

SCI 199 L0161 Short Report #3, 2005-2006

Due in the week of March 6, 2006.

Bulk E-Mail

Something or other about e-mail is one of the biggest scourges of the modern internet, and we call it “spam”.

However, there is some considerable disagreement about exactly what the problem is, what the cause of it is, and what the appropriate remedy is.

There’s very little disagreement that there is a problem. For example, I (ajr) personally get far more e-mail which I consider to be “spam” than I get legitimate e-mail (which I also get a lot of), and there’s even more unwanted e-mail which I don’t even see because of “spam filters”. I spend a significant amount of time simply deleting it all every day. I periodically miss important e-mail messages altogether because they are hidden by the huge volume of undesirable e-mail messages. Furthermore, these days legitimate e-mail which I *send* is often erroneously rejected by “spam filters”, especially by poorly-designed ones—the internet is a very big place, and there’s all sorts of software out there, some better than others.

In short, there is a big mess which greatly harms our ability to use e-mail. Furthermore, the mess is caused by people’s deliberate actions, so the victims are angry... and most e-mail users are victims.

Why did this happen? What happened to the internet e-mail system to get us to this sorry state? (How could such a pervasive problem arise without being solved?) Whose fault is it? Can it be fixed? What should we do about it? What are the implications of different kinds of fixes? Is it a technical problem or a social problem?

Some of this will be the topic of your short report #3.

Your report must be less than two pages long when double-spaced and in a 12-point version of a normal font (such as Times), with one-inch margins all around (top and bottom and left and right).

Answer a few (very few, but more than one) questions such as:

- When was the term “spam” first used to apply to e-mail (and to what related matters has the term legitimately also been applied)? What was e-mail like before then? How inevitable is “spam”? (Make sure your answer to the inevitability question is consistent with the non-existence of “spam” for the majority of the history of e-mail to date!)
- Why are people actually *angered* by “spam”? Isn’t everything in a computer just ones and zeroes? Why is it a big deal?
- What is a “market externality” and how does this relate to unsolicited bulk e-mail? What other forms of unsolicited advertising rely on market externalities? Are people as angry about them as about “spam”? Is *all* advertising theft? (Why not?)
- What are some of the arguments for and against technical solutions to this problem? What are some of the arguments for and against legal solutions to this problem? Is anyone seriously arguing that “spam” is not, in fact, a problem? What are their arguments?

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- What are the arguments for and against limiting anti-spam legislation to apply only to commercial e-mail, rather than to all unsolicited bulk e-mail? More generally, which of the distinctions made between types of unsolicited bulk e-mail are important? What terminological issues are important?
- What facilities are used to send “spam” these days? How does it differ from facilities used in the past? What do ISPs do to try to prevent their users (members) from sending spam? What does the term “spam-friendly ISP” mean, and do they really exist?
- Find interesting things to analyze in the brochure on the web at <http://www.ciniva.com/eblast.cfm>
- Where is “spam” illegal? What precisely is prohibited by these laws? How do the various laws differ? How effective have the laws proved to be? Who supports them and who criticizes them? Which arguments do you agree with?
- Is “targeted advertising” actually better than unsolicited advertising? What forms of advertising are considered more socially acceptable than others? Why are they?
- In what ways is “spam” similar to and dissimilar to the problem of “junk faxes”? What has been done about “junk faxes”, both technically and legally?
- In what silly and irrelevant ways is the term “spam” used these days? Why has this term pervaded the society so fully?

Please refer to the assignment for short report #1 (or the course web page) for advice on citing web pages.