

JUNE 02, 2003

Spam – just another brick in the wall . . .

By now, millions of Americans are sick and tired of the spam that's flooding their in-boxes with unwanted e-mail messages – mostly offering products, services and scams that tell of big bargains, implausible windfalls, garish porno and dumb scenarios for bodily enhancements. In 2003, we're routinely slogging through large amounts of junk e-mail.

These are aggressive advertisements that won't quit. They're doing a lot to pollute the Internet environment.

Various technological and legal remedies have been developed. Filters on e-mail programs can screen messages. Some servers try to limit mass e-mailings. Legislators propose crackdowns on spamsters. But many of the proposed "cures" are apt to damage cyberspace more than improve it.

A communications system that allows only certain incoming messages – perhaps just those sent by people we've heard from before or think we want to hear from again – undermines the Internet's vital expansive spirit. E-mails with valuable content (and who is to judge?) can run afoul of Internet service providers that start acting like censors. And legalistic moves against unfettered outreach to others via the Internet could easily turn repressive while stifling free speech.

Overall, the most likely scenario for the spam problem is that it will keep getting worse. And we'll continue to do what we've already started to do – get used to it.

The spamming of America is not some strange anomaly that's perverting a wondrous technology. It has many precedents.

Nearly a century ago, for instance, radio was a new grassroots phenomenon that responded to community needs without huckstering the listeners. Between the First World War and the early 1930s, however, much of radio went from small-scale, locally-based stations to "chain stations." As the dollar signs grew bigger in radioland, federal authorities sided with the era's corporate broadcasters while cutting back on the hours and watts of nonprofit stations run by colleges, labor unions, civic organizations and religious groups.

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Initially, few people assumed that the airwaves should transmit commercials. And when the ads began to proliferate, a lot of people didn't like what they heard. In 1928, the Federal Radio Commission – predecessor of today's FCC – acknowledged that "advertising is usually offensive to the listening public."

Many Americans were repelled by the new phenomenon of blaring commercials. "Radio broadcasting is threatened with a revolt of listeners," Business Week declared in 1932. The magazine added: "Newspaper radio editors report more and more letters of protest against irritating sales ballyhoo."

But commercials on the radio – and then, starting at mid-century, on television – became facts of media life. The airwaves had been hijacked by corporations, which used their ill-gotten gains to turn broadcast outlets into advertising-driven cash cows.

During the past decade, the Internet has undergone a similar transformation. Yes, there are ways to dodge spam, navigate between pop-up ads and surf past the more obnoxious manifestations of cyber-shilling on the Web. But the commercialization of the Internet seems inexorable, and every year finds cyberspace more severely afflicted by advertising than the year before.

In the midst of the Internet's commercial descent, the anger that some people feel about it is understandable. But here's a reality worth pondering: While there's outrage as more and more spam and other profit-fixated gunk keeps appearing on our computer screens, the Internet is merely catching up with many other realms of our daily lives.

We rarely question the ongoing presence of advertisements on television and radio (including the "enhanced underwriter credits" on PBX and NOR) as well as on billboards, clothes and a vast array of other available surfaces. We expect ads to come at us every time we pick up a newspaper or magazine. For a price, sporting events and stadiums are named for corporations. And on and on. The branded life seems to be spreading wherever we turn. And commercialism never recedes – it only expands, cheapening perceptions of life by equating money with "worth" and possessions with happiness and attractiveness.

The real indication of commercialism's insidious success is not so much that it bothers people as that it doesn't. We've gotten accustomed to the assault. And now we're getting used to the incessant intrusions on personal computers.

What's happening to the Internet is what's been happening all around us. But that's no cause for complacency. On the contrary. ■