Hoax

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For the policy on hoaxes in Wikipedia, see Wikipedia:Don't create hoaxes.

A **hoax** is an attempt to trick an audience into believing that something false is real. There is often some material object (e.g., snake oil) involved which is actually a forgery; however, it is possible to perpetrate a hoax by making only true statements using unfamiliar wording or context (see DHMO). Unlike a fraud or con (which is usually aimed at a single victim and are made for illicit financial or material gain), a hoax is often perpetrated as a practical joke, to cause embarrassment, or to provoke social change by making people aware of something. Many hoaxes are motivated by a desire to satirize or educate by exposing the credulity of the public and the media or the absurdity of the target. For instance, the hoaxes of James Randi poke fun at believers in the paranormal. The many hoaxes of Alan Abel and Joey Skaggs satirize people's willingness to believe the media. Political hoaxes are sometimes motivated by the desire to ridicule or besmirch opposing politicians or political institutions, often before elections.

Governments often perpetrate hoaxes to assist them with unpopular aims such as going to war (e.g., the Ems Telegram). In fact, there is often a mixture of outright hoax, and suppression and management of information to give the desired impression. In wartime, rumours abound; some may be deliberate hoaxes.

There is often considerable controversy about whether a given factoid is true or a hoax.

The word **hoax** is said to have come from the common magic incantation *hocus pocus.* "Hocus pocus", in turn, is commonly believed to be a distortion of "hoc est corpus" ("this is the body") from the Latin Mass.

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Character of hoaxes

Hoaxes are not always created, initiated or sourced the same way. Examples:

- Hoax by tradition (see below)
- Hoax by design (such as in war)
- Hoax originating in legitimate non-hoax use (see email hoax below)
- Hoax by scare tactics (virus hoaxes)
- Urban legend

This is by no means a complete list; but the import is to show that hoaxes take many forms. The main characteristic of hoaxes is presenting the information or media as something real or believable to human understanding but is in fact false. Whether there is intent to deceive is not part of the hoax characteristics, as hoaxes are known both with and without it.

Other hoaxes

- Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre radio broadcast on October 30, 1938, entitled "The War of the Worlds" has been called the "single greatest media hoax of all time", although it was not — Welles said — intended to be a hoax. The broadcast was heard on CBS radio stations throughout the United States. Despite repeated announcements within the program that it was a work of fiction, many listeners tuning in during the program believed that the world was being attacked by invaders from Mars. (Rumors claim some even committed suicide.) Rebroadcasts in South America also had this effect even to a greater extent.[1] It has also been suggested that the story of the hoax is, in fact, a hoax, or at least a significant exaggeration: that the broadcast did not cause widespread panic.
- Wolfgang von Kempelen‘s construction of the chess-playing Mechanical Turk in 1770.
- The Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Russian: "Протоколы сионских мудрецов", or "Сионские протоколы") is an antisemitic literary forgery that purports to describe a Jewish plot to achieve world domination.
- The 1934 "Surgeon's Photograph" of the Loch Ness monster, revealed some sixty years later to have been a plastic head and neck mounted to a toy submarine.
- The Bathtub hoax, perpetrated by American journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken in 1918, which was cited as factual even after the hoax had been revealed by the author.
- The Great Moon Hoax of 1835, which helped to establish the market position of the *New York Sun*.
- The Cardiff Giant of 1869, which was created and "discovered"; reputedly after an argument about the reality of giants.
- Our First Time, possibly one of the first major internet hoaxes, although some characterized it as a botched scam.
- Uri Geller; numerous demonstrations of trickery otherwise claimed to be those of paranormal powers.
- Idaho, the northwestern US state, was named as the result of a hoax. Lobbyist George M. Willing suggested the name, claiming it was a Native American term meaning "gem of the mountains." It was later discovered that Willing had made up the word himself. As a result, the original Idaho Territory was renamed Colorado. Eventually, the controversy was forgotten and the made-up name stuck.
- The Sokal hoax was a fake paper published in the journal Social Text, which was intended to reveal the uncritical misuse of scientific terms and ignorance of science in the field of postmodern cultural studies.
- The Piltdown Man fraud caused some embarrassment to the field of paleontology when apparently ancient hominid remains discovered in England in 1912 were revealed as a hoax some 41 years later.
- In 1970, Clifford Irving and Richard Suskind contrived to write an autobiography of Howard Hughes, believing Hughes would not come out of hiding to denounce it. Irving sent a manuscript to his publisher McGraw-Hill in late 1971. Authentication tests and Hughes's initial silence led some to believe the manuscript was genuine, but Hughes eventually gave a teleconference by phone denying both participation in the book and knowledge of Irving. Weeks later, Irving confessed to the hoax and was later convicted of fraud. He served 17 months of a two and a half year prison sentence. Suskind, sentenced to six months, served five.
- The Hitler Diaries; the 1983 forgeries claiming to be the diaries of Adolf Hitler.
- In 1928 Margaret Mead published *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a book largely concerned with the sexual practices of adolescents in Samoa. In 1983, five years after Mead's death, Derek Freeman published *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, in which he said that he had interviewed the sources of Mead's information, and was told that they had hoaxed Mead. Freeman's conclusions are controversial.
- The Cottingley Fairies, a series of trick photographs taken by two young British girls from 1917 to 1920.
- The alien autopsy film, supposedly footage of the examination of an extraterrestrial being which had purportedly died in the Roswell UFO incident. The film, presented by Ray Santilli in 1995, was later revealed to have been faked by Santilli and Gary Shoefield.
- In the late 1970s and early 1980s, photographer Robert B. Stein created convincing UFO photographs using only a Kodak Pocket InstaMatic camera and throwable discs, and claimed to be a contactee. His pictures appeared in many publications devoted to the paranormal. In 1985, he revealed how it was done.
- Rosie Ruiz finished first in the women's division of the 1980 Boston Marathon by riding the subway to a point near the finish line and jumping back into the race. Her marathon title was revoked when the hoax was discovered.
- In the 1970s the Philippine government announced the discovery of the Tasaday a supposedly uncontacted stone-age tribe. Revealed to the world in a cover story in National Geographic, it was a decade later revealed to have been all staged.
- The sale of the Eiffel Tower for scrap, an elaborate scam run twice by the master con artist Victor Lustig.
- American con artist George C. Parker made his living selling and re-selling public monuments in New York City.
- Project Alpha, a hoax conceived by stage magician James Randi to fool psychic researchers.
- The Carlos hoax, another creation of The Amazing Randi, staged to discredit the New Age belief called trance channelling.
- The residents of Palisade, Nevada, once earned their living by pretending to be the "toughest town in the West". The violence was actually an elaborate show put on for tourists

arriving on the train.

- Georg Paul Thomann, a fictional artist created by the group monochrom, who represented the Republic of Austria at the Sao Paulo Art Biennial. During the course of the event, no one had realized that the artist never really existed.
- The Priory of Sion (French:Prieuré de Sion), an alleged secret order sworn to defend the mythical Jesus bloodline which protected Jesus' descendants, including the Merovingian rulers of France and their heirs, was fabricated by French royalist Pierre Plantard in the 1950s as part of a personal plan to become King of France; fake documents created as part of the hoax have been included in best sellers purporting to be non-fiction such as *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* as well as novels such as Dan Brown's controversial *The Da Vinci Code*.
- The Paul is dead hoax of 1969 had it that the famous bassist of The Beatles was actually replaced after he had a fatal car accident in the late 1960s. "Clues" have been discovered by fans on different Beatles songs and album covers. This hoax was not started by The Beatles themselves (although they seemed to anticipate it in the song *Glass Onion,* released a year before the hoax took off), and Paul McCartney is one of the two Beatles still alive as of January 2008.
- Bonsai Kitten, an Internet hoax consisting of a fictional domain of a company that sold kittens inside jars as ornaments.
- In early summer 2006 an Internet hoax went around saying Jaleel White of the TV show *Family Matters* committed suicide, mirroring similar urban legends of other celebrity suicides and deaths.
- In what became known as the Berners Street Hoax in 1810, Theodore Hook tricked hundreds of people into showing up at 54 Berners Street, London.
- In 2006, A.N. Wilson was the victim of a hoax when he included a love letter by Sir John Betjeman in his biography of the poet. It turned out to be a fake letter with an acrostic that said "AN Wilson is a shit".[2][3]
- In April, 1985, Sports Illustrated ran a profile written by George Plimpton of an amazing new pitching prospect for the New York Mets named Sidd Finch. Finch was a student of yoga ("Sidd" being short for "Siddhartha") who had studied with Tibetan monks to perfect his pitching and claimed to throw a 168 mph fastball. The Mets helped with the initial story but the magazine admitted to the hoax on April 15.
- Dead fairy hoax: On April 1, 2007, an illusion designer for magicians posted on his website some images illustrating the corpse of an unknown eight-inch creation, which was claimed to be the mummified remains of a fairy. He later sold the fairy on eBay for £280.[4]
- De Grote Donorshow, a hoax reality television program which was broadcast in the Netherlands on Friday, June 1, 2007 by BNN. The program involved a supposedly terminally ill 37-year-old woman donating a kidney to one of three people requiring a kidney transplantation. Viewers were able to send advice on who they think she should choose to give her kidney to via text messages. After the airing of the show, 50.000 people had requested a donor form.

Famous musical hoaxes

(Music composed by purported existent or nonexistent individuals but in reality composed by someone else)

- Ovsianniko-Kulikovsky's Symphony No. 21 (by Mikhail Goldstein)
- Violin concerto by "Khandoshkin" (by Mikhail Goldstein)
- Album-blatte by "Glazunov" (by Mikhail Goldstein)
- W. A. Mozart, Adelaide Concerto for violin (by Marius Casadesus)
- G. F. Handel, Viola Concerto (by Henri Casadesus)
- J. C. Bach, Cello Concerto (by H. Casadesus)
- Valentin Strobel's Concerto for lute (by Francois-Joseph Fetis)
- Works for lute by Sautscheck (by Roman Turovsky-Savchuk)
- Works for lute by Ioannes Leopolita (by Roman Turovsky-Savchuk)
- Works for archlute and baroque guitar by Antonio da Costa (by Paulo Galvao)
- "Kanzona" for lute by Francesco Da Milano (by Vladimir Vavilov)
- "Ave Maria" by Caccini (by Vladimir Vavilov)
- Mikhail Vyssotsky's Elegy for guitar (by Vladimir Vavilov)
- Vassily Sarenko's Nocturne c-minor for guitar (by Vladimir Vavilov)
- Fritz Kreisler's works for violin attributed to other composers
- "Haydn's Lost Sonatas for keyboard" (by Winfried Michel)
- "Allegretto Grazioso" by "Schubert" (by Gaspar Cassado)
- "Toccata" by "Frescobaldi" (by Gaspar Cassado)
- "Adagio & Allegro" by "Pugnani" (by Fritz Kreisler)

Other musical hoaxes

- Recordings by the pianist Joyce Hatto
- The voices of Milli Vanilli

Hoax traditions

During certain events and at particular times of year, hoaxes are perpetrated by many people and groups. The most famous of these is certainly April Fool's Day, which is open season for pranks and dubious announcements.

A New Zealand tradition is the capping stunt, wherein university students perpetrate a hoax upon an unsuspecting population. The acts are traditionally executed near graduation (the "capping").

Many Spanish-speaking countries have Innocent's Day, on December 28, to make "innocent" a person with jokes and hoaxes. The origin for the pranking is derived from the Catholic feast day Day of the Holy Innocents for the infants slaughtered by King Herod at the time of Jesus' birth.

Email hoax

See also: E-mail spoofing

An example email hoax is a doctored image distributed via chain emails, as pictured here. The photo image imbedded in this email was actually intended for an online photo-manipulation contest and not for distribution as a falsehood, but was distributed by another person who allegedly attributed the photo as originating from a 1954 Popular Mechanics Magazine article. In truth, the magazine never published it in 1954, but they did publish an article in December 2004 exposing it as a hoax.[5]

Careful examination of the image will typically reveal unnatural flaws in it; for example, shadows and lighting. The television set appears to be hung on the wall without any apparent means of supporting mechanisms, and the shadow is wrong. The man has shadows on his clothing inconsistent with the surrounding lighting, and he has no shadow on the wall behind him. The form-feed paper exit on the front of the teletype printer is misaligned with the paper feed port at top, and the paper exit port is supposed to be behind and under the printer, not in the front. In addition, the computer's console is actually the Maneuvering/Reactor Control Panel of a nuclear submarine (specifically the USS Trepang (SSN-674)) on display at the Smithsonian Institute.

Chain email hoax

In 2001 another image, purporting to be the "National Geographic Photo of the Year" and depicting a shark leaping from the sea to attack a helicopter crew member, was widely distributed by email, prompting the magazine to publish an article (http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/08/0815_020815_photooftheyear.html) uncovering the hoax. As the article revealed, the image had been composited from two photographs taken in entirely different locations.

See also

- List of hoaxes
- Famous April Fool's Day jokes
- Forgery
- Counterfeit
- Impostors

- Simulated reality
- Anomalous Phenomenon
- Conspiracy Theory
- Urban Legends
- Virus hoax
- Pseudoscience
- Fictitious entry
- Website spoofing
- *The Hoax* (film)

Footnotes

1. **^** The War of the Worlds (http://www.greatnorthernaudio.com/sf_radio/wow.html), search on "South America". See also Broadcast Remakes (http://www.war-of-the-worlds.org/Radio/Remakes.shtml)
2. **^** Brooks, Richard "Betjeman love letter is horrid hoax", (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2330457,00.html) *The Sunday Times*, August 27, 2006. Retrieved on 28 August 2006. The letter was sent to Wilson by "Eve de Harben", who then wrote to *The Sunday Times*. Wilson's arch rival, Betjeman's authorized biographer, Bevis Hillier, initially denied all knowledge (the envelope sent to the newspaper was bought in Hillier's home town, Winchester).
3. **^** Brooks, Richard. "Betjeman biographer confesses to literary hoax (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2087-2340567,00.html)", The Sunday Times, 2006-09-03. Retrieved on 2006-09-05. Hillier subsequently admitted being responsible.
4. **^** "April fool fairy sold on internet (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/derbyshire/6545667.stm)" from BBC News. Retrieved on July 31, 2007.
5. **^** Popular Mechanics Magazine (http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/computers/1303271.html), December 9, 2004

References

- Curtis Peebles (1994). *Watch the Skies: A Chronicle of the Flying Saucer Myth*, Smithsonian Institution, ISBN 1-56098-343-4.

External links

- The Culture Jammer's Encyclopedia (http://www.sniggle.net/index.php)
- Virus Hoax Busters (http://www.virushoaxbusters.com/)
- US DOE Computer Incident Advisory Capability (CIAC) Hoaxbusters Web Page (http://hoaxbusters.ciac.org/)

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