FINDINGS | John Tierney

As the Grapevine Withers, Spam Filters Take Root

Thanks to the sociologist Dan Ryan, I'm coming to terms with my need for spam filters against my friends' e-mail.

It's not that I've lost interest in them. I still want to know how they're doing, but I can survive without their vacation itinerary or last weekend's golf scores. I'd like to keep up with their work, but I don't need all their blog posts or their deep thoughts on the Iowa caucuses.

I'm glad to see a joke or an article that they picked out for me, but not one that they blasted to everyone in their address book. Did they really imagine I wanted to drop everything this second to contemplate the future of NATO? Are they writing personal notes to their A-list friends and relegating me to the @-list? What am I, chopped Spam?

What we have here is obviously not a failure to communicate, but it's not quite the opposite either. It's not a simple case of information overload, according to a seminal article in the journal Sociological Theory by Dr. Ryan, a professor at Mills College in Oakland, Calif. He defines it — with all the flair we've come to expect from that journal — as a violation of the "notification norms" that "constrain the behavior of nodes in social networks."

Technology now lets us tell everyone everything at once, but we still value a network that existed before the Web: the grapevine. When you pass along gossip to a friend or colleague, you're doing more than just relaying news. You're defining a social circle. You're reassuring the listeners that they're in the loop — and subtly obliging them to remember that you are, too.
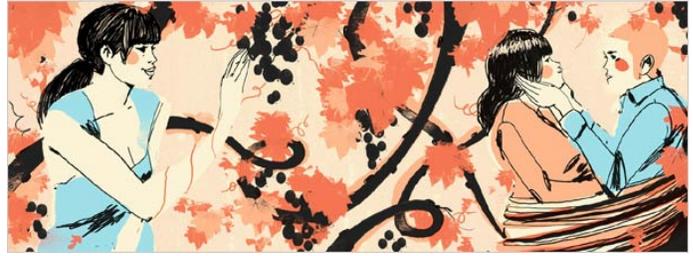
Further Reading

"Getting the Word Out: Notes on the Social Organization of Notification." Dan Ryan. Sociological Theory, September 2006 (PDF)

"Bad News, Good News: Conversational Order in Everyday Talk and Clinical Settings." Douglas W. Maynard. University of Chicago Press, 2003.

The golden rule of this "information order," as Dr. Ryan calls it, is to tell unto others as you would have them tell unto you. You shouldn't leave your trusted colleagues at the office in the dark about a coming shake-up, but you shouldn't be an electronic font of trivia, either. You filter the news for them and expect them to do the same for you. You tell them what they need to know in the way they expect to hear it.

"Even though we all claim to hate gossip and being in or out of the loop, there's an emotional benefit to grapevines," Dr. Ryan says. "I think of it as informational grooming, like primates picking bugs off each other. We don't want to get information all at once. Some you want to get as an insider: 'I talked to Bob yesterday and he wanted me to tell you...' Telling everyone violates our sense that we live in a rich array of social relationships."

Technology hasn't eliminated the desire for rules about who tells what, when and how. You don't want your wife or girlfriend to tell you she's pregnant by sending an e-mail message. A close friend could be miffed if he found about your hot date on Friday not from you, but from a casual acquaintance who had already seen pictures of it on your Facebook page.

A host may think it's a friendly gesture to e-mail invitations to a party with all the recipients' names in the address line, but if the names aren't in alphabetical order and yours is near the end, the message may not seem so friendly. You could have the same out-of-the-loop feeling as a manager who learns big news about his department in the same e-mail message sent to everyone else in the company.

Every message incorporates another message in the way it is delivered, whether it's an e-mail or a ransom note pinned to an ear. Dr. Ryan calls this metanotification. The metamessage is usually less gruesome than a body part, although once a CC: list reaches critical mass it has a horror all its own. Dr. Ryan said that in barraging me with "friendly-fire spam," my correspondents were also telling me:

"I'm too busy to be bothered thinking much about whether and why you, recipient, might actually want to know this."

"At this moment I'm treating you just like everyone else in my address book."

"I have this category for you — journalist — and some really crude and naïve sense of what you must be interested in, and I think that I'm plugged into the stuff that's going on in the world a lot better than you are, so you're lucky that I'm your eyes and ears out here."

Yes, those messages came through pretty clearly, although I like to think my friends didn't mean to do all that metanotifying. They presumably figured I might be interested in what they were thinking — and often I am. Compared with all the spam I get from strangers, their stuff is riveting — even when they launch into their Middle East peace plans.

But it's still spam, and you don't expect that from friends. It's the equivalent of the holiday cards with the what-our-family-did-last-year letter. We recognize that these letters serve a purpose — they can even be

Searching for some sign that I'm more than just a contact.

entertaining, intentionally or not — and we realize that the writers don't have time to send personal letters to all their friends. But the mass-produced pseudo-intimacy still seems dorky.

That's why, as Dr. Ryan pointed out, so many of these holiday dispatches begin with an apology like, "We hate these photocopied letters, too." The writers know they must acknowledge that a notification norm has been broken. The most diligent will scribble a brief personal note on the letter to send a further message: See, you're not like all the others. We have a relationship!

That's the kind of signal I've started looking for in the e-mail messages from my friends-turned-spammers — some recognition that I'm more than just a Contact. I'm trying filters that distinguish letters with a small display of netiquette, like having my name somewhere besides the address line. I'm not looking for a long personal note. It's the metanotification that counts.

TierneyLab
Putting Ideas in Science to the Test

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Telling Bloopers: Oops! I Didn't Mean for You to Find Out This Way

By John Tierney
Tags: gossip, grapevine, social networks, spam

In my Findings column, I inveigh against spam from friends. Now it's your turn to rail against what Dan Ryan calls violations of "notification norms."

Dr. Ryan, a sociologist at Mills College, is studying who's expected to tell what to whom in what way – and how these rules are changing because of the Web and text messages and other technologies giving us new ways to spread the word. He has written an article exploring the structure of the "information order," and now he's looking for case studies of disorder.

Can you describe an example of mishandled notification – some instance when you or someone else bungled the job of passing on a bit of information? Dr. Ryan isn't looking for practical blunders like leaving crucial facts off a medical chart or forgetting to relay a profitable stock tip. He's looking for the kind of social bloopers that upset people even though they wouldn't have done anything differently no matter how or when they got the information.

This could be a blooper in a personal conversation, an interoffice memo, an invitation, an e-mail, a Web post, a press release. It might be something that was passed on to the wrong person or in the wrong way, too soon or too late, or something that should have been passed on but wasn't.

What went wrong and why did it matter? Did it tell you something new about a relationship or about your standing in a group? Was the mistake made because of sheer stupidity, or because technology is changing the rules and people are struggling to figure out just what the new ones are?