



In the Loop: On K Street

Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, Columnist

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When citizens send e-mails to their congressmen through the Web sites of lobby groups, they expect those messages to zip electronically to the place they intended.

It turns out that isn't always the case.

A new study by a company that routes thousands of these e-mails to Congress shows that plenty of constituent e-mails never reach lawmakers' offices.

"Citizens would be understandably upset if they knew that letters they sent through the U.S. Post Office were never delivered," writes Dennis W. Johnson, a George Washington University professor who oversaw the study for the e-mail company, Capitol Advantage. "Unfortunately, there is strong evidence that much of the electronic mail that citizens assume is reaching Congress is ending up in an electronic trash can."

Congress has had an e-mail problem for years. It is deluged with an estimated 200 million constituent messages annually, the vast majority of them electronic. The number is so large and is growing so quickly that lawmakers are desperate to find ways to throttle the volume.

The number of e-mails has mushroomed in part because of the now-common practice among interest groups to rally their troops via cyberspace. Generally, a lobby will send an e-mail to its most eager members, which directs them to a Web site. Once there, the members fill out a form that routes to lawmakers e-mails that advocate whatever it is the group is pressing for at the moment.

Lawmakers have come up with ingenious methods to undermine the effectiveness of such programs. As readers of this column know, some congressional offices are now insisting that would-be e-mailers solve a simple math problem (to prove they are real human beings and not some machine spamming them with the push of a button). Many offices are also demanding that constituents disclose what issue they want to communicate about and to reveal information about themselves: Zip code, street address, e-mail address, phone number and the like.

Now we know that these efforts are working well. According to the Capitol Advantage study, six of the 10 leading companies that run Web sites that send e-mails for interest groups failed to deliver even half of those e-mails through their systems.

That is a big disappointment. After all, aren't public officials supposed to be open to the public?

The survey wasn't as comprehensive as I might have liked and the companies that set up the Web sites are disputing its findings. But its overall conclusion is difficult to contradict: Lobby organizations are having a hard time getting e-mail to Congress.

"There's a lot of resentment toward us on Capitol Hill," said Bill Pease, chief technology officer of GetActive Software Inc., a vendor of public policy programs for the Web.

Lawmakers tend to think that e-mail communications and, in fact, almost all mass mailings are fake and can easily be disregarded, several executives said.

To get around the hurdles, Web site operators have taken to faxing the e-mails to legislators. For example, the Business Industry Political Action Committee, or BIPAC, routinely faxes to Congress messages that started out as e-mails typed into its sites by constituents. So does Democracy Data & Communications LLC, which also runs regular hand deliveries to Capitol Hill so it can be doubly sure that messages reach targets.

All of this, of course, is absurd. Electronic messages are being delivered on paper. Many of the missives that actually reach their targets are not accorded attention by the people who matter. Faxes, in particular, have low credibility with lawmakers.

Which leads to the more interesting question: Can democracy be conducted through shortcuts?

The Internet allows interest groups to mobilize their members with incredible ease and speed. Hundreds, even thousands of messages can be directed to individual lawmakers with a single, well-placed e-mail alert to trained zealots back home. Even with the obstacles placed in the way of these communications, e-mails roll into Congress at an amazing rate.

So amazing, in fact, that it is possible that lawmakers have become inured to the sheer volume and have learned not to care as much about them.

An earlier poll of congressional staffers, also underwritten by Capitol Advantage, touched on this. It discovered that half of the aides it surveyed thought the folks whose names were attached to the e-mails they receive aren't aware that the e-mails were sent to Capitol Hill. Another 25 percent of staffers questioned whether those communications were legitimate.

That strikes me as the bigger issue: Not whether every e-mail is getting through to Congress but how many of them are being read with serious interest. I bet a closer look at that issue would be even more unsettling to Web site operators and their clients than the latest estimate of delivery rates.