

# SCAMS & HOAXES



FREE TO THE PEOPLE

Scams are really old. We might even be hardwired to believe them: brains vs calculators, hardwired to convince people we're right (Mercier and Sperber)

Scams are a great American tradition. PT Barnum defended them (Selling an experience)

Scams: Confidence tricks, basically predatory.

Hoaxes: Efforts to instill false belief, but not necessarily malicious (April Fools!)

But the line is blurred—PT Barnum and the Fiji Mermaid—his defense for the hoax was that he was selling the experience/entertainment

Besides Barnum, some grate hoaxes:

- Charles Dawson and the Piltdown Man
- Fox Sisters and spirit mediumship
- Hitler diaries—Konrad Kujau, Rupert Murdoch, Hugh-Trevor Roper (Lord Dacre)

Plenty to learn here, but let's focus on some medical scams too

- Clark Stanley, the original snake oil salesman (Chinese water snakes work—there's a lesson here about how a kernel of truth goes wild)
- Plandemic—"activating coronavirus expressions" and healing microbes in the ocean
- All kinds of "New Age" treatments, from colloidal silver to crystal therapy—health and beauty stuff too, like supplements, etc.
- Soviet heat pills! Worked to lose weight, but also killed people (see "In the Sanctuary of Outcasts")

## Why do Hoaxes Work?

- Information control: quantity and presentation of information (-“experts” - conspiracies –“timeless wisdom” and cultural stereotypes)
- People want to believe (-fear and desperation -makes the world exciting)
- Don’t know any better: expertise gaps, sloppy thinking, etc.

## That brings us to scams

- A lot of for-profit colleges
- Fyre Festival (celebrity appeal and social media advertising)
- Coronavirus again (-hydroxychloroquine and Surgisphere controversies -buying blood and saliva -colloidal silver again -gift card scams -etc.)

## Phishing is a key vector—how it works (the Atlanta Stock Tip scam)

How phishing works: large numbers. This is the law of large numbers: if you send out a million emails and fail 99% of the time, that’s still 10,000 successes.

## Why do we fall for scams?

- Pathos: need, greed, and compassion. We want stuff; we might not think it’s likely, but it’s hard to say no
- Social ties and social belonging (original “confidence man” William Thompson; celebrities)
- Appeal to vanity: make you feel like *you’re* tricking everyone else
- If you do research: confirmation bias

## So what do you do?

- Know the history and look for the forms. We’ve talked about some of the histories here: PT Barnum, Clark Stanley, and Charles Ponzi. These get repeated over and over. You can’t know the *content* of every scam (“does this company really have good facemasks?”) but you can know the *form* (pyramid schemes, snake oil sales, flattery, conspiracies)
- Trust is good, and we need compassion. But verify. Other lessons we learn here about how to evaluate a good argument and a good source should help: don’t just look for things about a group, critically evaluate them. Ask who you trust on this issue and why you trust them
- Learn some simple protections: always check email addresses, always google things, try to keep up on the scams. Never use a password. Check news outlets you trust: is there really a coronavirus vaccine? Why is this shady email the first you’ve heard of it?
- Report!!! You have to. We have to be the antibodies that inoculate against scams. Report to the FTC (Federal Trade Commission). You can also report Internet crimes to the FBI—do a little research to see who will accept this particular complaint.

Some overall conclusions for the series:

1. What makes the basics of an argument: claim, warrant, data/evidence
2. We are not naturally great decisionmakers—although we think we are. We can get better, though. Be extra skeptical about what you want to believe.
3. Always ask: 1) who gains from me believing this? 2) Is this practical? 3) Does it matter/is it worth my time?
4. Most bad information appeals to the passions—fear, greed, vanity, charity. The more emotional the appeal, and the more it makes you feel good, the more scrutiny it needs
5. Trust but verify. Why do you trust this source on this issue?
6. Certainty is too much to hope for. We're in situations often where we need to be "less wrong."

**For a full list of book recommendations, visit:** [www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-scams-and-hoaxes](http://www.carnegielibrary.org/staff-picks/navigating-information-fatigue-scams-and-hoaxes)

**Presenter Contact Information:**

Calum Matheson, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Public Deliberation and Civic Life and Director of Debate  
University of Pittsburgh Department of Communication  
[matheson@pitt.edu](mailto:matheson@pitt.edu)  
[www.comm.pitt.edu/person/calum-matheson-phd](http://www.comm.pitt.edu/person/calum-matheson-phd)