



The Information Technology Magazine at the University of Virginia

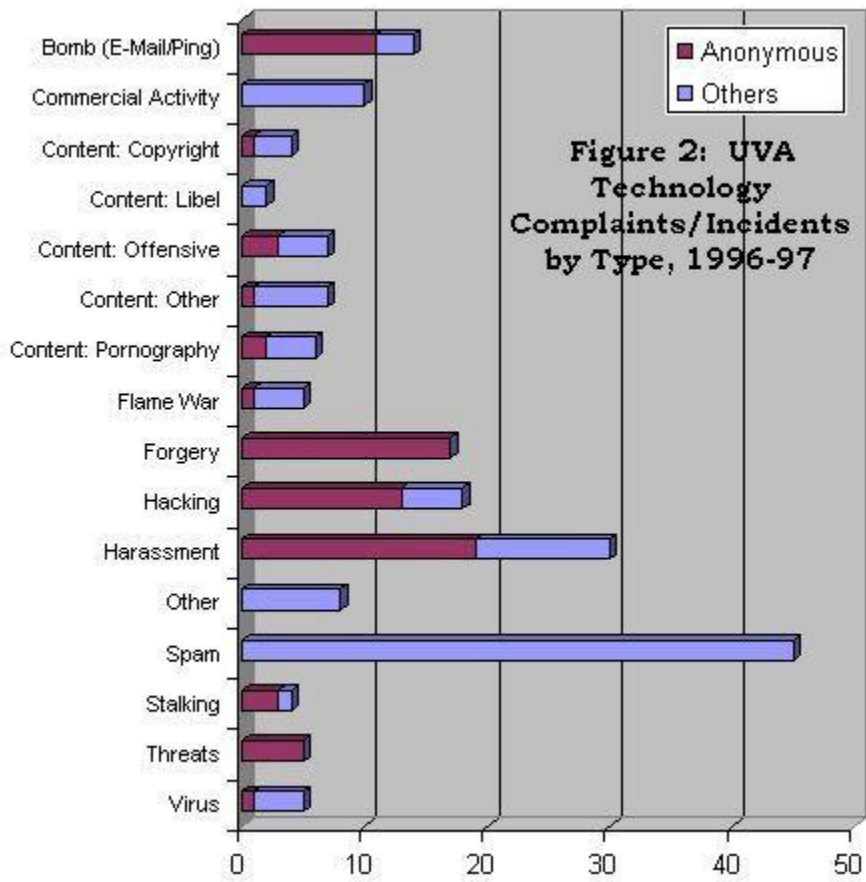
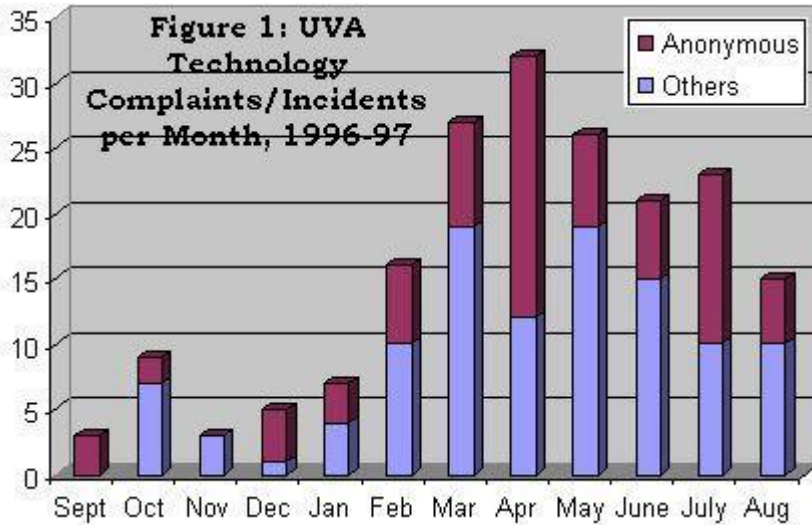
IT Policy: abuse@virginia.edu

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In the course of my job, I've had many opportunities to read about and hear presentations concerning how higher education institutions deal with incidents of improper use of networked computing. The common theme you find in the words of experts from around the nation is one of not re-inventing the wheel. Use existing disciplinary systems and existing policy whenever you can.

This is easier said than done. Most of the time, complaints come to computing organizations, not directly to those disciplinary systems. The usual recipients of such complaints may remember all too well the days when computing organizations handled discipline themselves like a private club enforcing rules on its members. Nobody outside the "club" cared, and the club was small enough that few people imagined a day when membership in the club (of computing users) would be a basic requirement of life in a college or university community. It isn't any longer a club—affiliation with higher education now requires access to networked computing, and severing that access can no longer be at the discretion of those whose expertise is in keeping the computing environment running.

We at the University of Virginia don't claim that we have a revolutionary or groundbreaking mechanism to handle incidents of misbehavior—just one that is effective and practical and one that may be a helpful model to other institutions. In 1996-97, we set up a mailing list reachable at the address abuse@virginia.edu. We didn't advertise its existence at first. Instead, we relied on people who received complaints to forward them to the address. More recently, we've promoted the address publicly, and business is brisk. Statistics from 1996-97 show a steady increase in the number and type of complaints for a variety of different abuse incidents here at the University of Virginia (see Figures 1 and 2).



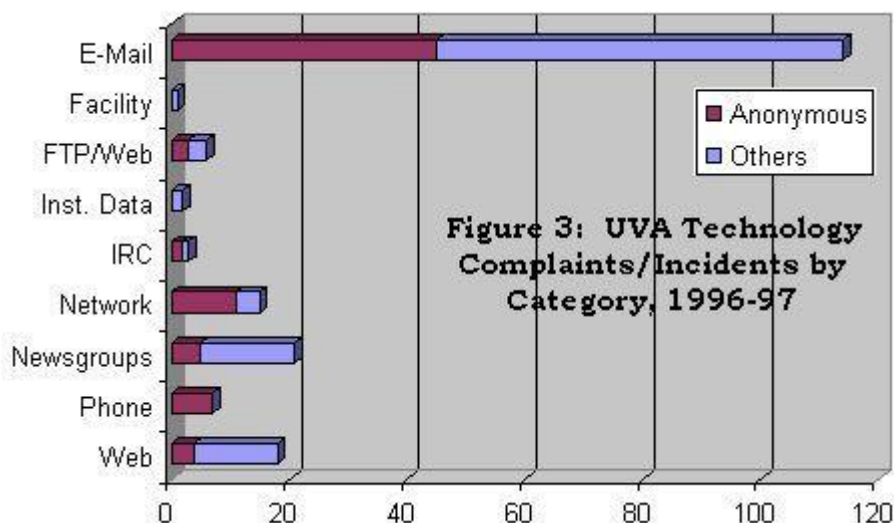
Behind the address is a list of thoughtful people who represent various perspectives on network misbehavior. The list has a simple aim—no individual needs to invent the response to any particular incident. We can talk through each incident (virtually, of course, via e-mail) and develop a rapid consensus that ensures rigorous thinking, consistency and fairness. Because most of the network behavior issues involve our largest population—students—the student affairs division representative on the list is often called upon to play an active role in the discussions. Other list members include

the manager of network systems, the manager of Unix systems, our entire "postmaster" team (including our Usenet postmaster) and various others of our computing staff who have reason to have good familiarity with policy issues.

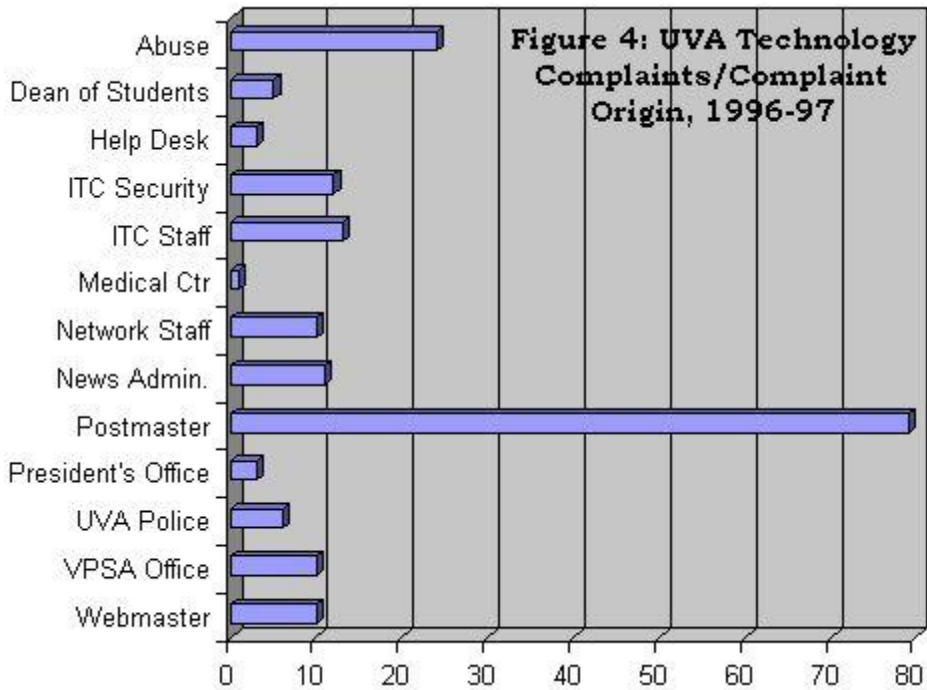
When an incident involves a faculty member, we include representatives from the provost's office, and, when an incident involves a classified staff member, we include employee relations in our communications circle. Other regular participants—depending on the nature of the incident—include staff members from the general counsel's office and from the police department.

Our on-line discussions are vigorous and rarely unanimous in outlook, at least in the beginning. Everyone involved is very busy, so it helps that the list is as large as it is. Not everyone can participate in every discussion, but enough read the list promptly to ensure that if someone's perspective is missing, another member will find some way to alert that person that his or her help is needed fast.

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the list is the joint education that results. All of us are learning more about areas in which we're not specialists. As a "non-techie," I frequently get lessons in the technical aspects of misbehavior, and I like to think that the student affairs rep and I help our technical staff learn more about University disciplinary processes. We all teach each other through serious discussions about unresolved questions in the networked environment on such topics as the definition of privacy and the limits of our control over "content" at a public institution.



Our system is not particularly formal, but there are two formal requirements, in my view. The first is that no person in authority—sometimes me—should make a pronouncement of disposition of a matter until it has been thoroughly discussed and all perspectives heard. This is a key to the life of the abuse list—if participants don't believe people are listening they'll abandon the significant investment of energy and time it takes to be an active member. The results will suffer if they do. Second, occasional meetings in person allow for some issues that aren't effectively handled electronically to come to resolution. Otherwise, it seems to me that the lighter a bureaucratic touch on a mechanism like the abuse list, the greater its value.



If you'd like to learn more about the varieties of incidents that come to the attention of the abuse list or some other aspect of its operation, send mail to abuse@virginia.edu.

The figures in this article were provided by Sam Miller, Office of the Vice President for Student Affairs.

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