

On The Net: Filtering the Email Storm

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Byline: Notess, Greg R

Highlight: With the proliferation of e-mail, a heavy user might want to set up and use filters to weed out as much junk mail as possible, and to prioritize legitimate e-mails or file copies of messages sent

Body

ABSTRACT:

Users who do not want to be bombarded with emails, particularly junk emails, should consider setting up email filters. There are several advantages to setting up email filters. For one, it enables users to read the important emails first than the others. The important emails are stored in the Read Me First folder while those not-so important are kept in New Books. Also, email filters automatically send junk emails to the Trash folder or to the Junk Mail folder. Users with several email addresses can use email filters to forward all their emails to just one main address. Moreover, email filters can be used to discard copies of transmitted emails that do not need to be stored. While there are several different ways to set up email filters, there are some fundamental steps to take. These are as follows: making a folder to receive all the output of the filter defining the filter and deciding what part of incoming emails would be used to determine whether it is a junk or not. Article discusses several email filtering products and some considerations for email filtering.

Greg R. Notess

Reference Librarian

Montana State University

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For all of the attention to the Web, search engines, and browsers, email remains the connection to the Internet that many of us use the frequently. The ability to communicate between two individuals without having to resort to phone tag or the more formal approaches of postal mail or even fax makes email the perfect medium for sending informal, brief messages to colleagues, friends, and family. In addition, with the one-to-many communication capability of email lists, the lack of any additional user cost for the sending and receiving of most messages, it is easy to see why email has become such a popular communication medium.

But popularity breeds excess. Unless the local system has set a maximum size on your Inbox, there is no real limit to how many daily messages you can receive. The more email you use, the more lists you join, and the more widely your email address is advertised, the more messages come in. Systems now filter most of the junk mail, but some still gets through. And if there is no system filter set up and your email address has been snared by the email direct marketers, you'll quickly want to set up filters of your own.

On The Net: Filtering the Email Storm

THE FILTER CONCEPT

With postal mail, we develop visual clues to identify and separate bills from checks, junk mail from personal letters. With email, it is not as simple to quickly identify an important message from a new thread on a listserv. The high priority message from a boss can look disconcertingly similar to junk mail.

The filters available from most modern email programs help automate the process of sorting and organizing email messages. Filters work well in conjunction with the ability to sort and store messages in different folders. Most email readers utilize the basics of an Inbox, an Outbox, and a Trash folder. Other folders can be established and provide a convenient way to separate family messages from high priority assignments or from listserv mail. Most people use these folders to save email that they expect will have some lasting value or that they will want to read again.

A simple filter is already built in to most programs. When copies of sent mail messages are automatically saved in an Outbox or Sent Mail folder, the program is using an outgoing mail filter to accomplish the task.

Filters for incoming mail can sift through new email and sort the mail into folders established for specific senders, subjects, or priorities. Establishing a filter that identifies all messages from parents@home.org can be used to put all such messages into a Family folder. Email from announcements@publisher.com can be filtered to show up in a New Books folder. Messages from a client or boss can be sent directly to a Read Me First folder (or a Trash folder, depending on your mood).

Using filters judiciously can make the morning email check much more efficient. Rather than starting with a list of a few hundred messages that are sorted only by time of receipt, filtered email makes it easy to read the important messages in the Read Me First folder before getting to the New Books.

For excess junk mail, clever filter use can send many of the messages straight to the Trash folder or to a special Junk Mail folder. Because so many people do exactly that, the most aggressive junk emailers try to make their messages defeat the filters and end up in the Inbox. Do not expect to be able to filter out all junk mail, but you can at least make a dent in it.

FILTER SETUP

The exact method for setting up filters varies from program to program. The features and level of sophistication vary as well. However, the basics remain the same. First, create a folder to receive the output of a filter. Then think about how you wish to define the filter and what part of the incoming message to use for identifying the messages to filter.

One of the easiest to set up is the listserv filter. Since all list mail comes from the same address, it is easy to reliably filter only the list mail into a specific folder. Look closely at the full header information for messages from a particular list. Identify which field consistently contains the list address, and then note the exact address.

Then, in the filter creation section, choose the field name of the list address, enter the address, and identify the folder to which the messages should go. Be sure to enable the filter, if that is an option.

In most cases, the filter will not work on mail already received. Instead, it will only work on new incoming messages. Thus, it may be awhile before you can check to be sure the filter was set up correctly, depending on the list volume and frequency.

EUDORA

For one of the most sophisticated and powerful sets of filtering options, try either the commercial Eudora Pro or the freeware Eudora Light. Both are available at <http://www.eudora.com>. Eudora can filter both incoming and outgoing messages. It filters automatically, although filters can also be created and marked as Manual. The Manual filters will only do their work when Filter Messages (under the Special menu) is invoked by the user.

On The Net: Filtering the Email Storm

To create filters in Eudora, choose Filters from the Tools drop-down menu. Choose New to create a new filter, and then specify whether it is for incoming or outgoing messages. In defining the filter, Eudora includes fields for To, From, Subject, CC, Reply-to, Any Header, Any Recipient, or even the body. The Any Header is especially useful when the address of a list or other sender appears in different parts of the header depending on the nature or type of message.

After choosing the field, Eudora gives a variety of options for strings in the field contents. The filter can specify that the field Contains, Does Not Contain, Is, Is Not, Starts With, Ends With, Appears, Doesn't Appear, or Intersects Nickname. For those used to straight Boolean searching, these take a bit of thought, but take a look at the help file for a more detailed explanation of each.

For a more advanced filter, Eudora has the option to run a second level filter. It uses the operators AND, OR, Ignore, and Unless. With this option, a filter looks for two specific occurrences within a single message. For example, it could send all messages from a specific address to the Trash folder unless it contains certain specified words.

The filtering part of Eudora's Filter window can do much more than just transfer filtered messages to a specified folder. The available actions for the free version of Eudora include Transfer To, Copy To, Make Priority, Make Subject, and Skip Rest. Thus, all messages from bestclient@somewhere. corn could be transferred to an Urgent folder with a copy sent to a Bestclientbackup folder. The messages could all be marked as Highest Priority and given a new subject of Read Me New.

Eudora Pro has even more filtering actions. They include Forward To, Redirect To, Reply With, Make Status, Make Label, Play Sound, Open, Print, Notify User, and Notify Application. Both Eudoras also can have folders within mailboxes, allowing for hierarchical folders. Messages can be filtered to any level. All together, Eudora demonstrates excellent advanced filtering capabilities.

NETSCAPE

For those still using UNIX mail programs, elm and procmail have numerous filtering capabilities. Among the more popular graphical email programs, Netscape offers Messenger, available in Communicator 4.0 and above. Netscape Messenger includes basic filtering capabilities in its suite of email tools. Look under the Edit menu for the Mail Filters section. While Netscape offers fewer options than Eudora, it can combine several criteria with an AND and look within several fields. For actions, it can handle a single move, copy, and change priority of the messages.

One additional feature not available in Eudora is that each filter can have its own name and a brief description. Eudora creates its own name for the filter based on the rules used. With Netscape Messenger, the filter name and description are up to the user.

OUTLOOK

Microsoft has a family of Outlook email programs--Outlook Express, Outlook '98, and the full Outlook. Various versions are available from the Microsoft Web site, or come packaged with Internet Explorer and Microsoft Office. All have filtering capabilities. Look under the Tools menu for Inbox Assistant or Rules Wizard. The filtering features in Outlook are not as advanced as those in Eudora, but they do offer the basic features necessary. These include filtering of the primary header information and the actions of moving, copying, forwarding, and replying with a specific file.

FILTERING CONSIDERATIONS

For anyone who receives a steady stream of email, filtering provides a very helpful management tool. However, there are a number of considerations when relying on filtering.

First of all, a filter is a computer program that sorts and files email messages. As such, it is extremely literal and will only do exactly what it has been programmed to do. If a filter trashes all messages with the subject of Make Money

On The Net: Filtering the Email Storm

Fast and your broker sends a hot stock tip with the unfortunate heading of Make Money Fast, that message gets sent to the trash as well.

Sorting list mail is one of the most reliable filters, since it can be based on the list's address. Any filters that sort by body content or subject words are really a guessing game, where the person setting up the filter tries to guess what words future messages will or will not have.

A related consideration is junk mail management. Filters can certainly be used in an attempt to get rid of junk mail. Unfortunately, identifying junk email is not always an easy task. Junk email from just one source can appear with different From lines, contain varying subjects, and the content of advertisements for the same product may be worded completely differently. If a large number do come from the same company or address, a filter can be used for that particular address.

Then there is the question of what to do with the suspected junk mail. Sending it directly to Trash runs the risk of deleting important messages, but it may be worth the risk especially if it can be tied to addresses or a specific, unique phrase. An alternate strategy is to simply send all suspected junk mail to a special Junk folder. Just check in the Junk folder occasionally to see if any of its contents could possibly contain an important message. Then delete the rest. Any attempt to filter out all junk mail can become a lengthy process with frequent updates.

Another danger of using filters is caused by what happens to that filtered email. If you have been used to reading all the messages in your Inbox and then sorting them into different folders, the use of filters necessitates the development of new habits. Filters that sort incoming mail into different folders make it essential to check in each of those folders for new messages.

Typically, the email program identifies folders with new messages by highlighting folder names or flagging them in some other manner. Be sure to remember to read the messages in those folders and not just the leftovers in the Inbox. This method also can be used to check if any messages have been filtered into the Trash folder. If Trash is also flagged, it contains new messages. After first setting up a filter, be sure to check the various mailboxes with new messages to make sure that the filter is working properly.

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OTHER FILTER USES

Filters come in handy for other functions. People with multiple email addresses can forward all the messages to one main address. Then, they can use filters to divide the messages into folders based on the address to which the message was originally sent. Look carefully at the full headers of the forwarded messages to see which field to use for this function.

How about all those file copies of outgoing messages? If you send email regularly and save copies of messages sent, the outbox could be quite full. Instead of saving all messages, use a filter to send copies of messages that do not need saving straight into the Trash folder. For example, messages that are forwarded to others might be good candidates for not saving yet another copy of the same message in the Outbox. Messages sent to personal friends or family might be another group. Be sure to use an outgoing filter to stop saving file copies of these kinds of email.

Filtering is an underutilized yet extremely useful technology. It takes awhile at first to learn the possibilities with your specific email software, but it can make for much more efficient email reading. Take a little time to explore the capabilities and set up some filters, and each morning's email may become much more manageable.

This column is also available on the ONLINE Web site at <http://www.onlineinc.com/onlinemag>.

Communications to the author should be addressed to Greg R. Notess, Montana State University Library, P.O. Box 173320, Bozeman, MT 59717-3320 406/994-6563 align@montana.edu <http://imt.net/notess/>.

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