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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.

References

- [1] online webpage version – no pagination
- [2] Brad Tempeton's references are part of a series of essays with no date : "Essays on Junk Email (Spam)"; Retrieved from <http://www.templetons.com/brad/spam/> [Accessed 1st June 2010]
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