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Is Bill Gates offering big bucks to track your email? On the trail of the most forwarded hoax in Internet history.

By Jonathon Keats

A few months ago, I received an email that promised to make me rich. It came from an acquaintance, Kim Chernin, bearing the suspect subject line "Fwd: quick cash?" Normally I'd send such spam straight to the trash, but Chernin - a psychotherapist and writer - is no fool; so I opened the message and began to scroll.

The email started with a list of recipients that was longer, and arguably more impressive, than the holy lineage at the start of the New Testament: dozens of people from Harvard and HarperCollins and *The Wall Street Journal*. This was a highbrow crowd. Then it got down to business. I was invited by a lawyer named Pearlas Sanborn to participate in a Microsoft/AOL/Intel email beta test designed to help Internet Explorer maintain its dominance in the marketplace. But first they needed more testers. "When you forward this email to friends, Microsoft can and will track it (if you are a Microsoft Windows user) for a two-week time period. For every person that you forward this email to, Microsoft will pay you $245, for every person that you sent it to that forwards it on, Microsoft will pay you $243, and for every third person that receives it, you will be paid $241."

As a Macintosh user, I was ineligible for this windfall. Still, I couldn't help but be a little curious - and perplexed. Why would AOL help its archrival, and what does Intel have to do with this? The remainder of the message didn't clarify matters. It simply went on to recount tales of fortunes earned ($4,324.44, $24,800), and then reiterated the offer, except that now Microsoft was running the beta test to facilitate an AOL/Intel merger and had decreased the reward to $203.15 for every forward. Why AOL and Intel would join forces with Microsoft was not explained.

During the next few weeks, I mentioned the message to at least 20 friends, each of whom remembered receiving it up to three times. It's a joke, they told me, a hoax, a fraud. It's been circulating for years. It's everywhere. One of them even forwarded a copy she'd just received.

But I wanted to make sure it was a fake. After all, having forwarded the message to 17 people besides me, Chernin should have been at least $3,656.70 wealthier. I emailed her, and, in case Microsoft had overlooked her, I wrote a note to the 344 other people whose addresses were to be found in some 20 generations of forwarding. If someone had struck it rich, I wanted to know about it.

None of the recipients reported earnings. But in the dozens of responses, I received a windfall all my own: I stumbled upon the Internet equivalent of a perpetual motion machine. Here was a hoax that had been in circulation since 1997, laden with factual improbabilities and logical contradictions, widely reviled and frequently debunked yet thriving on a Net strewn with spam and other causes of universal cynicism - a prank lacking in both brains and brawn that nevertheless, cockroach-like, had outlasted the Melissa virus and Saddam Hussein.

The 29 people who replied to me came from across the US - high-school grads and PhDs, builders, dancers, documentary filmmakers. A 55-year-old rabbi from Philadelphia named Mordechai Liebling is typical of those who fell for the hoax. He got the message from an old friend, he said, and he passed it along to a few more acquaintances (promised earnings: $609.45) because there was "nothing to lose." Janet Randall, director of the linguistics program at Northeastern University, received it from a friend and forwarded it to 64 people (promised earnings: $13,001.60) because of the lawyer's assurances. And Greg Lopez, 21, who works in shipping for a South Carolina hydraulics manufacturer, got it from a fellow employee and sent it to 11 more (promised earnings: $2,234.65) because he wanted "to give other people chances to make easy money."

Chernin's note to me echoed all these motivations, but also something more. She wrote that the message "seemed to have a knowledge about Internet technology that was, alas, all too plausible, since it suggested a clear invasion of privacy." (Remember, Microsoft was going to track each email.) "Things that seem preposterous no longer seem so preposterous. One's sense of reality is probably shaken by living in our times."

In fact, successful hoaxes have always preyed on our tendency to imagine the future through the lens of our own hopes and worries. A celebrated 19th-century prank convinced millions that Thomas Edison had invented a machine capable of

converting soil into cereal. A "top secret" report that became a best-seller in 1967 concluded that an end to war "would almost certainly not be in the best interest of stable society." Publication of the deadpan parody led Lyndon Johnson to cable every US embassy, insisting the report didn't reflect foreign policy.

The Internet has, of course, been a boon for tricksters, providing a platform for frauds ranging from the announcement that Microsoft had acquired the Catholic Church to advertisements for bonsai kittens. "The decentralized, decontextualized nature of the Internet proves to be the feature most advantageous to hoaxers," notes Alex Boese, curator of the online Museum of Hoaxes. "It strips away contextual information that would allow people to weigh the credibility of sources."

In other words, to track Chernin's email to its origin, I'd need to be systematic. I had a few leads: In addition to the suspicious-sounding name of the lawyer, Pearlas Sanborn, the email was signed by a Charles S. Bailey. But it turned out that the only Pearlas Sanborn living in the US was a physical therapist in Milton, Florida, who didn't return calls. Charles S. Bailey, according to his email signature, was a general manager for field operations. Only one problem: He managed field operations for the freight train company CSX, not Microsoft.

On Bailey's answering machine, I heard a voice with a Southern accent repeating over and over - as if redundancy increased clarity - that the email I'd received was a hoax. I left him a message that was never returned. Following Bailey's directions, I went to truthorfiction.com, which confirmed that the hoax was one of thousands online (including one proclaiming, aptly, Internet Clean-Up Day).

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Other hoax sites filled in the picture. On truthminers.com, mathematician Simon Nance calculated that in a mere three months of propagation, the email had put Microsoft, AOL, and Intel, individually or in combination, on the hook to owe 7.91 x 10111 dollars. Hoaxbusters.org had 30 different versions offering cash or merchandise from the likes of IBM, Nokia, Honda, British Airways, Disney, Coca-Cola, the Gap, and Bath & Body Works.

Then there was hoaxinfo.com, which posted iterations of the Microsoft ruse trailing back to 1999. A version that had circulated in May 2000 replaced Charles S. Bailey's signature with the name Aisha Haynes, who was an administrative assistant at the National Policy Association. According to the site, "someone wanted to cause some grief to the NPA so they included a contact number and person from this company at the bottom of the chain letter. [The NPA] had to change their main telephone number." In fact, the NPA no longer exists (perhaps it had to pay its share of that $7.91 x 10111 debt), but Haynes now works at the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation. She was not pleased to hear from me. "My name got on that by mistake by forwarding that email; I was not the originator," she blurted out. "But I don't know how you got this phone number and please don't call back."

It turns out that the appearance of her name, and of Bailey's, was neither intentionally deceptive nor malevolent. It was simply the result of careless forwarding on systems that automatically append signatures to outgoing messages. Inadvertently lending institutional authority to the message, the signatures stuck - and spread.

There is something Darwinian about chain letters. If the success of a hoax depends on deliberate manipulation of our hopes and suspicions, these chains thrive on the random mutation and natural selection of living systems. In a

hundred years of circulation on paper, the letters have adapted to the times with remarkable precision, fitting their niche as snugly as a Galápagos finch. Originally a means of propagating prayer, chain letters in the secular 20th century have adopted luck and prosperity as their raison d'être.

Nobody masterminds such changes from on high. The adaptations begin as minor accidents of transcription. Daniel VanArsdale, who has compiled an archive of 500 chain letters dating from the turn of the century, has observed that "a single letter bearing some new innovation will propagate so abundantly and rapidly that within just a few years, its descendants replace all similarly motivated letters." For example, the addition of "It works" as a postscript to one from 1979 - several thousand generations old in its own right - had become nearly ubiquitous by 1983 and by the turn of the millennium was copied an estimated 2 billion times.

While my email-tracer hoax lacks that particular coda, it shares a remarkable number of attributes with paper chain letters. In them, we find testimonials from experts and beneficiaries. ("Mr. Frankling D. Roosavelt [sic] was elected for the third term as president of the United States 52 hours after he mailed this letter," claims one piece from 1949. In fact, Roosevelt was elected to a third term in 1940, and by 1949 he was dead.) We find the age-old promise that "this is not a junk letter" and the perennial threat of bad luck for breaking the chain ("If you ignore this, you will repent later"). And then there's the long list of addresses, the last one belonging to a friend: the altruism of the gesture, the expectation of reciprocation.

Even the internal contradictions of the email Chernin sent me - the changing promises, the rotating cast of companies - help ensure its survival, making the come-on so opaque it resists examination (she'd been taken with its "knowledge about Internet technology"). In a paper delivered to the Internet Research and Information for Social Scientists conference, University of Surrey sociologist Edmund Chattoe said urban legends - which he compares to viruses or memes - function on a "strange mixture of detail and vagueness." The contradictions in my email were well adapted yet unintended, the result of a sort of human-assisted technobiology: Two distinct mutations of the same hoax, one concerning Microsoft and AOL, the other concerning AOL and Intel (with fragments of the earlier version), seem to have been carelessly pasted together to sow utter confusion.

How, then, did it begin? I asked Microsoft. A spokesperson told me, "We don't comment on rumors," a remark only slightly less enlightening than Bill Gates' own response, made back in March 1998 - and preserved on Microsoft's Web site - that the email was "hooey." Still, the version of the message that had made

Gates so irate bore little in common with the one I received from Chernin, and showed the extent of its evolution. The original read, "My name is Bill Gates. I have just written up an email-tracing program that traces everyone to whom this message is forwarded to. I am experimenting with this and I need your help. Forward this to everyone you know, and if it reaches 1,000 people, everyone on the list will receive $1,000 at my expense. Enjoy. Your friend, Bill Gates."

I found the same text preserved by an amateur Internet archivist named Martin Miller, a University of Houston student who'd saved every copy of the hoax he received over a seven-year period and posted the collection on his Web site (where he was also selling calendars for Lent). He informed me this version was sent to him in late 1997 and that he believes it's the first. When it got to him, there were just 10 names on the recipient list. The first was Bryan Mack at Iowa State.

Bryan Mack was no longer a student by the time I came calling. He'd graduated in 2001 and had taken a job programming databases at the Colorado School of Mines. He's a regular guy. He answers his own phone. "I wasn't trying to trick people," he told me. "It was just a joke between a couple friends." Then he described how the joke got a little out of hand.

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It all started on November 18, 1997, when the guy sitting beside him in the computer lab received a get-rich-quick email, one of the first examples of spam that either of them had seen. "I can come up with something better than that," Mack boasted. Three minutes later, Bill Gates' email-tracing program was born. Mack thought it was funny enough to send to a friend at Loras College in Dubuque, with "bill gates here" in the subject line. It made the guy laugh, so he passed it on.

Within days, the message was being read by strangers. A few wrote Mack, asking about their money. Whatever, he thought. Then he went home for Thanksgiving break. "When I got back to school, my account was locked up. There was like a gigabyte of mail, thousands upon thousands of messages." He set up a filter to block the onslaught. But two weeks later, someone forwarded him a new version. His name was no longer in the header. It came from *gatesbeta@microsoft.com* and offered $1,000 and a complimentary copy of Windows 98. Then he got another, signed by Walt Disney Jr., that promised $5,000 and a free vacation. "I started getting scared," he says. "I thought maybe I was going to get in trouble for fraud." But Bryan Mack had already been forgotten. He went on with his studies in computer science. He occasionally played phone pranks on friends' parents, posing as a manager from Goody Tree Service, saying they'd ordered a spruce.

Years passed. His email-tracing hoax became notorious, one of the top 10 of all time, according to antivirus firm Sophos. Mack remained anonymous. I asked him why he didn't lay claim to his creation. With just a couple sentences, he'd launched one of the greatest social critiques of our age. He'd shown that when it comes to technology, people believe that anything can happen - that invasion of privacy is inevitable - and that even those who don't like it are willing to benefit from it.

"I didn't really think of that," he said. "It's just a hoax. And if I admitted to it, why would anyone believe me?" I didn't have an answer. In a trickster universe, doubt is the only certainty.

Jonathon Keats (jonathon_keats@yahoo.com) is an artist and novelist. His most recent book is The Pathology of Lies.

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