

The long, weird history of the Nigerian e-mail scam



Earlier this year, thousands of people checked their e-mail and found a surprise: An American soldier needed help, and there was something in it for them. Their correspondent was a sergeant stationed in Iraq, he explained. He had accumulated millions in hundred-dollar bills—the older ones being phased out by the Treasury—from the cash brought into the country by the American occupation. The soldier needed to launder this money, fast, and needed a stateside bank account to do it. In return for a cut of the total, could he use yours?

Reading this, you're probably already shaking your head: The message is obviously spam. This electronic missive from a 21st-century war seems like just a new, cynical twist on a scam that's a hallmark of the Internet era: advance-fee fraud, also known as "419" (for the fraud designation in the Nigerian criminal code) or "Nigerian letter spam."

Sent out by the tens of thousands to e-mail address lists, 419 messages seek a small investment on the part of the recipient in return for the promise of a huge profit, then create obstacles that require initial investments on the way to the payout—which never quite arrives. Preposterous as the scam seems, it can work. Though many successful 419 scams go unreported, the average take from those we know about is more than \$5,000

per American victim, with some losing much more—\$600,000 from a Czech retiree, \$5.6 million from a US businessman.

The advance-fee scam seems perfectly made for the medium of the Internet, with its anonymity and ability to send thousands of e-mails with a single keystroke. Since the mid-1990s, it has become so common that it is now synonymous with spam for many people—so much so that the “Nigerian prince” serves as a shorthand joke on TV shows like “30 Rock” and “The Office.”

But if the Internet has provided a particularly efficient way to carry out advance-fee scamming, the underlying con is a lot older than most Web users realize. Advance-fee fraud is actually a modern version of the “Spanish Prisoner” con, variations of which have been documented back to the French Revolution. A look back at the con suggests that far from being a testament to the risks of the Internet, it’s a window into much deeper human impulses and fears. The scam tends to arise wherever we assume corruption and confusion are greatest, and its long and twisting story offers a kind of negative portrait of world history—the places over the last few centuries where those fears have most firmly taken root.

Over the years, the shape of the advance-fee con has become so reliable that you can spot it from the first sentence, as familiar as the 12-bar blues. A message arrives claiming to be from someone in a place of global crisis: the son of a Russian oligarch who needs to liquidate a safe deposit box full of Krugerrands, say, or the wife of a deposed Nigerian politician with decades of graft in Swiss accounts. The plea is set in an environment of real global news, and may allude to a mix of real and fake institutions: AngloGold Corp., Apex Paying Bank, Novokuibyshevsk Oil.

The deal is this: You make a small initial outlay (the advance fee), in exchange for an enormous return. But once you take the bait, things inevitably begin to go wrong. The customs staff changes, new bribes are needed, a key person in the transaction falls ill.

Just a little more money, the writer promises, and you'll make it all back. The longer you play along, the more you fall prey to what economists call the "sunk cost fallacy"—you've already put so much money in that it seems crazy to turn back now. By the end, you're just trying to make back what you've lost.

Even the tone of these letters is immediately recognizable. They are written "as fairly well-educated foreigners speak English, with a word misspelled here and there, and an occasional foreign idiom." That quote isn't from the last few years: It's from a New York Times article from 1898, when the Spanish Prisoner scam—minus the computers—had already been running for decades.

While there are even earlier scams with similar outlines, the first recognizable version of the Spanish Prisoner cropped up in the aftermath of the French Revolution. It went like this: A letter arrived describing an aristocrat in exile, say, the Marquis de _____, who in escaping from revolutionary violence had thrown a chest full of jewels into a lake. His faithful servant, now writing this heartfelt letter, had come back to retrieve it and unfortunately ended up in prison. With just a little help from you, a fellow Frenchman, to aid in the servant's bail or escape, you'd earn a portion of the loot. The scheme worked: "Of a hundred such letters" sent by French confidence tricksters, "twenty were always answered," wrote Eugène Vidocq, the French criminal turned detective.

The con got its name a century later, when it was popularized in the United States during the Spanish-American War. Havana and Madrid offered the perfect setting for the letter's promises—remote but not inaccessible, exotic but recognizable, and full of mercenaries, adventurers, and corrupt officers. A detailed, daily presence in the pages of Pulitzer's and Hearst's newspapers, the war provided an ideal context for the story of a military man imprisoned in Spain with money concealed in the United States (say, a shipment of Cuban gold) that he could recover—with your help. Bolstered by current events folded into the story—I was captured at the battle of X, I was friends with famous dead soldier Y—the scam proliferated, and Spanish Prisoner syndicates on the East Coast did a brisk business. By 1910, the author Arthur Train, the John Grisham of his

day, could casually allude to a letter in a short story, confident that his readers would know the character was being taken for a ride: “Gentleman: Arrested by bankruptcy I beg your aid in the recovering of a trunk containing two hundred and fifty thousand dollars deposited at an English station, being necessary to come to Spain....”

Even as it remained popular in the United States, the Spanish Prisoner letter was modified and adopted overseas in the following decades. In Nigeria, in particular, during the wildly corrupt 1980s, millions of paper “419” letters were sent (using counterfeit postage) all over the world. Again, the con fit the context: Victims could be expected to know about the easy money circulating through oil-boom Nigeria, with its featherbedded development contracts and ministerial slush funds, just as they had known about military adventures and hidden gold during the Spanish-American War.

Finally came the Internet, the development for which the Spanish Prisoner seemed tailor-made. The letters could now evolve rapidly, responding in real time to changes in the world (like our sergeant with his stolen cash, who needs to move it following news from the Treasury). As cybercafes opened from Rotterdam to Lagos, they created a venue for sending massive streams of messages, without even the labor involved in forging postage. The shift from letters to e-mail meant they could now incorporate links to corroborating sites and documents, bolstering the pretense of realism on which the con relies. Today, it is as easy to adjust the scam’s specifics to a new crisis as it is to cut and paste.

Why has the advance-fee con survived through all these different eras, all the way up to the Internet age? It’s partly the scam’s structure: It’s a near-perfect con, self-reinforcing and internally consistent. There’s something (sort of) logical about why the writer is resorting to such extreme measures. The reason the prisoner has the loot is the same reason that he needs to split it with you—it’s dirty money, he’s desperate, and he’s willing to trust even a stranger. This mutual dependency answers the perennial con question: Why are you getting a piece of the action at all?

Ultimately, though, the Spanish Prisoner thrives because we all tend to believe that wherever there is instability and corruption in the world, someone is making out like a bandit. Why not us? After all, it's not as if we're stealing from widows and orphans. The money we're being promised is victimless theft, the product of a corrupt environment, and if you didn't get it, it would just be scooped up by crooked officials.

What this suggests is that for all the ways that technology and globalization have changed our world, some things have changed not at all. Advance-fee spam works because we are inured to resource extraction and wartime being zones of greed, confusion, and graft. If the Spanish Prisoner is still with us after centuries, it's a reminder that there's more to blame in our strange modern world than technology itself. Instead, the con's healthy persistence suggests that everything comes back to human nature: to the greed and credulity of us, the targeted victims, and the corrupt, bewildering world that we're still willing to live with.

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