



News analysis

Newsbook

Koch-ups and conspiracies

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FOR a moment, they almost had us fooled. It looked very much like a press release from Koch Industries, announcing that the big American conglomerate would [stop funding various lobby groups](http://www.scribd.com/doc/45044630) (<http://www.scribd.com/doc/45044630>) that question the scientific consensus on global warming or oppose laws to curb emissions. Earlier this year Greenpeace [issued a report detailing Koch's aid](http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/media-center/reports/koch-industries-secretly-fund/%20) (<http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/en/media-center/reports/koch-industries-secretly-fund/%20>) to such groups, calling it "a financial kingpin of climate-science denial". The *New Yorker* followed up with a [profile of the company and its owners](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer) (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/08/30/100830fa_fact_mayer), the brothers David and Charles Koch, detailing their generous, if discreet, support for these and other right-wing courses. If all this adverse publicity had indeed induced a bout of "climate conscience" in the brothers, it would be quite some story.

But it was a spoof. A well-executed one, mind. The release appeared on Friday on www.koch-inc.com (<http://www.koch-inc.com>), which one might easily have assumed to be the American conglomerate's official website. Someone had gone to the trouble of registering and creating this site in the hope that it would convince journalists "checking" the story that it was authentic. By Monday it seemed to have been taken down or blocked, and Google was redirecting searchers to [the company's real homepage](http://www.kochind.com/newsroom/news_releases.aspx) (http://www.kochind.com/newsroom/news_releases.aspx).

As far as we know, no news organisation fell for the hoax: the *New York Times's* [environment blog](http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/a-koch-industries-climate-change-spoof/) (<http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/10/a-koch-industries-climate-change-spoof/>) and a few (<http://thehill.com/blogs/e2-wire/677-e2-wire/133121-koch-industries-denies-affiliation-with-phony-press-release>) other (<http://gigaom.com/cleantech/is-koch-backing-away-from-support-for-climate-change-denial/>) websites (<http://www.bnet.com/blog/clean-energy/the-greening-of-koch-industries-8212-psych/3415>) ran stories noting it as a spoof. But the pranksters could all too easily have scored a hit, as BBC Radio demonstrated last week. It [broadcast an interview](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/dec/06/radio-4-james-naughtie-jeremy-hunt) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/dec/06/radio-4-james-naughtie-jeremy-hunt>) with a construction worker posing as Mike Crockart, a junior member of Britain's coalition government, saying he was preparing to resign over the increase in university fees. (In an example of life imitating art, three days later [the real Mr Crockart did resign](http://news.scotsman.com/politics/Edinburgh-MP-Mike-Crockart-quits.6655760.jp) (<http://news.scotsman.com/politics/Edinburgh-MP-Mike-Crockart-quits.6655760.jp>) over this issue.)

As the *NYT's* blogger notes, the Koch spoof bore the hallmarks of [the Yes Men](http://theyesmen.org/) (<http://theyesmen.org/>), a group of pranksters whose stated aim is "identity correction" —shaming public figures and corporations by putting out fake press releases in which they own up to their alleged misdeeds and promise to change. Back in 2004 a member of the group was [interviewed by BBC World Television](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2004/dec/04/india.broadcasting) (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2004/dec/04/india.broadcasting>), posing as a spokesman for Dow Chemical and promising \$12 billion in compensation to the victims of the Bhopal disaster. Several other news organisations wrote up



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Contact: Kate Ann
kate.ann@koch.com
281-305-

KOCH INDUSTRIES ANNOUNCES NEW ENVIRONMENTAL

WICHITA, Kan. – Koch Industries remains committed to environmental stewardship, announcing today that it will restructure its support for organizations that undertake climate change research and advocacy.

Since its founding, Koch Industries has been focused on achieving environmental and using resources efficiently. Through extensive and award-winning investments, Koch Industries has implemented innovative practices that and greenhouse gas emissions in the manufacture and distribution of our

the interview, believing it to be real. The group has set up a hoaxers' training college, called Yes Lab, to "help progressive groups carry out Yes-Men-style projects on their own", so it is possible that the Koch Industries spoof was the handiwork of one of their pupils. Other recent targets of the Yes Men's brand of sarcasm include [Apple](http://theyesmen.org/blog/apple-reacts) (<http://theyesmen.org/blog/apple-reacts>) and [Chevron](http://www.chevron-weagree.com) (<http://www.chevron-weagree.com>) .

It's not easy to be spoof-proof

Although these big companies no doubt have various legal means to curb the activities of impostors once they have revealed themselves, it is difficult and expensive for them to do much to prevent hoaxes in the first place. Buying up all the plausible alternative addresses for your company's official website would be expensive. A quick check on [Network Solutions](http://www.networksolutions.com) (<http://www.networksolutions.com>) revealed that www.kochindustries.info (<http://www.kochindustries.info>) , www.kochindustry.net (<http://www.kochindustry.net>) , www.koch-inc.biz (<http://www.koch-inc.biz>) and all sorts of other variations are still available to be bought. As we recently reported in [a piece about internet governance](http://www.economist.com/node/17627815) (<http://www.economist.com/node/17627815>) , the number of website suffixes, and therefore the number of permutations that companies would need to register to defend their brands online, has been multiplying.

And that's before we get on to social media. [BPGlobalPR](http://twitter.com/BPGlobalPR) (<http://twitter.com/BPGlobalPR>) , a bogus Twitter feed that mocks BP's public-relations response to its Gulf of Mexico spill, has gained over 180,000 followers, about ten times as many as the company's [real Twitter account](http://twitter.com/BP_America) (http://twitter.com/BP_America) for America. Surely the real Steve Jobs of Apple cannot be behind [this Twitter account](http://twitter.com/ceostevejobs) (<http://twitter.com/ceostevejobs>) (despite its massive 333,000 followers) or [this Facebook page](http://www.pcworld.com/zoom?id=162166&page=1&zoomIdx=1) (<http://www.pcworld.com/zoom?id=162166&page=1&zoomIdx=1>) . The possibilities for spoofing seem endless.

So far most online corporate hoaxers seem relatively harmless. They are doing nothing worse than satirising companies or just having a bit of fun. But it is not hard to imagine more malign motives: creating a false rumour to profit from manipulating a firm's share price, for example. So, added to the emerging risk of having their corporate secrets WikiLeaked (or indeed having their websites attacked by hackers in retaliation for cutting their links with WikiLeaks), firms must also now be constantly on the lookout for online impostors. Even if the pranksters' motives are not malign, they can do companies and their brands a great deal of damage, in no time at all. Now that we're on internet time, a hoax can travel around the world before the truth has got its boots on. And there's no guarantee that all those who read or heard about a fake announcement will get to hear that it was in fact a hoax.

Read on: [Companies must adapt to a WikiLeaks world where no secret is safe](http://www.economist.com/node/17680643?story_id=17680643) (http://www.economist.com/node/17680643?story_id=17680643)

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