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Tolerating Deception

by Rushworth M. Kidder

Last week, the U.S. presidential candidates ratcheted up their attacks, a virus invaded my computer, and a "2004 Medicare Update" came in the mail. There's an odd but telling relationship among these three happenings. It has to do with a public indifference to dishonesty.

The Medicare update looked just official enough to make me open it. It was computer-printed on one of those sealed, 5.5" by 7.5" carbon-paper forms in a bureaucratic typewriter-style font. Inside was a postcard warning "Seniors" that they needed to understand how new Medicare proposals would affect them. Then it asked for dates of birth, phone numbers, and names of addressee and spouse. The small print said "Not affiliated with or endorsed by any governmental agency."

Nothing new here, of course. In recent years, direct mailers have devised ever-craftier ruses to get people to open their letters. This one, however, had overtones of a new form of identity theft. Called "phishing," it depends on luring Internet users to Web sites apparently maintained by reputable firms. Once there, the respondents are asked to divulge personal information with which the scammers can gain access to their bank and credit-card accounts. A new report from the Anti-Phishing Working Group, a consortium of some 250 companies, found that such scams have recently increased by more than 50 percent a month, reaching a record high in June.

Was my envelope a direct-mail phish? If so, that's illegal. Even if not, it was the result of a fraud carefully engineered to make me open the envelope.

Well, you say, big deal? So I was hoodwinked into opening an envelope, so what? For answers, consider the second incident: the virus attack. It appears that, over the weekend, a notorious virus named Netsky found its way into a message sent to me from a colleague. Slipping past my virus detection system, it lurked in my computer helplessly until I took the first step. All it wanted me to do was open the message -- which, when I did, caused my email system to crash.

For both the direct-mail scammers and the computer hackers, the first and most important task was to get me to look -- to tear open the envelope or click the message. Junk email is nothing new. But increasingly the virulent emails are coming from addresses that look just enough like colleagues, friends, or familiar organizations that you're tempted to open them. In this case, I fell for it.

What's all this got to do with the presidential campaign? By all accounts, this is already one of the most negative, attack-oriented political seasons on record. We've all got mute buttons on our TV remotes. But the visuals, artful and wily, still intrigue us. "This is important," they tell us. "Watch this, listen to this, let this into your thought so we can shape your opinion!" All the ads need is our willingness to watch. And watch we do, even though we suspect that much of what we're seeing lies somewhere between wily spin and groundless assertion.

It would seem in other words, that we're drifting unwittingly into a bland tolerance of low-grade deception. We know, intellectually, that much of what the U.S. Postal Service delivers is designed to trick us. We realize that much of what lands in our computer inbox is rancid with

porn or insidious with infection. We understand that much political advertising pushes spin well past the edge of what, among private citizens, would be considered libelous.

What's odd in all of this is the absence of outrage. It's as though, in our eagerness to be tolerant and nonjudgmental, we allow ourselves to be deceived. It's as though we believed that, in a complex world, honesty was passé and candor an impossibly high standard. True, we don't want to be closed-minded, but that need not condemn us to be conjured by duplicity and duped by connivance.

What's needed, here, is an increasingly rigorous demand for honesty. We do have it in our power, after all, to condemn *every* effort at deception -- however commonplace, however expected, however frequent. Otherwise, the risk is that we'll become so tolerant of deception that we won't bother to resist it. That's when the scammers and hackers and spinners will have won.