasion of privacy). Go ahead, check it out yourself by going to the [SunSat Satellite Solutions site](#) and tracking your own cell phone's location. Select your country, type in your cell phone number, click the Start Searching button, and wait for it. (This is one of the year's best pranks. And I won't give away the ending.)



15. Apollo Moon Landing Hoax (1969)

You're aware that we never landed on the moon, right? It was all just an elaborate hoax designed to score Cold War points for the United States against the Soviet Union in a world of falling dominoes. The whole lunar landing thing? It was a video staged at movie studios and top-secret locations.

Okay, you can stop laughing now, but some sites, such as [Apollo Reality](#) and [Moon Landing](#), still insist that the Eagle never landed. Of course, enemies of Flat Earthism will point to the Rocket and Space Technology site, which does an in-depth job of [debunking the hoax](#). But true disbelievers should check out this terrific [video spoof](#), complete with outtakes showing lights and cameras.

Hoaxes 16 Through 20

The world of weird eBay auction items starts off this page, which concludes with a photo hoax purporting to show a 1950s-era vision of the home computer of tomorrow.

16. Sell It on eBay! (1995)

You won't believe what people have sold on eBay--some of the items pranks, some of them for real, and some, well, it's hard to tell. For a sampling of the weird, you need look no further than a [haunted tree stump](#) and a [pork chop](#) shaped like a grizzly bear. The Internet itself once went on the market at a modest starting bid of a million bucks, as have a dozen spontaneous images of the Virgin Mary (on toast, on windows, and heaven only knows where else). Bidders have also had a shot at [someone's soul](#), [a guy's virginity](#), and [a human kidney](#), with the price of this last item having reached \$5.7 million before eBay pulled the plug. (Hey, guys, don't you know that what you lose in Las Vegas is supposed to stay in Las Vegas?)

But my favorite eBay offering involves a tattooed guy who, as a joke, dressed up in his ex-wife's size 12 wedding gown and [put it up for auction](#). Only, the dress ended up selling for \$3850, and the guy got five marriage proposals. Nice.



17. Chinese Newspaper Duped (2002)

Information on the Internet may want to be free--but if it's posted by a for-profit publisher, you'd better take it with a

grain of salt. That's the lesson learned by China's Beijing Evening News, which was taken in by the Onion's [Capitol Dome spoof](#). Famous for its authentic-sounding but tongue-in-cheek articles steeped in the language of the Associated Press, the Onion reported that Congress had threatened to leave Washington, D.C., and head for Memphis unless the District agreed to erect a new domed Capitol building with a retractable roof and luxury box seating. Having accepted most of the Onion article at face value, the Chinese newspaper at first stood by its source in the face of international derision and refused to back down. When it finally published a retraction, it [blamed the Onion](#) for the confusion: "Some small American newspapers frequently fabricate offbeat news to trick people into noticing them with the aim of making money." Right.



18. The Muppets Have Not Already Won (2001)

In early October 2001, just prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, protesters at an anti-American rally in Bangladesh showed their support for Osama bin Laden by marching, chanting, and waving placards. One of the posters captured on film by Reuters News Agency was a photo-montage of the Al-Qaeda leader, and in one of the shots a yellow felt puppet to his right glowers furiously at the camera. It's...Bert of Sesame Street. Originally a Zelig-inspired creation of San Francisco Webmaster Dino Ignacio, the satirical Web site Bert Is Evil depicted Bert hobnobbing with the worst of the worst in history, tormenting his roommate Ernie, and generally reveling in wickedness. After Ignacio retired from active efforts to expose Bert's career of evil, others filled the Photoshop void, capturing the cone-headed miscreant with all the latest baddies-du-jour.

Evidently, the company responsible for printing the pro-Osama poster found the doctored dual portrait irresistible, although (according to the [Urban Legends References Pages](#)) its production manager claims to have produced about 2000 copies of the Osama-and-Bert poster without realizing "what they signified." Well, if you can't trust pictures you find on the Internet, what can you trust?

Image courtesy of Snopes.com.

19. Chevrolet's Not-So-Better Idea (2006)

The ad folks at Chevrolet thought they had a winner: Let site visitors create their own 30-second commercial for the company's 2007 Chevy Tahoe SUV. It'll be fun, they probably thought. We'll give them a choice of video clips and soundtracks, and let them add their own text captions. Yep, viral marketing at its best.

Unfortunately for Chevrolet, a few pranksters decided to use the opportunity to express [what they thought of the SUV](#). One commercial said, "Like this snowy wilderness? Better get your fill of it now. Then say hello to global warming." Another lambasted the SUV as a gas guzzler: "Our planet's oil is almost gone. You don't need G.P.S. to see where this road leads."

20. Rand's 1954 Home Computer (2004)

This intriguing image of a room-size computer made the rounds of the Internet, accompanied by a breathless blurb: "This article is from an issue of 1954 'Popular Mechanics' magazine forecasting the possibility of 'home computers' in 50 years." The steering wheel in the picture is the predecessor to today's mouse, and the keyboard looks like those on teletype machines. It even comes complete with a guy right out of the Eisenhower era.

Cool stuff, and easy to believe--but it's not a 1950s Rand Corporation mockup of what a prototype home computer might look like. It's actually a shot that was taken of [a submarine display at the Smithsonian Institution](#) and subsequently modified for inclusion in a Fark.com image-manipulation competition.

Hoaxes 21 Through 25

Our final five takes you from the ultimate instance of Microsoft hubris to an ill-conceived experiment in Internet democracy (or is that Internet anarchy?).

21. Microsoft Buys Catholic Church (1994)

More than a decade ago, an e-mail press release--from Vatican City, no less--landed in my inbox. Microsoft was announcing that it was in the process of acquiring the Roman Catholic Church in exchange for an unspecified number of shares of Microsoft common stock. The story was [a prank](#), but it sure looked real, circulating for months and perhaps worrying residents of the Holy See.

Just think: If the press release *had been* true, it might have stopped the Vatican from using Linux. And no, I'm not kidding about the Linux part. Watch this [video interview](#) with the woman who helped build the Vatican's Web site.



22. Hercules, the Enormous Dog (2007)

Wow, that dog's almost as big as the horse. That's what I thought when I first looked at this e-mail. The picture depicts a couple, one walking a horse, the other holding the leash of Hercules, a 282-pound English Mastiff and "The World's Biggest Dog Ever According to Guinness World Records."

Horsepucky. Here's my analysis of the Photoshop modifications. First, take a close look at the grass under the people and the animals. The area has been subtly lightened in order to make all of the shadows match and look authentic. Next, examine the shadows and you'll notice two anomalies: First, the shadows of the dog and the man start at their feet, but the same doesn't hold true for the horse. Second, the woman's shadow is missing altogether; instead, the man's shadow extends in front of her. Oh and by the way, the [Guinness World Records](#) site doesn't have a listing for Hercules or for the world's biggest dog. Okay, okay, so the pictures of the big kitty and the big dog are both fakes--but have you seen the shot of Craig Sherwood riding the world's largest jackelope?

23. Lights-Out Gang Member Initiation (1998)

People have a tendency to believe e-mail messages that come from authority figures. In 1998, a message purportedly from a police officer working with the DARE program circulated around the Internet. It warned recipients [not to flash their lights](#) to inform oncoming cars that their headlamps were off. According to the message, a recently devised gang initiation ritual involved having new gang members drive at night with their headlights turned off until an oncoming car flashed its lights at them; then, in order to become initiated, they were to shoot everyone in that car. It's just another urban myth--and about as silly as the one claiming that gangs mark off their territory by [hanging sneakers from power lines](#).



24. Hurricane Lili Waterspouts (2002)

It's weird, it's disturbing, and it's seemingly plausible--all of the elements necessary for a successful e-mail forward. The

image shows three dark waterspouts in the distance. The subject is "here comes lili," and the e-mail began appearing in inboxes at about the same time that Hurricane Lili started battering the Louisiana coastline. But three waterspouts, all neatly lined up? According to [About.com](#), the National Weather Service labeled the picture a hoax and said that it was a modification of a genuine photo taken in 2001 by a crew member of the Edison Chouest Offshore supply boat.

25. Pranks Shut Down Los Angeles Times Wiki (2005)

It seemed like a bright idea. The LA Times' "A Wiki for Your Thoughts" fandango asked readers to chime in on the newspaper's editorials via a Wiki. In their explanation of how it would work, the editors even acknowledged that "It sounds nutty." Yet they went ahead with it--and achieved disastrous results. The Wikitorial (the name was nearly as dumb as the scheme) brought out the best and then the worst in readers. On the first day, an editorial about the war in Iraq prompted civil and thoughtful contributions. On day two, pranksters littered the unmoderated Wiki with rude comments, pornography, and profanity. The Webmaster removed the offending entries, but only after they were available for public viewing. By the next morning, the publisher had [dismantled the Wiki](#).

Brought to you by: 