

How to stem the tide of electronic messages

BY SIMSON L. GARFINKEL
Special to the Mercury News

FOR MANY of us, what was the miracle of electronic mail has become the curse of information overload.

It starts off innocently enough, with a few electronic notes passed between friends. For newcomers to the information superhighway, e-mail is a way to keep in touch with friends or co-workers who have hectic schedules, to write to loved ones who are many time zones away, and to send important documents in machine-readable form. What could be better?

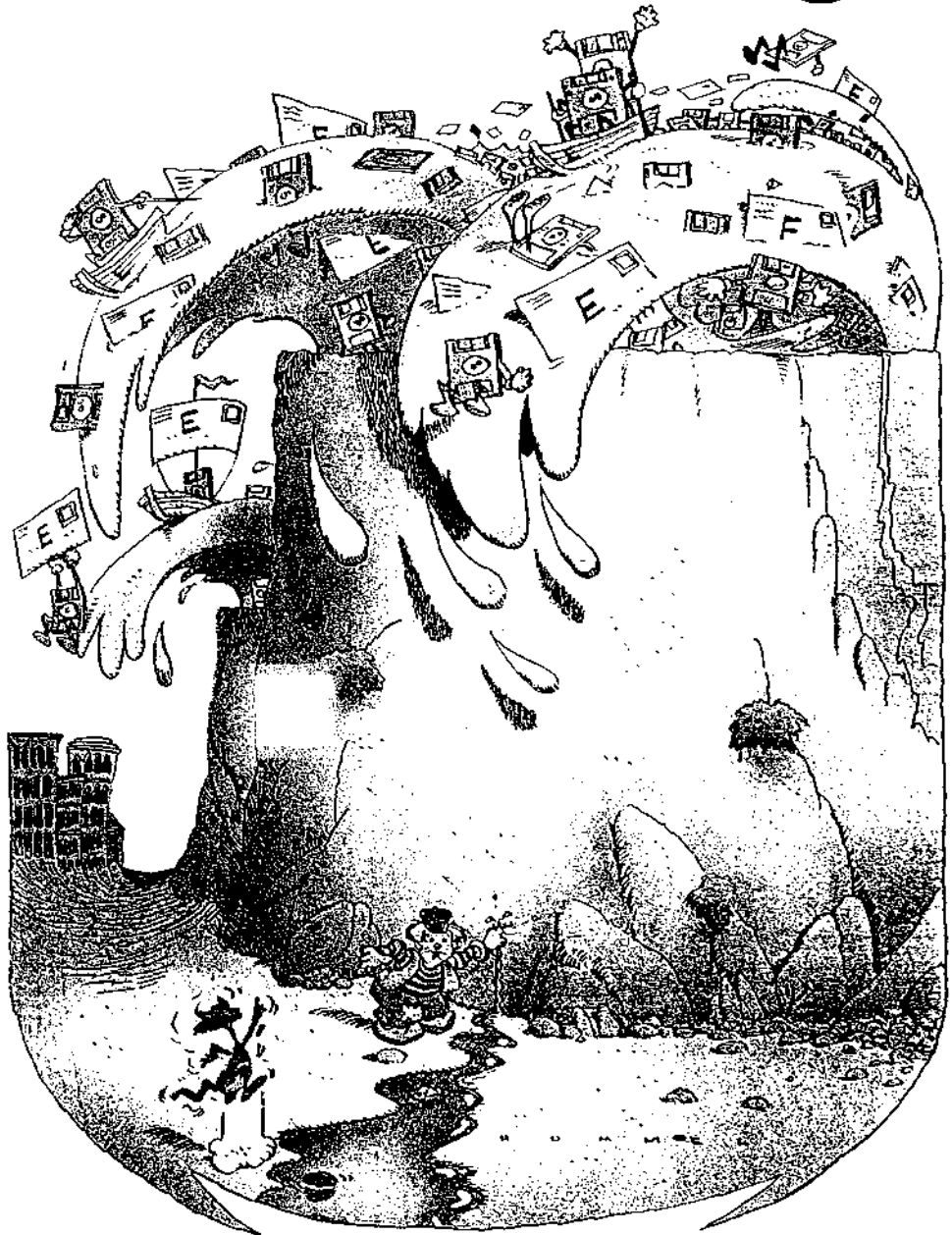
Before long, neophyte e-mail users learn about electronic mailing lists: special interest groups that discuss every topic imaginable, from developments in new programming languages to the cutting edge of the sexual revolution. Send mail to a mailing list, and your message is automatically delivered to everybody on that list. Reply to the message, and your reply goes to everybody as well.

Then, before you know it, you are in the throes of e-mail overload, with 20, 60 or even 100 messages a day in your electronic mailbox — each one clamoring to be read and replied to.

"I probably get about 100 to 150 a day," says Mark Frauenfelder, an associate editor at Wired magazine in San Francisco. "I get everything from on-line press releases to queries, story submissions, to people asking when their article is going to appear in an issue."

Like many people, Frauenfelder increasingly finds that e-mail is cutting into his personal time as well. "I get behind, and then I just have to spend an entire evening trying to catch up," he says. "Or a lot of times, I will come in on a Saturday and go through it all."

And it's getting worse, he says. For example, on the day he was contacted



JIM HAMEL — MERCURY NEWS

MANAGING YOUR MAIL

1. Don't use your electronic mailbox as a things-to-do list. Instead, create a second mailbox or folder for e-mail messages that still need to be answered or acted upon. This will prevent important new messages from getting lost.
2. Read all of your e-mail as soon as it arrives and file it away immediately.
3. Don't create too many folders — otherwise, you'll lose messages that you file. Instead, adopt a simple message filing system and stick to it.
4. Don't save long messages with the thought that you will get around to them later. By the time later arrives, you'll have received even more e-mail.
5. Create a new set of folders every year: copy the previous year's correspondence onto a floppy disk. That way, if you change mail providers (or jobs), you won't lose all of your personal letters.
6. You don't have to reply to every e-mail message that you get. If you do, and your correspondents do as well, then the number of messages you get every day will increase geometrically.
7. Do not send chain-letters. If you get a chain-letter, just delete it. They may seem funny, but they clog mail systems and have shut down networks.
8. If somebody sends a request for help to a mailing list that you are on, send your response directly to that person, rather than to the entire list.
9. If you are on a mailing list that has too much traffic for you, don't make things worse by sending mail to the list asking people to send less mail to the list. Just have yourself taken off.
10. If somebody sends you a flame, don't make things worse by broadening the scope of the disaster. If you feel compelled to send mail back to the flamer, send it just to him or her.

Sorting systems help e-mail users survive the deluge of messages

■ E-MAIL

from Page 1E

for this article, Frauenfelder said he had 115 unread messages in his mailbox. "At least half my working day is maintaining my e-mail."

While keeping up with the heavy flow of traditional paper mail has long been a problem, many believe that electronic mail represents a fundamentally different challenge. For starters, most people have just a single electronic mailbox, which is used for internal communications with co-workers, communication with business contacts on the outside world and for personal correspondence. Often the personal mail crowds out the office mail, or vice versa.

A second problem is uniformity: Nothing makes an important electronic message stand out from the rest. E-mail has no handwritten addresses, no Federal Express envelopes for messages that absolutely, positively have to be there overnight, no overstuffed manila envelopes bursting at the seams with a new contract. Indeed, the only thing that distinguishes one electronic message from another is the person who sent it and the "Subject:" line at its top.

Sorting the mail

Heavy e-mail users often use the subject line to figure out which messages they should read and which they should throw away unopened. Doing so is made possible by many modern mail programs, which display the user's mailbox as a long list of messages, identifying each with its date, sender and subject line.

"First, I go through the subject and see who it is from and delete the things that I don't want to read about (and messages that are from) people I don't want to read," says Stan Gramates, a biology graduate student at the University of Massachusetts who says she receives between 200 and 300 e-mail messages a day.

Some mail programs allow the user to sort mail messages by the date, sender or subject line. One program with this feature is Eudora, a popular freeware mail program for the Apple Macintosh (a commercial version of Eudora is now being sold for both the Macintosh and Microsoft Windows by Qualcomm. You can contact Qualcomm at 800-2-EUDORA.)

Sort by sender, and all of the messages in a mailbox by the same person are grouped together.

Sort by subject, and all of the messages on the same topic are gathered in one place. This feature is very handy for dealing with e-mail from a mailing list when many people have replied to a message on the same subject. (For people who don't want to read the messages on a particular

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topic, sorting this way makes it easier to delete them all at the same time.)

"I'm on a lot of mailing lists," says Gramates, as a way of explaining the volume of electronic mail she receives. Since most of those messages are not addressed to her directly, she says, "I doubt it takes me more than three seconds each to go through (most of them). I don't necessarily read more than the first two or three lines. So that gets it down to the stuff I actually want to read."

Other people don't have this luxury. Richard Stallman, the founder and president of the Free Software Foundation, says he gets about 100 messages a day, and virtually every one is addressed directly to him and needs his personal attention.

'A serious problem'

"Most of them (are about) work that I have to do," says Stallman, whose organization is dedicated to creating free programs that are distributed by tape, CD-ROM and over the Internet. Much of Stallman's incoming mail is bug reports for his programs.

But Stallman's mailbox also gets filled with personal messages, people asking his advice, and administrative issues pertaining to the running of the foundation. It gets so filled, in fact, that Stallman has had to alter the structure of his life to keep up with the electronic torrent.

"It's a serious problem," he says. "I can no longer go away and spend time elsewhere off the

net, because the mail piles up in a horrible way. When I get invited to go someplace and speak, if I am going to be there for more than a day, I generally make arrangements to have my mail forwarded, so I can spend a few hours each day answering it."

As e-mail becomes more of a problem, software vendors are beginning to develop expert systems that allow a person to specify a set of rules for handling mail automatically.

For example, with the MagiCap system being developed by General Magic of Mountain View, the user can specify that e-mail from some users should be ignored, e-mail from most users should be held on the desktop computer, and e-mail from special people should be sent to a personal communicator via a wireless network. Other mail systems can be set up so that mail from particular mailing lists or individuals automatically gets filed into special mailboxes.

Nevertheless, few people contacted for this article believe that the answer to the e-mail crisis lies with this limited application of artificial intelligence.

"I don't know of any automated way of doing what I do with my mail," says Stallman, who is considered by many to be one of the best programmers in the world. "The problem is I get large amount of messages that are not routine — they report bugs or suggest changes. ... If I knew how to make a computer program deal with that, we wouldn't need me anymore."

"The solution is to come up with some kind of technology so you don't have to sleep anymore," says Wired's Frauenfelder. On the other hand, Frauenfelder says, if people didn't need to sleep, they would have more time to send him messages.

Simson Garfinkel is a computer consultant and free-lance journalist living in Cambridge, Mass. His most recent book is "The UNIX-HATERS Handbook," published in June by IDG Programmer's Press. He's had e-mail since 1983 and gets about 60 messages a day.

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