In discussing the fundamental attributes of information that we protect through information security, Donn B. Parker included authenticity and integrity along with confidentiality, control, availability and utility to constitute what I term as the Parkerian Hexad. Today I want to start discussing the relationship between authenticity and integrity in defining integrity of human behavior, not just data security. I have several cases to present and today will start with the case of the annoying envelope.

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In late December 2010, my wife and I received an official-looking letter with what appeared to be a sticker similar to those used by the US Postal Service to certify or register mail:

The “sticker” was in fact printed directly on the envelope.

The upper left corner of the envelope included an intimidating warning forbidding tampering. There was no organization named in the return address:

The section of the US Code named in the warning is indeed a warning against “Obstruction of
correspondence” <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode18/usc_sec_18_00001702---000-.html> but there is no mention of a fine.

The envelope contained a flier from Twin City Subaru in Berlin, VT <http://www.twincitysubaru.com/index.htm> advertising their ironically named “Share the Love” event. The misleading envelope was presumably designed to increase the probability that people would open it.

We had received an identical mailing in December 2009 and I personally went to the dealership with the envelope in hand to complain about the effect of such fraudulent misrepresentation on elderly recipients. I myself had found my heartbeat increasing as I opened the original letter in 2009 – and then a sense of outrage that I had been tricked into opening junk mail.

This year, I filed a complaint with the United States Postal Inspection Service.<https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov/contactUs/filecomplaint.aspx>

Readers would do well to examine any letter that has official-looking, possibly intimidating material on the front or back but no identification of the sender. If what appears to be a sticker is actually printed on the envelope, you should be skeptical of anything in the envelope.

I think the designer of this scam has questionable moral standards and is deluded about the effectiveness of his marketing scheme. Misrepresenting the contents of an envelope to intimidate people into opening it is surely counterproductive. Scaring people against their will is not normally associated with warm, positive feelings about the dishonest sender. (When my wife was in the service department of this Subaru dealership the day I phoned them with my complaint about the envelope, another customer agreed that the inauthentic envelope made him mad too.) If the car dealership has people who are willing to lie on an envelope, why would anyone trust them to be honest in their commercial dealings? Would you trust such a person to give you a fair deal on a trade-in?

So data authenticity – the correct attribution or labeling of information – is a good standard for demonstrating moral integrity and trustworthiness.

Next time I’ll continue with additional cases of misrepresentation.

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