Hoaxes

# A good story

We all love a good story and since the beginning of time, we have tried to make our daily conversations richer and add more substance to our stories by adding interesting and captivating information to it. The more fantastical the story, the more impressed people will be with us. Storytelling skills are important in all cultures to preserve old legends and myths, and to keep our history alive.

In South Africa, we have several myths and legends which have mutated through the ages to fit some or other cultural profile: we all know the story about the tokoloshe that hides underneath your bed at night and catches all the bad children. A likeness to this evil spirit can be found in other cultures as well.

# New ways of communicating

We have moved on from word of mouth and even books to fast and unlimited communication through the internet and social media. We are also in awe of anything concerning technology and coming to us through technology and the real challenge these days is to realise that everything we see on a computer, cell phone or tablet screen is not necessarily the truth.

From an age where we got most of our information from relatively trustworthy sources in the library or encyclopaedia set, we have moved into the age of unlimited information where any crackpot can offer information and data on the internet and claim it as true.

You all know that before using any information found on the internet, it has to be verified and the sources checked. We all do that before using information for schoolwork and projects, but in our social communication network we like to add some juice to our stories – we love gossip and forwarding an exciting story.

# Internet communication and the workplace

Companies are looking at measures to contain the amount of useless and social information that is received and sent by their employees and sites such as Facebook are blocked. It is thought that about 60% of all emails are not work-related and therefore waste employees’ time that the companies pay for. Some of the favourite emails are jokes, videos and hoaxes, and it can be interesting to see how fast these can spread. Remember, emails are instantaneous, and you can send hundreds at a time!

# It can cost you money!

Phishing, where a scam email is combined with a false website to gain personal information from the user can cost the unsuspecting person a lot of money if he/she is not careful. An even more sophisticated version is pharming, where the user is also led to a false website. It is even more devious, because the user does not even have to follow a link to the fraudulent website, but is redirected through his web browser. This is done by installing malicious software on the user’s computer and editing web addresses. Therefore you may think you are on a legitimate banking website and start entering your account numbers and passwords, when you really are using a fraudulent website with a slightly different address. It really is important to double check your website addresses when working with personal information. If your banking website seems different somehow or the links don’t work as they normally do, you must double check!

# Examples of hoaxes

Hoaxes include the old favourites about the cats from China raised in glass jars to keep them small and all the different foods causing cancer, obesity and bad health. A really bad SMS hoax was the one where it was claimed that the Afrikaans music star, Steve Hofmeyr had died. This even reached the newspapers where it had to be confirmed and was found to be untrue. It must be very disconcerting to read about your own death on a cell phone!

Hoaxes can range from topics such as virus email scams, giveaways (huge amounts of money can be involved), chain letters and funny jokes to potentially harmful ones concerning missing children. The missing children hoax is especially heinous; this is where a picture of a teenager is placed on the internet with claims that this young person is lost. People are even asked to donate money for the search which constitutes fraud.

People are also always looking for that special person and here the *hoaxsters* have a field day with bogus internet dating hoaxes and personal ads. You may think that you have found that special love of your life, but you really may be part of a hoax.

# No freebies!

Another hoax that seems to be very popular is where companies give away stuff for free: we all love those ones. Reality proves that no company gives away products when people forward emails. It just doesn’t work that way! Never! Companies like Microsoft, Woolworths and Gap have been used in this way and remember, nothing for nothing is the real deal.

# Let’s get all worked up

Hoaxes intending to cause panic are quite common, and because we always are eager to believe bad news, we always fall for those. We are always warned about new taxes, levies and fines as well as price increases on everyday items. These hoaxes are written to be utterly believable and cause rumours that can actually cause damage to public morale. Just think of the impact of a hoax on the stock market if a rumour is spread about the stability of a certain company. This can lead to court cases, but it is very difficult to trace hundreds of emails back to its source.

# Why and who?

It is difficult to understand why people spread hoaxes as there can be no personal gain had from it. One would think that only a mentally unstable person can spread a rumour about a dead or missing child when they know that it could cause a lot of unhappiness and heartache. Sometimes a hoax can start as a practical joke aimed at only a few people, but it easily spreads to thousands in a day. A hoax about Cambodian midgets fighting a lion is one such example.

# Sign up!

Petition emails are also quite popular as we are always willing to jump on a bandwagon when we feel that our rights are impeded. Most of these serve no purpose as it can be so easy to make up names and locations and you would never know if they were true. There was a petition for the Chinese government to stop the bonsai kittens, which refers to the hoax mentioned earlier where people supposedly stuffed kittens in glass jars to keep them small. As this is an urban legend, the petition serves no purpose and is an absolutely useless email. So please do not think that you have done the world a service when signing an electronic petition – you have just wasted time and energy on a useless exercise.

# To send or not to send?

For people who actually have a very busy day, it can be time consuming and irritating receiving hoax emails. If you have a dial up internet account, it can be expensive as well downloading unnecessary information. Before you forward a hoax email, evaluate it according to the following guidelines:

* Is it worth reading and relevant to us?
* Is it very large and will it take a lot of time to download?
* Does the person I am forwarding it to really want it?

Sometimes a funny story can brighten up somebody’s day and a good sense of humour is essential to living a full life, but receiving potentially damaging emails can be frustrating. Please check any hoaxes before forwarding them, especially if they involve sensitive information.