

## A hoax? No thank you, I prefer to find out myself!

In Italian, bufala: a hoax, also means a female buffalo – and a type of mozzarella cheese is made with buffalo milk. So it is not about the cheese that we will talk about here, but about how to disclose, knowingly, any scams that are hidden in the Internet!

Hoaxes have evolved with the Internet and, undisturbed, they spread at the speed of light because of all the naive people who believe things readily, and do not ask any questions why. Chemical contrails that are harmful for your health, vaccines that provoke autism, the Italian metodo Stamina which was not approved because of the pharmaceutical companies, many lipsticks containing lead that can cause cancer; and with the help of some deceptive methods, they invite you to check if also your lipstick contains this metal... There is a great amount of confusion between science, pseudoscience and hoaxes! Every day the list of hoaxes grows exponentially, also because of the social networks that spread false information in a short amount of time. More and more often we are led by the emotional aspect of the information and we do not analyse its scientific correctness. In fact often false information has a strong hold on feelings such as fear and pity, and also includes shocking pictures.

### What is a hoax?

A hoax is a false statement often intended to deceive or trick the public, making something false seem real. The origin of the Italian word for hoax, bufala, as defined in the Italian dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca, indicates the action of pulling the buffalo by the nose, in other words leading somebody on, distracting them, and the origin of hoax, in its English form, is thought to have been a contraction of the word hocus from the conjuror's term hocus pocus, when performing acts that tricked the spectators. So, if we are not attentive, we could all easily be lead on, or tricked!

### Why is it so easy to fall for a hoax?

We have all fallen for one at least once! We read some incredible news in a newspaper, on the Internet, or on a friend's Facebook wall, and we share it. The false news spreads rapidly because we trust the source, according to the Principle of Authority. If the news comes from what we believe is an authoritative source, our critical trait diminishes and instead of analysing the news, and asking questions, we automatically consider it true.

Furthermore it often occurs that these stories have a strong emotional involvement, which prevails over our rationality. Therefore to fall for one does not mean that we are stupid, but simply that we are being human and believe the story. The emotional component is however very strong in human beings and it often prevails over the rational component. Another factor which must not be underestimated is the pleasure of telling others what one has found out. Generally hoaxes involve sensational stories and it is difficult not to boast of what we know, and therefore very often we do not check if the story is true.

### How do we recognize a hoax?

First of all you need to activate your critical thinking, and start from the assumption that the news you read is a hoax, an eRumour, till you can prove the opposite. This is how you can reveal a false story.

#### 1. Sniff out a hoax.

Be suspicious of any news that looks strange, this is the first step to understand the correctness of the information. It is not difficult to sniff out a hoax, when in the text you find sentences that say "share this with as many people as possible, because everyone must know", or "shame!" and "scandal!", you must hear an alarm ringing (An Italian Facebook page, B.U.T.A.C. the acronym of "Bufale un tanto al chilo" (Hoaxes, per kilo) specifically warns readers of these sentences) . These words are used to attract one's attention and make the

user spread the fake news too. In 90% of the cases in which these sentences can be found, it is a hoax. Therefore, let us try not to be passive readers, and let us try to ask ourselves if that particular news could be possible, let us become active readers, and in this way we will make a difference!

## 2. **Watch out for fake experts!**

Have you noticed that often the hoax states that the source is an expert or an association? Actually a careful analysis of the news shows that the experts that are mentioned are always common names; or names and surnames are mentioned to make the information seem true. Even photographs of people with white coats for example, can lead us to believe the false information. A hoax is based mainly on this, it acts on our ignorance with regard to the topic. We must only trust the real experts who know the problem, alternatively we must look for information from sites that are reliable.

## 3. **Check the source**

Look for the source, when you read news that looks strange. If the news does not have any link to the original article, it is almost always a hoax. Always check if the source that wrote the news is an expert in the sector, or simply an amateur. In order to decide whether a source is authoritative or not, I follow two fundamental criteria as suggested by the famous Italian journalist Paolo Attivissimo in his website, <http://www.attivissimo.net/> : the first is that generally press agencies are authoritative, and are rarely wrong (as for example CNN or BBC), the second is the criterion of personal gain. The example provided by the journalist who carries out inquiries on different hoaxes, is really convincing: If the Pope, backed by the Church's thesis, says he has proof that the devil exists, the source is biased. If, instead, the Pops says he has proof that the devil does not exist, this should be considered an authoritative source because the statement differs from his convictions.

## 4. **Make sure the message is coherent**

If, in the news there are obvious contradictions, it most probably is a hoax. Be careful also with regard to the topics that are dealt with: politics, religion, football, stereotypes, health and pollution are the best topics for hoaxes. Before sharing, check!

## 5. **Check real data**

If you cannot find dates, names of people or companies, then be more suspicious. If instead you do find them, check with a search engine on the Internet. For example, you can check part of an unusual sentence in the news. If in your authoritative sources there is no reference to the news you are suspicious about, then it must be a hoax. It often happens that news is re-written, news which was divulged months or years before is re-proposed by various sites. In this case you can be sure that it is a hoax!

## 6. **Famous hoaxes**

Visit the numerous sites that unmask hoaxes on the Internet. Often the hoax has already been checked and revealed. One of the most famous Italian sites is Paolo Attivissimo's, Disinformatico <http://attivissimo.blogspot.it/> besides the above mentioned Facebook page, B.U.T.A.C., where you can find advice on how to debunk a large number of hoaxes. In English, the most famous site is Snopes, and you can find the ten top sites here: <http://www.techrepublic.com/blog/10-things/top-10-sites-to-debunk-internet-hoaxes/#>

## 7. **Do not spread false information!**

Sometimes we do not have the time, nor do we want to search the Internet to make sure a shocking piece of news that we have just read is true. In this case avoid sharing and spreading the news that you are not sure

about. 90% of the photographs with posts on Facebook are hoaxes! If your friend posts news that smells fishy, be suspicious and critical: search the Internet yourself, and if you understand that the news is unfounded, leave a comment to explain the mistake your friend has made. This way even your friend's friends will know that the news is fake, you must inform them correctly.

## Why do hoaxes spread?

When a hoax is unmasked, we quite naturally wonder who would have the time to waste inventing and spreading false news. There are many reasons, however they may be classified as follows:

- **Profit**  
There are websites that earn money by selling advertising banners on their site, therefore the more a hoax is shared through the social networks, the more people will visit the site and the more money will go into their pockets!. Other cases are real scams, that invite the user to make donations to inexistent humanitarian causes.
- **Discrediting an opponent**  
In some cases hoaxes are artfully created with the intention to discredit someone or to call into question a subject matter that could be inconvenient from an economic and idealistic point of view, which is the case in some of the Italian national newspapers.
- **Obsessive need to draw attention**  
Just for the purpose of attracting attention and making people talk about them, there are people who are ready to spread false news. These people share a hoax without reflecting on it first, thinking they are being helpful to others.

## Famous hoaxes: the “chemtrails” legend

Since 1995 our skies have been crossed by a flying hoax, the chemical contrails hoax. According to some, in fact, the white contrails you see in the sky when a plane passes, are actually chemical substances that poison the air and therefore poison the Earth's inhabitants. On the website of CICAP, the Italian Committee for the Investigation of Claims on the Paranormal, you can read the full story, from its very origin.

In fact, the legend began with Bill Brumbaugh, an anchor-man at an American radio who, observing the white contrails in the sky, supposed they could be toxic substances coming from the plane fuel. He managed to get some samples of plane fuel and asked the microbiologist Larry Wayne Harris to analyse them because he could not afford the proper analyses. The microbiologist analysed the samples but never published the results due to legal problems. In fact he was arrested twice for possession of anthrax and bubonic plague, for use as chemical weapons.

In 1997, Richard Finke, his neighbour and friend forwarded an email on bioterrorism to a selected list, saying that the fuel that was analysed contained a highly toxic pesticide, 1.2 Ethylene Dibromide. In the message the details of the techniques that were used for the analyses were not specified, and later it was discovered that the laboratory references were false. Notwithstanding all this, as it often happens, the news spread, with various additions and changes.

In 1999 the journalist, William Thomas, during a famous radio programme called “Coast to Coast AM” spoke of the chemical trails. It must be pointed out that the radio programme deals with mysteries, conspiracies and ufology. From that day onwards the hoax spread rapidly also thanks to the various media which often spoke of the topic without a critical attitude. All this promoted the legend that has no foundations, and that has even been discussed in the parliaments of different countries around the world.

## Famous hoaxes: vaccines don't cause autism, they save lives

Vaccines have been declared the best medical discovery of the past two centuries, however they too have been accused of being part of a conspiracy. It is well known that vaccines, even though in very rare cases, can cause the disease one is being vaccinated against or complications may arise. In fact, this can happen because in some vaccines, a less virulent virus of the disease is inoculated. Instead it is absurd to believe that the vaccine can cause diseases that are different from those it must fight and that this has been proved.

This whole ugly story began in 1998, when an English doctor, Andrew Wakefield published an article on the authoritative medical journal, The Lancet. The study seemed to show the presence of anti-measles antibodies in the intestine of 12 autistic children. The inquiries that followed proved that Wakefield had manipulated the data of the research and had falsified the conclusions. Actually in the journal it was said that a link between the vaccinations and the symptoms of those children had not been shown, and that further tests had to be carried out. However Wakefield organized a press conference in which he declared that there was a probable link between autism and the vaccines and he suggested an interruption of the MMR measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, that should be replaced by single vaccines for each of the diseases. As there were no vaccines of this type available on the market, he terrified parents all over England. After a series of inquiries carried out by Brian Deer, a zealous journalist, Wakefield confessed he had taken money from a lawyer who was taking care of some applications for reimbursement, for autistic children. Wakefield's study was withdrawn and the doctor was banned from the medical profession.

The effect of this hoax was devastating. In 1998 cases of measles in Great Britain and Wales were 56, but in 2008 this number reached 1348, with two deaths caused directly by measles. In Italy from the start of 2014 to the month of April, there have been 1047 cases of measles!

After Wakefield's story, legends about vaccinations increased: presumed toxicity, presumed connection with diseases and presumed poisoning. Actually to date there are no studies that show that the vaccines are dangerous, there is no proof either that the vaccines are more dangerous than useful. The best proof, which is indisputable, is that billions of people in the world have been vaccinated and there is no record of mass casualties in children, on the contrary, man has reached a mean life span and physical well-being like never before.

## Why are hoaxes harmful?

If you have reached the end of this special report, you already know the answer to this question!

However it is best to explain why, to those who are still convinced that sharing a hoax is not that bad.

In some cases hoaxes only (so to say!) trigger fear of phenomena that are not at all dangerous in real life, such as the above mentioned chemtrails, but these distract us from real problems, as for example climate change. Climate change is a real global problem that affects us all, individually. We constantly hear of crusades against the chemical contrails and their poisoning effect and we do not face real, tangible problems such as climate change!

In other cases hoaxes lead to serious economic damage, if for example the topic is toxic substances present in the products of particular companies. In this case the company is affected negatively and as a consequence also their staff. The worst of cases however is when the hoax regards health and medical problems, as in the case of the vaccines. This has led many parents not to have their children vaccinated, and in this way diseases that seemed to be eradicated are returning and cause useless deaths that could have been avoided.

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