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My Top 10 Email Hassles

inside RISKS

In running a large mailing list, I have become acquainted with a depressing variety of dysfunctional mail-handling software—probably the single most intimidating aspect of the Internet's user interface. To help the Net live up to its potential, I hereby nominate the following top 10 most dysfunctional email phenomena, with the hope that a universal union of large list maintainers and mail-system developers might spring up to fix them.

10. Mailers that give intermittent "user unknown" messages for users who indeed exist, perhaps because the mailers cannot detect transient local network problems well enough to postpone delivering mail.

9. Mailers that return error messages to the sender rather than to the address in the message envelope that is specified by the standard.

8. The "redirect" command in Eudora, which permits someone reading a message from me to pass that message along to others with a header line to the effect of "From: Phil Agre (by way of Joe Shmoe)." These headers, though consistent with the standards, are confusing to many people, and the "by way of" is often truncated along the way. One result is that I often get error messages from closed listservs, as well as polite and not-so-polite messages asking "Who are you and why are you posting messages to the BLORT-L listserv?" What is worse, though, is that Eudora permits users to modify the messages they redirect without any indication that the original sender is not responsible for their additional text. Eudora is a fine thing, but this feature is not.

7. Mailers that tell me "Press F1 for help with VNM error codes" even though my function keys are unlikely to be programmed the same way as they are for users at the site that generates the bounce-mail message. In general, mailers designed on the assumption that all senders and recipients of messages would use that same mailer— particularly when the mailer in question does not think in terms of standard IP domain formats.

6. Mailers that complain that a certain message could not be delivered, but do not specify who in particular the message could not be delivered to. Also, mailers that complain that a forwarded message could not be delivered without providing any indication of what address(es) the message was forwarded from.

5. Vacation programs that respond to bulk or mailing-list mail or that do not keep track of who they've replied to, with the result that I get batches of spurious vacation messages (sometimes in German) as each holiday approaches.

4. Mailers that generate mail that cannot be replied to. Sometimes I have no idea why I cannot reply to a message, and the mailer offers me no help. This is particularly annoying when the sender in question starts sending further messages to the effect of, "you should reply to my messages, you rude person!"

3. Mailers that take a month before giving up on the delivery of messages to a missing user, resulting in a month-long stream of error messages, individually, for every one of the messages I've sent in the last month.

2. Mail-reading programs that automatically generate a little message to the effect of "so-and-so read your message about 'routine administrative notes' on December 3rd at 08:41"—even when the message was sent to a mailing list and not directly to the person reading it. The people whose mail readers generate these messages are usually not aware of them, and their site maintainers usually do not know how to shut them off.

1. Sites that generate bogus error messages whose "postmaster" alias is not defined or that send messages explaining that customer service requests should be addressed to their 800 telephone number.

Of course, errors happen. The problem is that the error messages are so incomprehensible, so incomplete, so inconsistent, and so hard to adjust or control. The Internet Engineering Task Force is working on standards for mailer error messages, and I will sprinkle rose petals at their feet when they are done. But much of the difficulty is caused by mailers that do not even comply with the existing standards. It is time for technically informed Internet users to identify those mailers, particularly the ones that are supposedly maintained by commercial firms. Make a reasonable attempt to communicate with the developers first. But if that fails, document the problem and start sending out colorful "Noncompliant Mailer Hall of Fame" messages to appropriate mailing lists—including RISKS. **C**

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