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Drinking From the Firehose — SPAM SPAM SPAM: and MORE SPAM!!! What are we to do?

by Eleanor I. Cook (Appalachian State University, Boone, NC) <cookei@appstate.edu>

SPAM. We're all dealing with it these days. I've been intending to write a column for *ATG* on this topic for months. Now that I am finally researching the situation, I've found other essays expressing similar thoughts. So at the end of this column I'll cite a few so you can read them too if you care to do so.

Here's something everyone agrees about Spam: We HATE IT and wish it would go away! So, why do these people perpetuate it? We assume there are actual human beings somewhere behind this stuff and I want to know what they are thinking. SURELY they know that 99.9% of us are totally uninterested in whatever it is they are peddling. Some of the messages are unreadable anyway. And some would be totally laughable if they weren't so pathetic or offensive.

Unfortunately, the significantly offensive messages are causing major disturbance, so anti-spam legislation is being introduced by Congress. Several bills are pending. The **Senate's Can Spam Act of 2001** (S.630) has the best chance of being passed, according to some observers. There is also the **Wireless Telephone Spam Protection Act** introduced by the House (H.R. 113). While it's true that spam as commercial speech is essentially protected by the First Amendment, consumers also have rights concerning the invasion of their privacy. Unless of course these spammers ARE Terrorists and they're trying to bring down the Internet with this garbage! Well, the al-Qaida couldn't do much worse

to annoy the American public — Spam is wasting so much time that it is becoming a major problem for the working public. There are a number of spam zapper systems available, but I would like to know what is being done to STOP the spam? These people, like stupid cell phone users (especially those talking while driving), need to realize that their actions DO have a real negative consequence and that they need to be held accountable. Spam is making junk mail and telemarketers seem tame.

I have had the same email address for 13 years. Besides that, I have been an e-list editor for about 10 years, which means that my email address is very public. Therefore I am suffering from the wrath of spam. It started slowly and then exploded about six months ago. Our campus email administrator and his colleagues continue to valiantly battle spam the best they can with the resources they have at their disposal. But it's a losing battle. And it's not just me having the problem — anyone who interacts with the Internet marketplace these days has a high probability of having their email address lifted and then distributed to nefarious spammers, no matter what is done to avoid it.

It is only natural at this point to ask — how can we get around this problem? Is there any practical way to avoid it without compromising our civil liberties? Of course, we librarians are quite aware that U.S. citizens' civil liberties are in serious jeopardy.

ardly in the name of "homeland security," and to add to this problem, we are constantly targeted as "consumers" by marketplace forces we have little control over.

Forget reading the privacy policies companies issue — they can change and they do, often. I pore over my library's database licenses with a fine-toothed comb, but I do not always take the same care when shopping on the Internet. Not because I don't care, but because even if I am diligent, the next time I visit that site, they may have totally redesigned the page and often when they do, a return visitor has to start all over again and reset preferences. Here's the problem in a nutshell: every company out there is convinced that THEY are your universe. Excuse me, but you're NOT. Each family/person/household, whatever you want to call it, has a multitude of services hitting on them at the same time, whether it be through email spam, telemarketers or paper junk mail.

Think about the old days: What if you had to sign a license agreement every time you bought a piece of clothing at a local department store? Or bought toothpaste at the drug store? Or bought green peppers at the grocery store? Any time we buy anything on the Internet, we are entering into a contractual agreement and many of these agreements are underwritten by onerous legal documents in the background. It's true that commercial enterprises have had consumer "contracts" for many years — return and exchange policies, for example. But most of these are navigable by the average consumer. And while I don't mind and might even appreciate getting a flyer in the mail from one of these stores on occasion, if we all received ads every day or every week from these places it would get annoying very quickly.

Not so when dealing with the Internet! Acquisitions and collection development librarians better than anyone, can see where this is going. Remember the stacks of publisher flyers we used to get before email? I don't get as many in paper anymore — but now my email folders are full of crazy messages that have nothing to do with my work!

So, how can you develop a fortress against spam? If your workplace or ISP isn't helping you, it should be. Most are developing or utilizing methods to block unwanted mail.

I cannot possibly describe all the "spaminator" products on the market right now. But I can say, beware of those you get as spam! Allow your ISP (Internet Service Provider) — for personal accounts — or IT (Information Technology) department at your

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issues there, and our patrons might balk at so radical a change.

Equipping our reading room with pull-out bleachers for girls badminton games would be an interesting way to get double duty from our space and increase awareness of the library's resources ~~among web-crazed undergrads who would never otherwise step foot through our doors~~. We were surprised, though, by the suggestion that the library's budget be tied to the fortunes of that team. Perhaps the Budget Director could meet with us again to explain the reasoning.

Our Committee is excited by the architect's proposal for information "kiosks" with directional touch screen "pathfinders."

But if patron questions are to be answered by reference librarians "cleverly hidden" within the kiosks, then we suggest removing the touch screens to free the librarians for face-to-face transactions. We estimate that not installing touch screens could save the University approximately \$10,000. ~~Any volunteers for life in the kiosk?~~

As you said so succinctly in the presentation, it's time for the library to "innovatively re-engineer the information paradigm." *Qu'est-ce-que c'est?* The planned library renovation offers us the perfect opportunity to do just that ~~And to think about early retirement~~. We look forward to working with you and the architectural team toward the completion of this project. ~~Now let's all pray the funding dries up.~~

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place of business to handle it — those of us who are end-users can filter our mail but what we often really need is a way to block it from coming into our accounts at all.

Let me try to describe what is happening on my campus. Our IT people made two major decisions to help build our “gated community.” First — major electronic junk mail distributors have been identified and are being blocked entirely from our campus network. Legally speaking, we are on solid ground because our mission is the education of our students, and this stuff is totally commercial and not part of that mission. Students, faculty and staff who wish to take part in these commercial activities are welcome to do so on their own time and with their own personal equipment.

Second, my university has installed a rating system for identifying potential spam and this system is currently being tested. We have signed up with a non-profit group called the **Mail Abuse Prevention System (MAPS)**. www.mail-abuse.org.

This filtering process helps email recipients determine rules for what they consider spam versus what they consider legitimate, though perhaps unsolicited messages. Messages that rate high enough on the scorecard get a subject header insert that says {SPAM?}. EXAMPLE: I want all the messages from my subscription and book vendors to come to me. However, some of these

messages are currently receiving the {SPAM?} header because of certain holes in the vendors’ system. Spam is determined by a grading system, and some aspects rate a higher score than others. Providing “open relay” rates a score that is worth mentioning. Relay capability means that potential spammers can hide their true intentions and pass their messages through a host server allowing the relay, often “cloaking” malevolent intentions. This can be insidious if the message carries a virus! At best it can be annoying. My university allowed open relay for many years but last year our state auditors directed us to shut down this capability. Unfortunately, many major sites still allow this because they haven’t realized the implications or they haven’t been asked to change it.

I continue to be amazed when I hear the reports that spammers only receive replies from one-half of one percent of the people they contact. And still, this seems to be enough to keep them in business. Another thing that surprises me is that so many people are having problems with spam and they don’t realize it’s so widespread. Yes, I have received the debt-consolidation and mortgage ads, the toner ads, the people from various African nations who want you to send them money, and the totally bizarre and offensive sex ads that come in with suspiciously innocuous subject lines which apparently are supposed to slip through filters only to promise you sex with animals, dead people or worse. It’s as though these spammers are simply doing this just to see if they CAN. This shakes my

faith in the goodness of people — somehow the ability to send spam is only bringing out the worst in humans instead. We must find a way to turn the tide on this trend. Did people have this much trouble when telephones were first invented? I hope not!

The following articles can give you more complete information about legislation, how to use filters and other tricks to avoid spam:

“Anti-spam bills in the works.” by Anne Chen. *E-week*, Aug. 19, 2002, v.19, issue 33, p.36.

“Just say “No” to spam — again.” by Andrew Brandt. *PC World*, Sept. 2002, v.20, issue 9, p.50.

“STOP SPAM!” by Adam C. Engst. *MacWorld*, Aug. 2002, p.82.

“Strategies for winning the war on spam.” by Alex Salkever. *Business Week Online*, Aug. 20, 2002.

“What spam is, how it is used and proposed laws against it.” All Things Considered, National Public Radio transcript for August 15, 2002. [This is available from LexisNexis Academic Universe or from the NPR Website: www.npr.org.]

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Texas Trails — Lost in Austin

by **Thomas W. Leonhardt** (St. Edward’s University)
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“Lost in Austin, Juiced in Houston.” That is all I remember from a song popular many years ago. I always liked the way that opening line flowed, the rhyme, the poetry of it. I can’t remember any other lines from that song so I can’t say whether the song writer was being literal or figurative but having lived in Austin (Texas, that is) for almost a month, I know that “Lost in Austin” is not a metaphor, it is a cry for help in navigating the highways and roads of Austin, and once out of town and safely in Houston, the singer takes to drink to forget the circuitous, loopy routes that make sense only with the realization that, with some luck and a good map, you can get where you are going and back again on the same day.

This is a long way of saying that I have not had the time or the courage to go looking for used book stores in Austin or some good, independent book sellers. But there is an-

other reason for not looking for book stores other than the **Barnes and Noble** where I bought a book of Austin maps. I am still recovering from a move of 2,200 miles from Eugene, Oregon to Austin, Texas in a bright yellow Penske truck 25 feet long and pulling a trailer with my automobile on it.

There are only two of us now. Our children are grown and living on their own with their own stuff. But while they have moved out, I seem to have filled all that empty space with books. During these past few years, I seem to have lost my senses, buying books as if they were disappearing and that in order to preserve enough material for my free time and retirement, I needed to stockpile everything that I might need. Never mind that I can’t keep up with annual publishers’ output, never mind that I work in academic libraries with access to literally millions of titles, never mind that public libraries exist to

provide more leisure reading than there is time for even over several life times.

When I left Klamath Falls last year to move to Germany, I should have learned my lesson. I had to pack scores of boxes of books and resort to a trailer when the truck I rented was full but a few boxes remained on the floor of my apartment. I then transported them to Eugene and put them into storage where they remained until just a few weeks ago.

I held a few books out, some were sentimental favorites, some were modern classics (many of which were Signet Classics, an autodidacts literary education in the making), and some were titles from **Harold Bloom’s** *How to Read and Why*. Oddly enough, I didn’t pack even one of the three greatest American novels: *As I Lay Dying* by **William**

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