

IT Policy: The Rules of Communication on the Virtual Grounds

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In the Spring 1997 issue of *virginia.edu*, I described a process to develop a new set of policies governing life in the digital community at the University of Virginia. Previously, our model for policy development had focused on generalizing policy statements that grew out of individual events—someone would misbehave, and we'd write policy to help prevent it from happening again. But last spring we began trying to define the kind of digital community we are trying to create at U.Va. This is a bigger, more profound enterprise—so big that it could be hard to find a handhold with which to begin.

We've been lucky, however. Our handhold was waiting for us. It revealed itself by a name we all know and love: junk mail. I have come to believe that digital junk mail will overtake parking as the universal topic of complaint at colleges and universities. And junk mail, like beauty, is defined in the eye of the beholder. One person's junk mail is another person's essential communication. Of course that distinction seems to parallel your role—to most recipients, most non-individually-directed electronic mail looks like junk mail, while to senders it looks like essential communication. Deeply embedded in this question is one related to the digital technologies involved. They fall in two general classifications: "information push," (see related article in this issue) such as electronic mail that usually shows up in a recipient's mailbox whether he or she wants to see it or not, and "information pull," such as web-based information that the reader usually actively chooses to view.

Our inability to wrestle the issues related to junk mail into rational disposition led U.Va. Chief Information Officer Polley McClure to establish a task force on electronic communications, led by University Relations director Louise Dudley. The task force's mission was to try to uncover a University consensus on these matters. I was an ex-officio member of the task force, which submitted its report to McClure shortly after the end of the spring semester. It is a fascinating report, both in its sophistication of analysis and as the emblem of a new era of policy development at U.Va.

Details of the task force's activities—its charge, makeup, meeting records and final report—can be found at its web site, <http://www.itc.virginia.edu/department/committees/ecommm/home.html>. But the gist of the group's conclusions is that blanket statements about the nature of electronic communications—and what constitutes undesirable electronic communications—are difficult. The members recognized value in the University's increasing reliance on electronic communication, but it equally recognized that overuse of specific varieties of communication could lead the community to judge them as just another nuisance. So, the task force recommended a policy that limits use of some types of communication in the University's digital community:

System-wide mailings, such as to all e-mail account holders or to the voice mail of all employees and students, should be reserved for truly urgent and rare emergency notices, as determined by the president or executive vice president. The frequency, content, and other characteristics of most messages are inappropriate for such wholesale delivery (see attached matrix). University departments, organizations, and individuals should avoid regular mass-mailings by a method whose value can easily be undermined, especially if recipients are unwilling to cope with a large volume of unsolicited messages and abandon its use.

This notion of limitation, as the task force saw it, will help ensure that the community creatively exploits the evolving capacities of electronic communication while minimizing the risk that University audiences will simply grow numb to the media because they are being overloaded with (sometimes irrelevant) information through them.

The group, working to define the nature of electronic communications at a university, found it helpful to divide them into three categories of use: academic, administrative and community. Characterizing the value of academic messages to senders and recipients turned out to be easy, but administrative uses proved more difficult, and thinking about community uses led to some conclusions that will require policy changes. For example, some commercial activity—such as advertisements for student web-publications or want-ads or product information—when carefully regulated may be not only acceptable but desirable in the continuing development of the University's digital community. Previously, policy has banned all commercial activity without specifically defining it.

The group also identified categories of recipients of electronic communications. Sometimes I am a member of an involuntary, standing list of recipients—when I serve on a committee that has a mailing list or in my capacity as a recipient of "itc-all" mailings that go to everyone affiliated with the Department of Information Technology and Communication. At other times, I may find myself the recipient of involuntary, ad hoc communications, involving one-time messages that I don't have any choice about receiving—a library overdue-book notice or a notice of a travel reimbursement to my bank account might be examples. And, I am a member of many voluntary lists to which I subscribe by my choice—one involves national policy issues in communication, for example.

The task force combined these notions with specific types of communication, such as emergency alerts and events announcements, into a matrix that offers guidance on the appropriate means of delivering specific types of communication and the level of University authority needed to approve it. Let's look at two contrasting examples.

Real-time electronic discussions that supplement academic classes are a growing phenomenon at colleges and universities. Students generally find them more convenient than the physical-attendance alternatives. The task force rated such discussions as high in value to the institution and to its mission, urgent (they are real-time discussions, after all), and high in their capacity to be offered to a carefully defined, segmented audience (students enrolled in a class). The students receiving this type of communication regard it as very important, even if they don't have a choice in receiving it, as do the originators of the discussions. They are not held all the time, but they are not usually one-time events either. Each one, however, has a relatively short life—usually the time in which it takes place only, and each one requires networked electronic communication to accomplish (you can't do a real-time discussion on paper). All enrolled students should have easy access to the discussions, and for that reason as well as others related to the real-time nature of the communication, such discussions use resources at high intensity. [*As I am writing this column, the recent release of*

Netscape Communicator and similar products has added a new level of worry to the resource question. Easy video and audio conferencing capacities make them realistic possibilities for real-time class discussions, but the network-load implications may force organizations like mine to put in place some limitations on their use. See the related news article on this subject.]

The task force rated the most appropriate methods of delivery of the discussions to be ones for which students voluntarily choose to involve themselves, such as signing on to a chat session. None of these judgments were difficult for the task force—academic communications seem relatively easy to characterize, as I noted before.

On the other hand, communications of a more administrative nature can generate more debate, and often did so in the task force meetings. Job listings, for example, vary in character based on the perspective of the person analyzing them. But the task force did come to consensus on them as a type of communication as well. The members found job listings to be of medium-level importance to the institution and to be of medium urgency. They regarded the listings as easy to segment for particular audiences (according to likely populations interested in the job), but they also agreed that most recipients who did not choose to receive them would see them as junk mail. Those who post job listings, on the other hand, see them as essential communications. Job listings tend to be frequent, but relatively short in the amount of time that they are relevant to anyone. You can sometimes use paper or other means to get the same information to appropriate populations, and sometimes you must, in order to ensure that everyone who should be aware of them actually sees them. Ease of access to the job listings is not an important consideration because people who really want them will seek them out, so the task force regarded the intensity of resources required to provide them via networked communication to be medium.

The task force rated the most appropriate methods of delivering job listings to be ones in which the recipients voluntarily choose to get messages or in which they go out and find the listings themselves. To allow job listings to be "pushed" to audiences that have not chosen to receive them would require relatively high-level approval within the University's structure, the task force said.

In these examples, it is clear that although available technologies may have helped frame some of the thinking, the most important elements of consideration were associated with the culture of our community. Policy is emerging from the definition of the community as it is reshaped in the digital environment, not the other way around. This is an important pattern that we must replicate through the entire policy framework related to life in the digital community.

The Office of Information Technologies and the Department of Information Technology and Communication will now take the task force report and assess its implications for our information technology planning—are we building the right infrastructure to support this view of electronic communications, and if not what would we need to do differently? That assessment plus the report itself will go to our top advisory committee, the University Committee on Information Technology, for its consideration this fall.

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