Hoax E-mails and Bonsai Kittens: Are You E-literate in the Docuverse?

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Abstract

As a society we are still to a large degree on that first wave of enchantment and wonder with what the information superhighway has to offer us - instant communication with loved ones and colleagues - either next door, at the next desk or on another continent - beautifully word processed reports, elegant spreadsheets and shopping at midnight in Paris or reading the latest dissertation on Iranian politics.

Our social mantra is very much 'is Internet, is good', and our logic is often placed around a misguided belief that if the information was found on the 'Net, then it must be good'.

This paper discusses the importance of not only having the skills of computer literacy, that is defined as being able to use computers and software to navigate the Internet, but also the importance of information literacy, defined as the skill of being critically literate.

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Artwork: Chip Taylor. Congratulations, you won the lottery in a country whose name you can't even pronounce! A wealthy oil executive in a far-off land wants to give you millions of dollars, right now! Sexy girls want to meet you! Now let's be honest. If someone came to your door and told you any of those things, you'd tell him to get lost. So why do people still fall for this stuff when it's in their e-mail, as if a poorly written message made a weird-sounding pitch any more legitimate? The saddest part is, the only reason annoying e-mail keeps filing your inbox is because The bonsai kitten site featured pictures of kittens in jars and instructions for how to create a bonsai kitten, supposedly a lost art whereby kittens were grown into various shapes depending on the constricting vessels that they were made to live in. Here's an example of the type of text that the site contained: At only a few weeks of age, a kitten's bones have not yet hardened and become osseous. They are extremely soft and springy. In fact, if you take a week-old kitten and throw it to the floor, it will actually bounce! Not surprisingly, animal lovers were infuriated and condemned Animal Freedom receives numerous mails about the Bonsai Kittens. At first we were patient in explaining that the site (made by unknown others) was just a bad joke or a hoax. But time after time we got more astonished about the naivety of people who take this site too seriously. Years ago a similar site has begun where people were asked to send in photos of “cat-scans”. These were pictures of cats placed on copiers. Of course there are real photos of cats on a copier, but the purpose of the site was to offend cat-lovers. These people just enjoy receiving e-mails and like to react to p