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Drinking from the Firehose

An Interview With an E-Mail Postmaster

by Eleanor Cook (Appalachian State University)

Column Editor: **Mike Markwith** (The Faxon Company)

In my last column, I bemoaned the fact that sometimes e-mail does not make it to its destination. This phenomenon does not seem to happen very often. According to those who know, the Internet is probably about 98% reliable but lately I've experienced several recent failures in transmission all due to some system failure at one node or another. In every case, the message being sent or received was time-sensitive, relatively crucial, and caused confusion or alarm by not being transmitted in the usual timely fashion. In an effort to understand the mysteries of transmission, I have occasionally queried the e-mail administrator or "postmaster" at my institution. This person (I assumed it was a real person) was always very helpful and quick about responding to my questions. One day I had a particularly burning question that could not wait; I actually picked up the telephone and called the number listed by his name in the campus directory. A human voice answered; yes, this WAS a real person! After receiving all kinds of wonderful information, I was quite reassured; e-mail is just like your hometown post office. And like a local post office, there are only so many factors they control.

After realizing that the postmaster was an approachable and friendly guy, I asked him if he would be willing to be interviewed for this column. After all, plenty of people out there in **ATG**-land might still be thinking that the "postmaster" is some kind of computer program! Our thanks to Terry Combs, the Appalachian State Postmaster, for agreeing to this interview.

ATG: Let's talk about what you do. A lot of people don't know who or what the postmaster is; some may think it's a machine. They don't know it's a real person. Is this your major job?

TC: No, this is just a sideline.

ATG: Is that typical?

TC: I don't know if it's typical or not, but that's what it is here. It's part of the job of administering an e-mail system. You get it set up, and then you've got to be sure everyone gets their mail. Someone has to be sure that the messages that don't exactly go through get routed as accurately as possible.

ATG: And IF possible, too.

TC: That's right, because if you get a message back that says "Host Unknown," or "User Unknown," then your postmaster can't help you. He cannot help you solve ID problems with outgoing mail that you initiate; however, your postmaster CAN get messages to you if someone sending you a message has your address slightly incorrect. For instance, if someone sends a message to "cookie" instead of "cookei".

ATG: Can you usually figure out who it is supposed to go to?

TC: Most of time, yes.

ATG: A friend of mine who works at a large university had a problem with having e-mail routed to someone with a similar name and address as hers. Apparently the two addresses were so similar that incoming messages received slightly off-track were sometimes sent to the wrong person. Have you seen problems of this sort? Can you tell by the content of the message who it might belong to?

TC: I mostly just look at the header. It takes me anywhere from 5-30 seconds to figure out what to do with it. Usually it is pretty quick. I don't look at the body of the message in the majority of cases; I can usually tell who it belongs to by the header.

ATG: What does someone have to know to do this job of postmaster?

TC: It doesn't take a lot of exper-

tise, although of course you do have to be comfortable with operating the computer in general. You have to know how to use the tools of the trade, so to speak.

ATG: So, this isn't a very stressful part of your job, is it?

TC: No, it's actually the fun part.

ATG: So, do you get a lot of questions from users?

TC: Not too many phone calls; mostly I get e-mail messages saying thanks for sending that message on (that was incorrectly addressed), and so forth.

ATG: So, what are some things people ought to know, that in your opinion are really important about using e-mail? What kinds of behavior really drive you crazy?

TC: Well, for instance, when people try to continually send something to the same host name over and over when the message comes back "host unknown."

ATG: Do you think there are people out there who are just lazy about sending things to the right address?

TC: Possibly. For instance, if someone wants to send a message to a prominent person on campus, they might guess at the address, knowing that the person is well known enough to be recognized. If they get the host name correct, the rest can usually be figured out. Sometimes I can figure out who it goes to by who is sending it, or by the subject line. For instance, if the message has something to do with computers and is addressed to "EJones," I know it should go to Ernest Jones, Head of Computer Management Services. While there may be other people on campus with the last name "Jones," I can usually narrow it down pretty fast in such cases.

ATG: It IS a lot like being a postal carrier.

TC: Yes it is, in a way. Knowing little things about individuals on campus, like nicknames, etc. can help get the message through. For instance, messages to Ernest Jones are sometimes sent to "Ernie." To me, it is obvious who that is.

ATG: The human touch can make all the difference.

TC: That's true. If a new person came on the job and wasn't familiar with the campus, it might make it a little harder for awhile.

ATG: So, do you get involved in any training, other than to answer questions over e-mail or by telephone that you get from users?

TC: Not really. Mostly I just answer little individual questions that come up from time to time. For instance, people often ask whether a message is going to go via BITNET or Internet. The way our system is set up, how you construct the address, it's not going to make a big difference; it will go through anyway.

ATG: But isn't it good practice to set up an address with IN% "as part of the address?"

TC: Yes, it is. Those quotes preserve the case. And it signifies that it isn't a local address. Some systems are case-sensitive. But most systems will convert what you send to what it wants to see.

ATG: It sounds pretty complicated, but the user doesn't see most of the complexity.

TC: The system will usually do whatever it needs to do to find a combination of cases that recognizes the address as one that it will accept.

ATG: All those kinds of nuances are the things that someone behind the scenes has to figure out; it's amazing that so many messages get through at all!

TC: Sorting proper names can be interesting, particularly in student databases.

ATG: In library jargon this is known as a "name authority" dilemma.

TC: Spacing, upper and lower case,

sequence, etc. can all confound the situation.

ATG: I've already touched a little bit on the issue of who can look at e-mail messages. People are sometimes paranoid about that. Do they need to be? After all, e-mail accounts at state institutions are state property, therefore subject to public scrutiny upon request.

TC: We generally would not go into accounts UNLESS we had proof of conflict of interest, criminal wrongdoing, etc. There have been cases of this. Without going into specifics, we have found members of the academic community using university resources to gain personal monetary reward through consulting.

Another example of wrongdoing would be harassment. This usually involves one student harassing another. With e-mail, there is little chance for anonymity. It is just plain foolish for an individual to commit such an act; it's like writing a threatening letter and signing your name. However, in most cases of this kind, the threatening individual plainly wished the recipient to know who he was.

ATG: The university has a written policy about such matters; I have a copy of it. So what do you do in such cases?

TC: If it is a serious enough matter, we'll freeze the account and the information contained in it can be used as evidence.

ATG: What if someone in your job has unethical motivations, or conversely, sees some immoral situation that they do not approve of personally? The person who monitors e-mail could use his position unethically OR could use information that may be construed as gossip to hurt someone. How do you deal with this? The e-mail postmaster could be in a good position to blackmail people!

TC: That would be an unforgivable situation. It's a public trust sort of situation, like a doctor or psychiatrist. It's something that just isn't done. People's personal messages are none of my business; like an old-time telephone operator on a party line. You have to respect people's privacy and get rid of prob-

lems as they come up. It's like the old-fashioned concept of the good steward: wealthy people in days gone past had servants who turned a blind eye to whatever acts the master committed. It was not the steward's place to pass judgment.

ATG: I'm sure though, if someone wanted to, they could really spill a lot of dirt on someone, if anyone cared, that is. It would mostly be local politics, not *National Enquirer* level gossip! Of course, everything I've read about e-mail etiquette has warned that you should never say anything over the Net that is in any way confidential or could embarrass you in anyway. That doesn't mean it doesn't happen. The "forward" command has no strings attached to it.

TC: Sure. Anything you don't want to see in the newspaper. But that doesn't mean people don't make innocent mistakes sometimes. For instance, I'll send someone a message as Postmaster, and they'll send a "reply" to the person they originally got a message from, but it comes to me first. Now, they didn't mean for ME to see that message.

ATG: So how do you deal with this?

TC: I send it back to them with a message at the top saying something like, "You didn't really mean to send that message to ME, did you?" That usually cures them. And then of course, I explain to them simply what they need finish sending the message to the original destination.

ATG: You really ARE the good steward, aren't you?

TC: I really don't see that many off-the-wall messages. They are mostly very routine. There really aren't too many big problems. Like you said, it's either because someone is in a big hurry or is upset, or it's an initial contact. People who know each other well generally are not going to have any reason to be intercepted, and the postmaster just doesn't have the time to snoop where there isn't a problem.

ATG: Have you ever had someone from the legal system ask for data from an account?