

The Art of Hacking Humans: Intro to Social Engineering

Scam Messages

Scam messages also known as advanced fee fraud messages, Nigerian letter or 419 scam messages involve scammers tricking victims into sending them money in anticipation of receiving far more money in return. The name 419 (four-one-nine) scam emanates from the section 419 of chapter 38 of the Nigerian criminal code pertaining to obtaining property under false pretence and cheating (International Centre for Nigerian Law, 2017); and the term 4-1-9 is also used as a slang in Nigeria denoting fraud. There is a tendency for the perpetrators of the crime to be of Nigerian origin, hence the reference to the Nigerian criminal code and also the name “Nigerian letter”, but the perpetrators are not only Nigerians, and does not originate from only Nigeria. As discussed in the brief historical overview, the Spanish prisoner scam and the letter from Jerusalem were precedents to scam messages.

The scam messages usually come in email or social media messages (which may still refer back to email) supposedly coming from a wealthy person in a country devastated by natural or human disasters (earthquake, flood, war, corruption, etc) claiming there is some wealth stuck somewhere which can only be accessed after certain payments are made. The scammer seeks victims that will make such payments which are a very small fraction of the stuck wealth in return for a reward that will more than cover the expenses involved in making that payment.

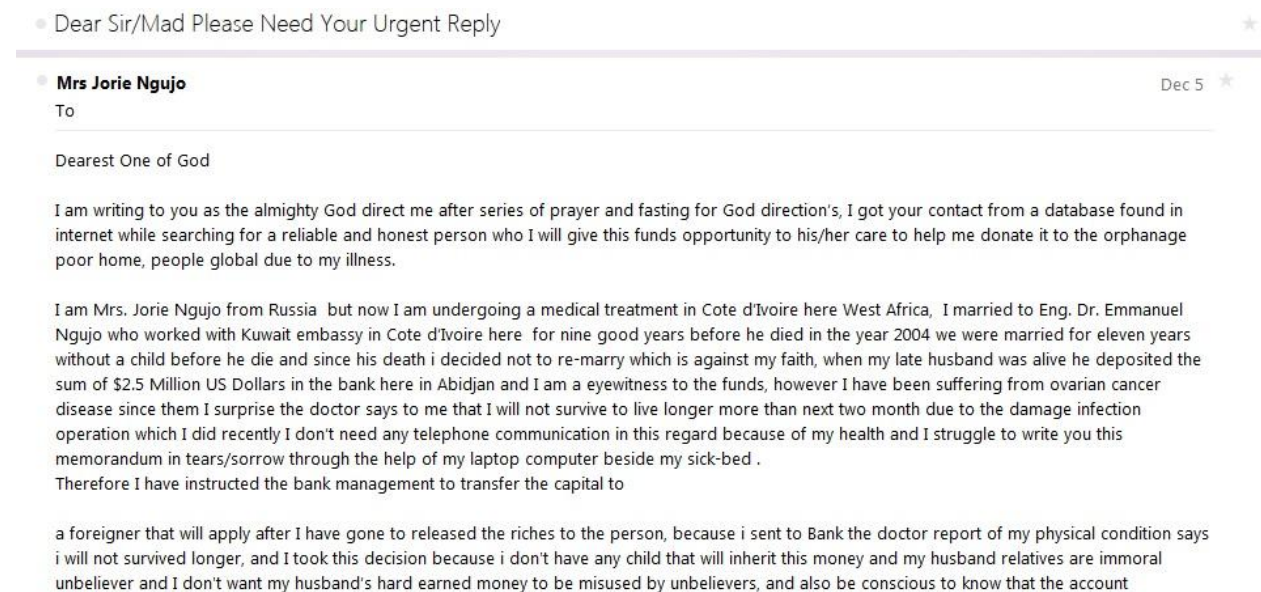


Figure 2: Sample scam email

A common strain of the email scams involves a message being received on social media, like Facebook, appearing to be from a lady apparently seeking a relationship. The lady states that she prefers to communicate through email and offers an email for the communication. If her message receives a positive reply, she introduces herself and even sends pictures claiming she is looking for a relationship. When another positive response is received regarding her plight, she then states that she is from a country ravaged by war (like Libya, Syria, South Sudan and so on) and the daughter of an influential wealthy leader who was killed in the war (might even include a link to a genuine news website showing that such a wealthy influential leader was killed) and that her father bequeathed his wealth to her (stating a very large sum of money, probably amassed illegally). She claims to be a refugee in somewhere like Cote D'Ivoire under the care of a Reverend and that she cannot access her inherited wealth without trustee. Hence; she requires the victim to be the trustee in exchange for a share of the wealth, but there would be some fees that have to be paid first by the trustee before the funds can be released by the bank that holds the wealth. If the payment is made, the scammer would probably continue giving excuses for more payments to be made and continue milking the victim until the scammers decides he has had enough of the victim or the victim realizes it is con.

The scammers are commonly referred to as "Yahoo boys", and such email scams known as "Yahoo-yahoo" in Nigeria. They usually consider themselves to be modern day Robin Hoods stealing from the greedy rich and giving to the poor (although in reality they are more like Robin Brain from 90's cartoon show *Pinky and the Brain* who steals from the rich and gives to himself). The scammers take advantage of not only greed to defraud their victims, but pity and willingness to help as well.

In order to avoid falling victim of email scams, ignore unsolicited offers, especially offers that appear too good to be true. There is also a tendency for some scams to claim being from a person of Semitic middle-eastern or North-African origin, yet the person's picture depicts a black West-African; the English and syntax of the message are also sometimes not very good. Being aware of such details should help keep you from falling victim to email scams.

References:

International Centre for Nigerian Law (2017) *Criminal Code Act-Part IV to the end* [Online]. Available from: <http://www.nigeria-law.org/Criminal%20Code%20Act-Part%20VI%20%20to%20the%20end.htm> (Accessed: 1 November, 2017).