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- World
- U.S.
- Weather
- Business
- Sports
- Politics
- Law
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- Health
- Entertainment
- Travel
- Education
- Special Reports

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The metaphysics of 'spam'

By Christine Boese
CNN Headline News
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(CNN) -- Sometimes when I'm busy mass-deleting huge chunks of "spam" -- those unsolicited "junk" e-mails -- I like to ponder on what's really important in this world. If I could rearrange my life with different priorities, how would I do it?



What if you could re-invent e-mail to make it more about what is important to you -- more about relationships and keeping in touch? What a radical idea, right?

This is a major pet peeve of mine. The problem isn't just spam, although spam makes it worse. Often I will get a wonderful e-mail from a dear friend far away, full of juicy news, interesting thoughts -- the kind of e-mail that just begs me to take some time and write back in kind. So I don't answer right away. I want to think on it a bit, compose a thoughtful reply.

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But that isn't what happens. Instead, e-mail keeps coming into my mailbox and my friend's thoughtful note moves up and off my screen. My dear friend is neglected, even though that is the last thing I want.

While this makes me feel guilty, I'm also starting to wonder if it isn't all my fault. On the Internet, e-mail is a dinosaur. Back in the day, when screens were black and text glowed green, e-mail came through command line applications. You logged on and checked e-mail by paging line by line through chronologically arranged messages using the arrow keys.

The odd part is, even with graphical screens, e-mail still works much the same. Sure, you can color-code spam, sort columns by name or topic thread and filter out junk or save notes from certain people into folders. But most of us still have a daily fight with spam despite having filters.

We don't question the basic chronological list-function of e-mail, where the most recent messages, rather than what we consider the most important, get to reign, pushing those important messages off the screen and out of mind.

Maybe it is time to do something drastic. Internet service providers offer spam filters with levels of security. The highest level requires that you specify only the e-mail addresses you are willing to receive e-mail from. Everyone else is screened out, including your long-lost classmate who finds you out of the blue.

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It is a dilemma. We want to fight spam, but we don't want to filter out that long-lost classmate. What to do?

I want to propose a metaphysical shift in thinking about e-mail, a change in orientation from reacting to acting. Instead of making reverse chronology the center of your e-mail universe, why not make people the center?

Right now your e-mail account is like a bucket that catches everything that falls into it. Then you filter out the e-mail you don't like.

What if we reversed that equation? What if a new kind of application focused on relationships first? It would function as a highly selective filter, not a bucket. You wouldn't have to filter anything out because it would be impossible for spam to get in.

You would keep your e-mail account "bucket" and maybe weed out the spam once a week or so. We still have to visualize the empowering use for such a tool in order to get our heads out of the chronological dominance of that old way of doing e-mail.

The good news is that someone has already been developing this application. Called "trust networks," they are mostly in beta-testing and are based on something like that "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" game. Folks are calling them "Friend of a Friend" networks, or FOAF for short.

The buzz is out on FOAF networks. In my next column I will look at some of these emerging new tools and a development that may go beyond the tools to a platform.

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