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## **‘Press Delete’ – The Politics and Performance of Spamculture**

Hosted by The Art of the Overhead

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A combination of research presentation and artistic intervention, the ‘Press Delete’ panel/performance expands the common format of conference panels through a dynamic double movement: being simultaneously on and of spam, it reflects the fragile socio-cultural negotiation at the heart of filtering ‘meaningful’ discourse out of informational flows. A critical garbage-archaeology, illuminating ‘dark sides’, ‘unintended consequences’ and creative acts connected to spam.

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Spam, you know it when you see it, at least this seemed to be the implicit assumption of Bill Gates when he in his 1998 article 'On Spam: Wasting time on the Internet' encouraged Internet users faced with unsolicited e-mails to 'press delete'. A few years later, at the 2004 Davos World Economic Forum, Gates bravely announced that 'Spam will soon be a thing of the past' as Microsoft was now introducing software that would make spammers 'pay' through a backlash effect on their computing power. From simply pressing delete to employing Bayesian e-mail filtering, the sheer plurality of methods proposed by Internet security companies to dispose this immaterial waste product, are perhaps at their most useful as testimonies to the inherent mutability of not only the object of spam but of networked communications at large. The endless quest of anti-spam research in defining and eliminating spam simply reflects the fragile socio-cultural as well as economical negotiation at the heart of filtering 'meaningful' discourse out of informational flows. As a variable object ranging from fraud letters, unsolicited bulk e-mails to malware – spam has remained a marginal phenomenon in contemporary cultural analysis. With a notable exception from Alessandro Ludovico (2005), it is foremost artists who have critically investigated the meaning of spam and thus seized on the long tradition of turning trash into art which can be traced from Chaucer's medieval 'fecopoetics' (Joy, 2008) to the readymades of Duchamp and other recontextualising acts of the 20th century avant-garde. The recent anthology "The Spam Book" (Parikka & Sampson, 2009), Finn Brunton's Ph.D. "Spam in Action" (2009) and the research of Camille Paloque-Bergès shows however that critical garbage-archaeology into networked media ecologies can illuminate 'dark sides', 'unintended consequences' and creative acts connected to spam which migrate from the margin to the centre of our understanding of digital communications.

Given the current global focus on climate change and the resurgent interest in waste management, it's perhaps only inevitable that also the purported trash of network culture becomes a hot-topic. In fact, 'waste studies' seen as not only from the environmentalist perspective but from the perspective of political and cultural-economy is a long established tradition: Marxist discussion of capitalism's 'waste products', Bataille's and Klossowski's

libidinal economies of excess, the culture studies approach taken in Michael Thompson's seminal "Rubbish Theory" (1979) and later by Gay Hawkins in "The Ethics of Waste" (2006), and on to the phenomenological philosophy of Greg Kennedy's "An Ontology of Trash" (2007). A lesson learned from this vast body of work is that media scholars' attempts at classifying spam as the 'noise' of cybernetic information theory is clearly reductive, even if that noise is being celebrated in academic or artistic intervention. Cybernetic media theory miss the point of the fundamental ambiguity of waste: the negotiation of meaning at the heart of communicational consumer societies which can be attributed to the old saying that 'One Man's Trash Is Another Man's Treasure'. The actuality of this perspective today is clearly evident in the hyped corporate interest taken in the 'waste economy' as a strategy of the new green capitalism to seize on every opportunity to re-purpose waste products into new uses.

As Victor Margolin has shown with his recently published 'Waste Manifesto', the contemporary model of the economy of waste stresses the 'need to create a flow – through society in which all waste – natural and synthetic – is reused.' This would indeed classify as a truly cybernetic model of waste which signifies a change in the cultural perception of trash and rubbish – not as Michael Thompson conceptualised it in 1979 with his famous three-step model where all things go through a transformation from being Transient (declining in value), to being Rubbish (no value) in order to finally resurface as Durable (increased value) – but rather as a conflation of this model in an understanding of waste as being any piece of modular information ready to be remoulded and remixed, regardless of the contents or meaning thereof. On a bit torrent tracker, a connected .avi file is potentially a collectible film at the same time as it is potentially just another piece of junk data soon to suck up space on your harddrive and upload ratio on your Internet connection, regardless if the actual film contained in the .avi is indeed a rare cut of Tarkovkij's *Stalker* or an Italian 1970's trash flick. In the same manner, examples from Usenet flame wars to Facebook narcissism show that all socially 'meaningful' electronic communication has the potential of becoming spam-like. What then in the face of electronic trash is left to do than to sit back and simply press delete? The other options are there for those who dare to depart from waste, trash and spam as radically relational concepts whose meanings are open for negotiation. As Gay Hawkins formulates it in her "The Ethics of Waste": 'Rethinking waste means rethinking all the practices that blind us to the reality and the possibilities of what remains.'

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## **Proto-Spam. Early Forms of Spam as Vernacular Performance on Usenet**

As a form of unsolicited advertisement, spam relates to offline media strategies. But spam has its own vernacular archeology, rooted in the folklore of the pre-Web Internet. Identifying proto-spam needs not searching for the first ever spam, but researching its primal media language forms and practices, at the level of discourse and software, context- and community-related, pre-institutional – i.e. a vernacular use of the Internet. We research sub-cultures from the depth of the pre-Web Internet (especially Usenet) on the stage of interpersonal communication, while questioning “*Vernacular [as] crucial to [an] interest in power; in a community’s vernacular discourse are in-sights into its conception of itself, its negotiation of its identity, and its interactions with other communities*” (Flores, 2009 [1]). With the help of a Media Archeology approach (Ernst, 2006), we dig out the experimental layers in the history of spam.

A re-occurrence of unwanted information as intrusion in the Internet as a second “home,” the network where we live as individual, spam is seen as impersonal, lacking individuality, despite the advances in agent technologies helping tracing users’ activities and identity, in order to customize online advertisement. Being spammed feels like communicating with robots. According to Brad Templeton, a Net veteran and Electronic Frontier Foundation board member: “*We have a spam problem because of mass mailing. Personally written mails, no matter how annoying, can never mathematically be a problem for us*” (Templeton, “Why Bulk from strangers is the best definition” [2]). Is spam ruled by numbers? Actually, mostly by programs. How can interpersonal communication be programmed? Or, from a cultural point

of view: how do network users deal with the idea of communication being programmed?

Impersonality is closely linked to automation. Templeton finds the first occurrence of the word “spam” within the MUDs, an early online game and social network to call the typing in a chatroom the same sentence over and over, or inserting repetitive text with the help of a program (a bot). Repetition and annoyance, just like in the Monty Python “spam” sketch, the most probable origin of the term (Templeton, “The history of the term spam on Usenet” [2]), are disturbing but also playful in terms of meanings and rules of network communication. It introduces confusion as to who’s talking (a robot or a user?) and what is talked about (redundancy and noise blur the boundaries of information).

Recursive mimicry (users act as bots acting as users) finds its favorite battleground in Usenet folklore, where Templeton goes on investigating the origins of spam. Automation and recursion are literary figures encoded in a communication system being experimented at the vernacular level. The art of flaming, for instance, is autogenerative (arguments produce more arguments) and autoreferent (trolls are flammers who create polemic for the beauty of it). Often, Usenet master flammers are even suspected to be bots themselves, and bots are mistaken for real users, such as Mark V. Shaney who generated realistic speech based on net.singles conversations. Networked interpersonal communication is actually a problem of *persona* communication – mask and performance. How you present yourself on the network and how you perform your network self.

Identity and performance meet spam at a communication crossroad. Aliasing and forging fake identities are recurrent topics on Usenet, and a technoliteracy about the rules of network use. Masters flammers use sock-puppeting to troll around without being caught as singletons. But aliasing can be a collective performance as well. Net.personalities such as net.god KIBO, or net.legend B1FF, have started cults and doppelgangers mimicking their humorous styles and absurdist content. The recurrence of these *persona* on Usenet playing with the rules of communication develops a social and aesthetic side of spam that is sometimes encountered in contemporary junk email.

Pseudonymity, though, is the black holes of these *persona* plays, highly criticized as allowing flammers’ bogus content on Usenet, the first form of network pollution before spamming and scamming. In a low-bandwidth economy, unsolicited content does matter when network-time is money, and emails are considered as commodified objects (which cost is shared by senders and receivers) more than free speech. The ARMM affair symbolizes this clash between play and economy on Usenet. Sent in 1994 by Richard Depew, a canceler (one who enforces the rules of “zero junk” on Usenet), the ARMM bot, looking at removing junk from newsgroups, actually ends up in a loop cancelling its own cancels, and spreading the cancel news all around, triggering a huge uproar. According to Templeton, it’s the first mass-mailing called “spam”, in an ironic twist of fate.

Emerging from the language experiments of an intentional community, both willfull and reflexive in its vernacularity, proto-spam has unlimited cultural effects, it reflects recursively on human communication as producing junk for social and cultural purposes – the only limitation being its institutionalization as an object in a network economy.

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## An Infinite Continuum of Spewage: Bayesian Filtering and the Reinvention of Spam.

```
// ... it is unreasonable to
// assume that any finite number of samples can appropriately
// represent an infinite continuum of spewage, so we can bound
// the certainty of any measure [sic] to be in the range:
//
// limit: [ 1/featurecount+2 , 1 - 1/featurecount+2].
-- crm_markovian.c, crm114-20070810-BlameTheSegfault.src
```

“Norbert Wiener said if you compete with slaves you become a slave, and there is something similarly degrading about competing with spammers.” The writer is Paul Graham, the prominent Lisp programmer; the quote is from his 2002 essay, “A Plan for Spam”, one of the most influential documents in the the anti-spam movement. (Graham 2002) Influential for three reasons: first, because it suggested a way to get to grips with spam, to turn it into an object; second, because it won, effectively destroying spam as it then existed, sidestepping its social complexities to attack it on a precise technical point; and finally, because it lost, the pure and elegant technical attack being based on a new set of design values and social assumptions, interstices into which spam moved, transforming itself in the process, and accidentally producing a literary experiment on the grandest scale in human history.

## Formless

Spam in all its diverse modes – from email campaigns directed at people to bot-generated blogs to affect search engine results – bases its resiliency and strength on two sources, one deep and one shallow. The deep source of spam's vigor as a form is that spammers operate largely by taking existing "good things," technologically and socially, to unforeseen extremes, making it difficult to destroy their capacities without doing damage to much larger constituencies of users and institutions, as well as dearly held values embedded in the design of the Internet and the systems built on it. The shallow source is simply that spam is often very hard to clearly define, whether the goal is legal, political, technical or scientific. Like art or pornography, it has often been a matter of knowing it when you see it, and early projects to filter spam emails before they reached the inbox tried to generalize particular experience, using crude techniques like word blacklists and blocking groups of addresses, with very mixed results. Spammers could fake addresses, and cook up innocuous subject lines and new scams faster than some centrally maintained list could keep up; dull-edged blocking tools tended to result in far too many missed legitimate messages, breaking the open square of email up into small, Balkanized camps, stricken by constant conversational uncertainty (have I missed something important? Did the other receive my message?). Spammers as a group seemed similarly formless in their mores, beyond guilt and shame, their "crime" without adequate legal definition to deter them.

## Quantified Language

Graham proposed applying a Bayesian filter to this problem, with a twofold goal: the filter would transform the words in email messages into probabilities of spam or not-spam, attacking the language of spam methods, the only area in which spammers could not hide their intentions. This filtering, done on an individual basis, would not stop all spam, just enough to dramatically raise the cost of a spammer's business, with far more messages needed to get a single response. "Spammers are businessmen," Graham averred, and whether criminal or legitimate would leave if the work stopped paying. The regularity of spam language became its weakness, as the Bayesian system, a very sophisticated method of inferring likelihood from past events, learned from every message marked "spam" and "not-spam." Spam was words like "madam" and "guarantee"; non-spam "although" and "evening." Wiener had worried that workers in competition with the automated production of machines would become no better than machines themselves, slaves; Graham meant to put spammers in the same position, competing with mechanical readers that would filter and discard their messages with relentless, inhuman attention, persistence, and acuity. The method worked well and was widely adopted. Combined with changing perceptions and increasingly effective police action, it effectively killed the 1990s culture of spam, with its limp pretense of respectability, and language from marketing and salesmanship, leaving the field to the smartest and most overt of the criminals.

## Litspam

The weak points seized on by the remaining generation of spammers were several, of which the strangest was a direct attack on Bayesian filters with the automated production of seemingly meaningful language. The filters couldn't be too strict, for fear of discarding too many legitimate messages, and enough non-spam words could get the message through the filter to the inbox – but most words, very rarely used, had a spam/non-spam probability of 50/50 and would make no difference. There was source of language in use, however, ready-made for algorithmic processing and statistical analysis, letters of transit to get a spam message before a person's eyes: the text files of public domain literature. Thus historical archives, Sinclair Lewis, pirated e-books, epic poems, and a thousand forgotten authors were pressed into the service of getting credit card numbers, producing a ceaselessly refined corpus of messages that suggest the clumsily mechanized avatars of Burroughs and Brion Gysin, Tristan Tzara and Louis Zukofsky, spam's high modernism.

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**Learning from Network  
Dysfunctionality**

**Accidents, Enterprise and Small  
Worlds of Infection**

In February 2010 an outbreak of media panic spread through the British tabloid press concerning a marketing campaign called DubitInsider. The DubitInsider website recruits 13-24 year olds who consider themselves to be “peer leader[s] with strong communication skills” to act as “Brand Ambassadors”. This requires the clandestine passing-on of product suggestions to peers via posting on message boards and social networks, emails and instant messenger conversations, organizing small events and parties. DubitInsider ignited the moral indignation of the tabloids not because of its covert nature, but since Brand Ambassadors were apparently paid to market “unhealthy” junk foods to minors.

Tapping into the social influence of the consumer is nothing new. Seeking out so-called influentials is the basis of seasoned word-of-mouth campaigns and persists in “word-of-mouth” variations. For example, In4merz.com exploits the anticipated contagiousness of relations established between friends “on and offline” to promote music acts. “In4merz is about matching our artists to your friends who may like them.” Young In4merz create posters, banners and videos about acts, Twitter about them, leave comments on Facebook etc. For each level of promotion, In4merz earn points that convert into CDs, DVDs, concert tickets and potential backstage access.

What interests us, as analysts of network dysfunctionality, is how the logic of these marketing strategies overlaps with the same anomalous abstract diagrams that distribute spam and viruses. In a different context, hiding unsolicited brand messages in social media and the potential for the bulk sending of veiled product promotions for financial reward could arguably be called spamming. Furthermore, designed as they are to spread Trojan-like suggestions through imitative social networks, whether or not the strategies actually become contagious, their aim is to go viral.

When removed from the context of the anomalous Nigerian cybercafe or computer virus writing scene, and played out in the marketplaces of food and pop culture, the emergent spam logic and virality of network capitalism becomes part of a broader indexical change concerning the way contagious communication networks, vulnerable bodies and unconscious behaviours

can be harnessed. The logic adopted becomes a normalized online marketing activity, not only performed by corporations, but embedded in social relations of individuals as part of the strategies of business enterprise and brand design. Spamming and virality are no longer anomalies then, but are fast becoming the standard, acceptable way of doing business in the digital world. If the peer-to-peer recommendations and thumbs-up-buttons of “word-of-mouth 2.0” characterize the current paradigm of social media, these campaigns are indicative of a more aggressive and targeted Web 3.0 marketing of suggestion already on the horizon. This is a Web 3.0 that appeals directly to a user’s emotional landscape and desire for intimacy (Ludovico 2005), and exploits the ready made expediency of contagiousness networks that pass on suggestion.

Following a similar neo-monadological approach set out by Lazzarato (2004) we articulate the dynamics of spam, viruses, and other related “anomalies”; as constituent parts of new infectious worlds “created” by the business enterprise. We focus on the specific creative capacities of dysfunctionality in the production of network environments, and how “learning” from the irregularities of normalized communication adds new flesh to this world. We discuss how new knowledge concerning the productive powers of the anomalous is filtered through what Thrift (2005) calls the cultural circuit of capitalism: “[...] a feedback loop which is intended to keep capitalism surfing along the edge of its own contradictions.” This new knowledge, acquired from the accidental events of the network, is seized upon by the business enterprise, leading to new consumer modeling intended to make ready environments so that the capricious spreading of social influence can be all the more effectively triggered and responded to.

Zittrain (2009) argues that viruses, spam and worms are threats to the generative principle of the Internet. Similarly, we contend that such software-driven social actions are exploitative of the open principles of the Internet, but further acknowledge the extent to which these practices have enthused and inspired the business enterprise. As we see it, “bad” software is not necessarily “malicious.” It becomes integral to an alternative generative logic of capture implicated in the production of new worlds of infection. We will discuss how these epidemiological worlds were mapped by computer scientists in the 1980s before they pervaded the burgeoning offshoots of the billion dollar network security industry. We further chart how they were modeled by network science as early as the 1960s and are currently being exported, via the circuitry of capitalism, to the business enterprise.

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