
The Internet Of Garbage: Spam And Net Abuse

So much of the Internet is garbage, and much of its infrastructure and many man-hours are devoted to taking out the garbage. For the most part, this labor is hidden from plain sight. But in recent years, the garbage disposal has broken down. The social media companies have a harassment problem, the pundits have declared.

However, large-scale harassment campaigns are hardly new, and the barrage of crude and cruel messages and undesirable content is only a small part of what makes a targeted campaign a frightening experience for the victim. Yet this part of the equation — the part that is seemingly under the control of Silicon Valley — has received the most attention from the media, because it is the most public, visible, and archivable. And as tech companies repeatedly fail to address the problem to everyone's liking, the problem looms ever larger in the public imagination.

The public's understanding of speech online has undergone a serious paradigm shift. Even in tech-centric communities generally supportive of "free speech" on the Internet, there is a pervasive feeling that harassment must be rooted out and solved. Anonymity and freedom of speech have become bad words, the catchphrases of an old guard that refuses to open its eyes to a crisis for the Internet.

But is there really a crisis, and if so, what is the nature of this crisis? If the Internet itself is under threat, it is in essence under the same threat it's been from its inception. The Internet isn't breaking. Beneath the Wikipedias and Facebooks and YouTubes and other shiny repositories of information, community, and culture — the Internet is, and always has been, mostly garbage.

What do I mean by garbage?

It's a broad category, one whose boundaries are highly dependent on the context. The definition shifts from platform to platform, from year to year, even from week to week.

Garbage is simply undesirable content. It might be content meant to break the code of the site. It might be malware. It might be spam in the specific sense of robotically generated commercial text. It might be a "specific threat" directed towards another user. It might be a vague threat. Or it might be a post sprinkled with a few too many four-letter words. In heavily moderated communities, posts that are deemed to be merely off-topic may be deleted. Posts that might be neither frightening nor offensive nor off-topic can also be deemed to be garbage. On the SomethingAwfiiil forums, postings that are judged to have little value to the community are referred to by the evocative name, "shitpost."

Even in the most anarchic of spaces, there will be content classified as garbage. On 4chan, a site with a reputation for permitting "anything," "doxing" (posting addresses or other personal information without permission) and "forum raids" (orchestrating a campaign of vandalism or harassment on another site) are forbidden. On the Silk Road, once a Tor-hidden service that allowed people to buy and sell drugs, listings for guns were forbidden. On both sites, child pornography is and was forbidden.

No matter how libertarian, how permissive, and how illegal the site is, there is always content that is deemed to be unworthy of staying on the site. It must be deleted. Perhaps it is because the content is illegal (e.g., child pornography). Perhaps it is dangerous to other users (e.g., malware). And perhaps it simply does not comport with the mission statement of the community — that is, it derails from the purposes and goals of the platform. Whether it is primarily a community of like-minded people (bulletin boards, forums, and mailing lists) or primarily a profit-driven social media company (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), there is some content that makes the platform simply less good. The standards for “good” differ, but nonetheless, the rule is the same. Some content contributes value, other content detracts. Each corner of the Internet works actively to discourage or weed out the trash — otherwise the garbage will choke it up and kill it.

Spam As Garbage

Today, nothing is as uncontroversially garbage as spam. Yet the definition of spam is nebulous. In 1975, Jon Postel, a computer scientist with so much control over the early Internet and held in such high regard that he was known as the “God of the Internet” before his death in 1998, wrote the document “On the Junk Mail Problem.” The “problem” that the RFC 706 document discussed was actually speculative in nature, and the “junk mail” was described as “undesired,” “misbehaving,” or “simply annoying” material.

The term “spam,” which today is interchangeable with “junk mail,” started off as simply being annoying behavior. On early chat systems, people would often type “spam, spam, spam, spammy spam” — a reference to a Monty Python sketch where a couple’s breakfast is repeatedly interrupted by Vikings singing about spam. If users hit the up arrow, the line would replicate itself, and they could then “spam” the chat room repeatedly with very little effort. Finn Brunton, professor of media, culture, and communication at New York University, writes in *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet*.

“In the bandwidth-constrained, text-only space, as you followed exchanges line by line on a monochrome monitor, this was a powerful tool for annoying people. You could push all the rest of the conversation up off the screen, cutting off the other users and dominating that painfully slow connection. The word ‘spam’ served to identify a way of thinking and doing online that was lazy, indiscriminate, and a waste of the time and attention of others.”

In early years, in fact, it wasn’t all that clear that spam should be proactively deleted or filtered. The debate was framed as a free speech issue, where the most libertarian standpoint, according to Brunton, was one that permitted “any speech except that which actively interferes with Usenet’s ability to function—that is, that which would restrict the speech of others.”

Examples of net abuse:

- Posting articles that directly crash the news server that is to inject the post into the news stream.
- Posting articles that contain control messages designed to crash news servers.
- Directly hacking into a news server to disable it.

Examples of things that are NOT net abuse:

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- Voluminous [sic] posting
 - SPAM
 - Excessive cross-posting
 - Off-topic posting
 - Flaming or arguing.

By the 2000s, commercial spammers like Laura Betterly would defend themselves on the basis that sending out millions of unsolicited messages was “what America was built on. Small business wonders have a right to direct marketing.” In fact, they would characterize the vitriolic backlash against spam as “hate groups that are trying to shut down commercial email.”

But today spam is largely understood as robotically generated text issued from “botnets” of compromised computers that have been unknowingly recruited into transmitting mind-bogglingly large amounts of unwanted messages advertising Viagra, genital enhancements, Nigerian get-rich-quick schemes, or linking to malware in order to steal passwords or simply recruit yet another computer into the mechanical zombie horde. Spam has become the realm of Russian crime rings (as documented by Brian Krebs in many places, including his book *Spam Nation*), a multi-million-dollar industry that is combated in turn by billions of dollars in anti-spam technology .

Of course, the old definition of spam still lingers. For example, someone might be chided for “spamming a mailing list,” when they themselves are not a robot attempting to evade a filter, nor a commercial mailer advertising a product or a service. But by and by, spam is beginning to have a relatively narrow definition. It is the stuff that lands in the spam filter that you want in the spam filter—the garbled poetry text from strange addresses full of misspelled words and suspicious links.

The deep ambiguity in the word “spam” in the early days echoes how nebulous the word “harassment” is today. While the media focuses on discrete, uncomplicated campaigns of hatred against women like Caroline Criado-Perez in 2013, Anita Sarkeesian in 2012, or Kathy Sierra in 2007, the worst harassment often occurs in deeply complicated circumstances. When complex Internet pile-ons like Gamergate get heated, the term “harassment” is flung back and forth like an accusation, with both sides convinced that the other side is the real harasser, and that that side is now using the term in bad faith to apply to mere criticisms or mildly unpleasant language.

I don’t mean to say that there is no such thing as harassment, no more than I believe there is no such thing as intimate partner violence, even though it is common for domestic abusers to claim that their victims are the ones who are abusing them. But the word itself, when used, is often not grounded with any specificity. As “spam” once was, it merely means an undesirable message. We are in the early days of understanding “harassment” as a subcategory of garbage. Just like spam used to be a catch-all for many different kinds of garbage, harassment too has become a catch-all. But if we are to fight it, the definition must be improved.