

Years ago, we were visiting my grandparent's at their home in what is now Cape Coral. As the adults sat talking out on the porch, my sister and I wandered off to rummage around the house, look at the old newspapers, pictures and antiques. Their house was old, dark, dusty, cluttered and for two kids...an archeological adventure! On this particular outing, we found a magazine with advertisements for patent medicines and inventions, which years ago could have been purchased through the mail. The claims that accompanied these treasures were fantastic. Mere spoonfuls of a tonic could cure hundred's of ailments. Another ad claimed that simply wearing a mysterious device could make weak men strong and women more ... "womanly". Always the young skeptic, I shook my head and wondered out loud to my sister, Julie. "Why would anyone have believed this stuff?" Julie pitched the magazine back in pile of papers, creating a little poof of dust in the dim light. "I don't know... I guess they *needed* to believe it."

I was recently reminded of my sister's words, when a friend sent me an email of a giant 20' alligator eating a moose. The title block said "THIS IS REAL... SEND TO EVERYONE YOU KNOW!" Well, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, so even though this was a "real hoot", it was obviously fake. Yes, a genuine giant moose-eating alligator would have been amazing, but the fact that there is something inside of all of us that actually wants to believe it, is equally amazing.

As innocent as these "Photoshop" pranks might seem, there are also a great many harmful, patently untrue and just plain mean pieces of misinformation that are constantly being spread and promoted as factual. Again... such serious theories and accusations should require equally serious critical analysis and proof. But instead, it seems that the simple act of something being broadcast on TV or being published in a blog, email or newspaper, automatically gives something the weight of truth. I think it may be because as humans, we're all subconsciously prewired to look for information that fits in with or validates our preconceived notions, fears and desires.

A few days ago, my sister forwarded me a particularly scary and divisive chain email she had received and added, "I can't believe my friend thinks this is true!!" Her friend had set aside her skepticism in favor of the forwarded emails passionate accusations and her own fears. So, I sent back a link to a reliable site that debunks such claims and typed below it "It's clearly not true, but remember... some people will still feel the need to believe it."

We are (generally) an amazing and intelligent species capable of creating remarkable technologies and solving complicated problems. But if we don't use the tools of critical thinking that we've learned from the Ancient Greeks or at least the skeptical skills that we've learned from buying used cars, we risk being trapped by our own fears and prejudices.

But then... don't take my word for it.