Chapter 17

Inspecting Spam: Unsolicited Communications on the Internet

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INTRODUCTION

Much coverage of the Internet focuses on undesirable, sometimes intrusive, communication, often referred to as "spam." Spam has been decried as antisocial, wasteful, and/or fraudulent, with individuals, organizations, and media reports widely advocating regulation or outright banning of the practice, yet no uniform definition exists. Participants in the electronic communication and commerce process generally operate on an "I know it when I see it" basis that is shaped by their personal experience and expectations.

This chapter begins with a brief history of this new medium, then defines spam within a typology of undesirable Internet communications. Conflicting definitions of spam are examined in light of their implications for suggested remedies. The paper concludes with recommendations on controlling spam for individuals, managers, and policy makers.

HISTORY OF ADVERTISING ON THE INTERNET

Advertising is "paid, non-personal communication about goods, services, etc., transmitted through the mass media by an identified sponsor" (Evans and Berman, 1997). Because of its reliance on mass media, advertising has been viewed as communication of a single message to a mass audience. Communication on the

Internet can take on many forms, not all of which can be fairly classified as a mass medium (Hoffman and Novak, 1995; Morris and Ogan, 1996).

If we accept the Internet as a mass communication medium, advertising on an *ad hoc* basis has occurred since the development of commercial service providers – prior to that, messages were not "paid." Early advertising was placed in specific mailing lists or newsgroups by subscribers. With the Internet's expanded reach and the development of the World Wide Web, businesses have recognized greater value in the medium, and the number and kinds of advertising have increased.

Company websites are developed and maintained as advertisements for company products and services, and increasingly for many other commercial purposes. Commercial websites can reduce marketing costs and improve relationships with customers (Peterson, Balasubramanian et al., 1997), but they are expensive to create and maintain, and consumers must seek them out.

Some businesses advertise directly to consumers via e-mail, or place advertisements in Usenet newsgroups. These "push" methods have several advantages: advertisers obtain extraordinary reach at a minimal cost, and can target specific consumer groups either by accessing subscriber profiles in a company like America OnLine (AOL), or by choosing newsgroups that relate to their offering.

E-mail or newsgroup advertising has some serious disadvantages that relate both to its "push" nature and to Internet culture. This type of advertising is similar to direct mail or telemarketing solicitation in that consumers view it negatively if they are not interested in the offering. Within Internet culture, such unsolicited commercial communications often provoke negative and even virulent attacks from those who receive them.

TYPES OF UNDESIRABLE INTERNET COMMUNICATION

A typology of undesirable Internet communications was derived from examination of academic research, trade, and technical articles and informal discussions with computer users and the authors' direct experience. The proposed classification, illustrated in Table 1, includes eight types of electronic communication: sales pitches, other persuasive messages, off-topic posts, flaming, flooding, denial of service, and at least in some cases, banner ads, and "push" technologies.

Other persuasive messages include messages that express political, religious, or other personal convictions. Unlike sales pitches, they "sell" ideas, not products or services. Off-topic posts are messages that violate appropriate content guidelines. These messages are often cross-posted or multi-posted (sent to multiple related or unrelated groups).

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