

VOTE NO ON BILL 602P!

By Michael Gottsegen

VOTE NO ON BILL 602P! I guess the warnings were true. Federal Bill 602P will permit the Federal Government to charge a 5-cent charge on every e-mail sent and delivered. It figures! No more free e-mail! We knew this was coming. Please read the following carefully if you intend to stay online, and continue using email. The last few months have revealed an alarming trend in the government of the United States attempting to quietly push through legislation that will affect our use of the Internet....

Do not sit by and watch your freedom erode away! Send this email to EVERYONE on your list, and tell all your friends and relatives to write their congressional representative and say "NO" to bill 602P. It will only take a few moments of your time and could very well be instrumental in killing a bill we do not want. Please forward this email.

When the above e-mail arrived in my inbox last week warning of this pending legislation, I became incensed and was determined to take action. I had heard a rumor about this legislation before and now I was presented with something concrete. The e-mail proceeded to spell out the U.S. Postal Service's rationale for supporting this legislation as a way of making up for the tens of millions of dollars of revenue it has lost as e-mail has increasingly replaced the stamped letter as a means of communication. Only The Washingtonian has editorialized against the proposal that has been wending its way through Congress almost without any public scrutiny.

I receive a lot of political e-mail urging me to support this or that and to pass along the message to friends and family. I seldom do pass along these messages, even when I am in basic sympathy with the cause - either because I don't fully agree with how the message has been formulated or because I do not want to inundate my friends and family with e-mail messages that I feel they are unlikely to read. Moreover, it often seems to me that these e-mails - despite their breathless urgency - only reiterate what is well-known already or express an opinion that is already widely shared by everyone I know. To forward such e-mails to others strikes me as more of a public nuisance than a public service.

This time, however, I was roused to action. The issue struck me as important and, even more significantly, it was off the general public's radar screen. Something of monumental significance was moving through Congress and nobody knew it. Cc-ing everyone in my e-mail address book, I felt like Paul Revere awakening his fellow Americans to political action before the hour was too late. It was an extraordinary feeling. In the twinkling of an eye, the private individuals in my address book became my fellow citizens and I a political actor seeking their ear. And how easy it was to effect this transformation. In less than

fifteen seconds, I had cc-ed three hundred individuals and five listserves in my electronic Rolodex, reaching perhaps several thousand people in less than a minute who were sure to disseminate the message even further. What reach! What speed! The new, do-it-yourself politics of the wired world!

My joy, however, was short-lived. Less than two minutes after sending out my message, I received a message back from one of the recipients who suggested to me that I might have been the victim of a hoax. He happened to be on the editorial board of *The Washingtonian* and he reminded me that it was not a daily paper but a magazine, that it did not run editorials and that, so far as he could recall, Bill 602P had never been discussed in its pages. He also suggested that I had better check my facts before disseminating such messages in the future.

OK, I thought, so there were some factual errors in the story and the editor from *The Washingtonian* was right to admonish me to take more care in the future before forwarding an e-mail. But these small factual errors aside, I was still fairly sure that the story must be basically correct. Not only did the story seem plausible to me in a general way, but I also trusted my source. Surely, she would not have forwarded it to me if she did not trust the credibility of the individual who had forwarded it to her. And when I looked at the e-mail address header again, I saw that the message had indeed come to her from someone whom I would assume to be of generally sound and sober judgment.

By this time - some five minutes later - a second message had arrived also suggesting that I might be the victim of a hoax. By then, I was already busy querying an Internet search engine in an effort to get the skinny on Bill 602P.

In less than two minutes, I realized that I had been duped. There was no such bill. The U.S. Post Office had not sought such legislation. The individuals named in the e-mail were fictitious, as were all the details in every respect. It turned out, moreover, that this hoax has been circulating across the Internet for nearly two years and that tens if not hundreds of thousands of persons have received it.

Faced with the truth, I wrote a letter of retraction that I tried to circulate as widely as my initial letter. But of course retractions, or corrections, are seldom spread as widely as whatever it is that is being retracted or corrected. The first impression is the more lasting, especially when it is the more striking. Trying to take back a rumor one has spread is like trying to gather up the down from a pillow that has come apart in an open field on a windy day.

What makes this cautionary tale so timely is the reality of instant communication in the Internet age. In a flash, rumor and error are multiplied and disseminated to the farthest corners of the world. It used to be that rumors spread slowly, serially, from one person to another. Sending bulk mail by post was a costly and time-consuming proposition, beyond the reach of most people. Today, however, when in a moment each of us can circulate a message to everyone in our e-mail

address books - who in turn can circulate it to everyone in theirs - each one of us in effect functions as a broadcaster or a mailing house. We are, in fact, individually empowered by the new communications technology in a way that few of us really understand. Being vested with such power, we are also charged with exercising it responsibly. But few of us have really gauged what this means. We blithely employ the technology without reflecting upon its implications. But reflect we must, for truth and trust - the moral foundation of our private and public lives - hang in the balance.

This issue is large and merits a more thorough treatment than it can be given here. Suffice it to say that, increasingly, we receive our daily diet of information about the world in an unfiltered and undigested form. Until recently, this was not the case. Basically, we got our news from the leading national newspapers and the television networks and trusted that we were being told the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Today, however, we get our information from many sources: from a proliferation of cable channels, from the Web and from the e-mail in our inboxes. Much of this information is of questionable veracity, and we have reason to be skeptical of the truth of much that we hear. As consumers of news and information, we need to become critical consumers, considering the authoritativeness of our sources and testing the stories for their soundness.

But if this holds true for each of us insofar as we are consumers of news and information, how much the more so it holds for each of us insofar as we are producers and disseminators of news and information. And today we are all producers and disseminators of news and information. Of course, it could be argued that this has been the case for as long as humans have lived in groups and possessed the language with which to report and pass along what they have seen or heard. What makes today unique, however, is the power that the new communications technologies (and e-mail specifically) have bestowed upon each of us to produce and disseminate news and information with lightning speed and on the widest scale.

In effect, we have all become freelance journalists and publishers. At issue is whether we will develop the editorial competence and the capacity to make sound news judgments. Today every one of us is a news source; the question is whether we shall become reliable sources as well. This week I received a lesson about the consequences of failing to do so. The quality of our public life may depend upon our all learning this lesson.