

'Press Delete'**The Politics and
Performance of
Spamculture****Kristoffer Gansing** (se)University of Malmö/The Art of the Overhead
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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.'

References

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