

The Reasoning Behind Logic Puzzles

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Congress Online highlights new and relevant Internet trends, technologies, and practices on and off Capitol Hill. It is a part of our broader technology research, which studies Congress' use of the Internet, identifies and award best practices, and provides technology guidance to congressional offices.

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To stop the “arms race” and facilitate diplomacy, CMF’s Communicating with Congress project seeks to improve communications between citizens and their Members of Congress. The first phase focused on Congress, and now we are focusing on citizens’ perceptions and expectations and trying to organize a task force to solve the problems. It is our hope that these efforts will result in a new model for communications between constituents and their elected officials—a model that increases a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country.

Introduction

The Reasoning Behind Logic Puzzles

The logic puzzles and other user verification tools some House and Senate offices are including in their Web forms has sparked a lively debate about the future of congressional communications. In this special edition of *Congress Online* we recap these developments, explain why congressional offices and the advocacy community – associations, non-profits, corporations, unions, third party vendors, and others involved in public affairs – need to change their practices, and how our *Communicating with Congress* research could help facilitate this effort.

How Did We Get Here?

Because the Internet and e-mail have made it easier and cheaper to do so, more Americans than ever before are communicating with their Members of Congress (see chart: [Postal and E-mail Communications to Capitol Hill](#)). However, technological developments have been so rapid that neither citizens (the senders) nor congressional offices (the receivers) have learned to use the Internet and e-mail effectively in their communications with one another.

Many citizens and the advocacy community have focused on finding the **easiest**, rather than the **best**, way to use the Internet to communicate with Congress. At the same time, many congressional offices have focused more on the **burdens** associated with these communications than on the inherent **benefits**. As a result, while more messages are being sent to Congress than ever before, arguably less actual communication is occurring. New communications tools and practices that should be improving communications between citizens and their elected officials are sometimes actually hampering this important democratic dialogue. In fact, there is a distrust developing on Capitol Hill of the organized communications they are receiving.

For the last several years there has been an “arms race” in progress between Capitol Hill and the grassroots community – with Hill offices adopting techniques to reduce the volume and improve the filtering and sorting of inbound communications, and grassroots organizations attempting to get their messages delivered in spite of these obstacles. It all started when, around 2000, congressional offices started turning off their public e-mail addresses and posting Web forms requiring correspondents’ names, addresses, and zip codes so they could more easily sort messages sent by their constituents from messages sent by non-constituents. The forms frustrated the advocacy community, because they limited organizations’ abilities to deliver messages to Members of Congress unless they were from constituents. The move away from public e-mail to Web forms also meant that organizations could no longer easily manage the technical aspects of facilitating organized electronic communications to Congress on their own, because of the need to interact with and adapt to changes to the wide variety of Web forms in use on Capitol Hill. As a result, the industry of advocacy service vendors has proliferated and now manages the technical aspects of the delivery of most electronic communications to the Hill.

Then Hill offices began using e-mail filters and rules that enabled offices to automatically sort their e-mail messages (e.g. by zip code, subject, keyword, or campaign). Again, the advocacy community was frustrated, but it found tools for getting around this obstacle as well. Congressional offices then turned to Web forms that – to make automatic sorting more effective – required correspondents to choose from a list of specific subjects the one most closely resembling the subject of their messages. Once again, the advocacy community developed the tools to send organized e-mail campaigns through these forms. The

logic puzzles and other captcha tools are just the most recent – and most challenging – phase in the arms race, but this continual escalation only raises the stakes. It doesn't solve the problem.

The problem here is not fundamentally about technology. Both sides have been applying technological solutions to a problem that is, at its heart, a problem of understanding. Ultimately, both sides have the same goal: to enable citizens to effectively communicate their views to their representatives in Congress. The problem is, each side has a different understanding of what effective communication really is. What's needed now is not escalation, but diplomacy.

What's the Congressional Perspective?

The exponential growth of incoming communications to Congress, especially organized e-mail campaigns, has frustrated and overwhelmed many offices. Although the communications volumes have increased four fold just in the last decade, congressional resources have not kept pace with the growth. In fact, congressional staff sizes have not changed appreciably since the mid-1970's. In an effort to manage the communications more effectively and more efficiently, House and Senate offices have pursued different process, management and technological solutions. Many offices have reallocated staff resources to manage the growing volumes. Some have embraced the organized e-mail campaigns and used them as a means to communicate with more constituents than ever before possible. And some have settled on tools and processes – such as the logic puzzles and other captcha tools – to filter, block or ignore some messages.

However, managing the volume is only part of the problem on Capitol Hill. There is also a strong and growing distrust among Hill staff of identical form messages (versus messages that are personalized by a citizen in some way). CMF found that 50% of the congressional staffers we surveyed do not believe that identical form messages are being sent with constituents' knowledge and approval, and an additional 25% weren't sure (see chart: [Staff Views on Form Communications](#)). That's 75% of congressional staff who doubt the validity of identical form communications. Their distrust stems from two primary causes. First, the fact that they cannot always tell whether the messages are actually being sent by the constituents whose names are on the messages, instead of being generated through an organizations' membership list. Second, after responding to a campaign of identical form messages, they sometimes hear from angry constituents who say they never sent any message to the Senator or Congressperson. This leads many staff to believe that most identical form e-mail campaigns are not legitimate messages from constituents, but are messages automatically generated by advocacy groups without the knowledge or consent of the constituents whose names are on them. From their perspective, these illegitimate communications take resources and attention away from responding to genuine constituent communications, and, therefore, deserve to be weeded out.

The logic puzzles and other captcha tools are means for thwarting computers programmed to automatically fill out Web forms and to guarantee that messages are being sent by humans. In fact, captcha stands for *completely automated public Turing test to tell computers and humans apart*. The logic puzzles, which House offices have the option of using through the Write Your Representative Web form, generate a simple math or logic problem that a person needs to answer before being allowed to submit their comments (see the *Roll Call* article "[House Puts Up Mass E-mail Block](#)"). Another captcha tool being used by some House and Senate offices are graphics that display a word or a series of letters and numbers that a person can read, but a computer cannot. The user must enter the word or code before submitting comments. About 60 House and Senate offices have implemented these tools.

What's the Grassroots' Perspective?

The advocacy community – associations, non-profits, corporations, unions, third party vendors, and others involved in public affairs – sees things differently than Capitol Hill (see the *Washington Post* article [“Finding Fault With Logic of Congress's E-mail Plan”](#)). From the advocacy community's perspective, tools that block or filter electronic communications limit citizens' ability to communicate freely with their Members of Congress (see the response to Congress from 100 organizations at [U.S. Newswire](#)). They also interfere with organizations' abilities to organize public advocacy campaigns to influence Members of Congress.

The Internet and e-mail have enabled the advocacy community to become far more effective at informing citizens of important policy issues and legislation, keeping them engaged in public policy debate, and motivating them to communicate with Capitol Hill. The Internet and e-mail have also given the advocacy community tools to make it easier and less intimidating for citizens to communicate with Members of Congress as part of an organized campaign. To facilitate organized campaigns online, the advocacy community uses tools on their own Web sites, often provided by third party vendors, which allow citizens to write messages to their Members of Congress. These tools also provide organizations the ability to automatically ensure citizens' messages are sent only to their own Senators and Representative; to suggest or require specific message text; to target different messages to different Members, depending on their stances; and other helpful capabilities.

Once the messages are produced, they are automatically delivered to congressional offices, often through vendor tools that fill out Members' Web forms using the information the citizens provided. However, so far, most of the vendor tools do not work with the Member forms that use logic puzzles and other captcha technologies. Thus, these offices are making it more difficult to send organized electronic communications, since they essentially require all communications to be directly sent through the Members' Web form.

What Does This Mean?

For the most part CMF has found that both sides of congressional communication fundamentally believe their actions are in the interest of fostering democracy, not debilitating it. Both sides have justifiable and strongly held perceptions – and misperceptions – about what the problem is and how wrong the other side is. Neither side is completely wrong, nor is either side completely right. However, based on their own perceptions, both sides also have engaged in practices – including the technological “arms race” – which are counterproductive to fostering effective and genuine dialogue between citizens and their Members of Congress. Our research, to date, has shown that both the grassroots community and congressional offices need to change their mindsets and their practices in order for communications to improve, including:

- **Congress** must recognize that technology and the Internet not only offer new tools, but a whole new way of communicating. They must improve how they use these technologies and adapt their communications to what citizens want.
- **The Advocacy Community** must recognize that there is a difference between being noticed and having an impact on Capitol Hill. Quality is more persuasive than quantity. Short, targeted, informative, and personalized messages (even if they are part of an organized campaign) have

more influence than a large volume of identical form messages, especially if those are intentionally sent to overwhelm congressional offices.

- **Congress** must recognize that the benefits of online communications go beyond *responding* to what they receive, and that *expanding* and *encouraging* constituent communications allow them to reach more people and save time and money when doing so.
- **The Advocacy Community** should develop a better understanding of how Congress works to improve advocacy campaigns, including understanding Members' positions on legislation before contacting them and customizing strategies to the legislative cycle and the appropriate chamber.

Detailed information about each of these statements can be found in the "[Implications to Congressional Offices](#)" and the "[Implications to Citizens and Grassroots Organizations](#)" sections of [Communicating with Congress: How Capitol Hill is Coping with the Surge in Citizen Advocacy](#).

What's the Next Step?

This problem did not happen overnight, and it will not be solved overnight. In fact, CMF first described this problem in 2001 in our report [E-mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis](#) [PDF – 218 KB]. Pressure from the advocacy community and citizens may encourage some Members to stop using the logic puzzles and other captcha tools, but it will not solve the root problem. Instead of escalation, what's needed now is diplomacy.

To facilitate this diplomacy, in 2004, CMF launched a long-term project, the [Communicating with Congress](#) project, to help improve communications between citizens and their Members of Congress. [The first phase of the project](#) focused on understanding how congressional offices manage constituent communications and learning which communications are most effective. Now, we are turning our attention to the other side on this communications process: citizens' and the grassroots community's perceptions and practices for communicating with Congress.

To understand how citizens and the grassroots community are communicating with Members of Congress, what motivates them to do so, and what expectations they hold for these communications, CMF will conduct research with citizens, grassroots organizers, and others who facilitate communication between citizens and Members of Congress. Questions we will address through a nationwide survey and interviews include:

- What percentage of the general public communicates with their Members of Congress and how often?
- What role do organizations play in facilitating public efforts to communicate with Congress?
- What motivates citizens to communicate with their Members of Congress?
- What do citizens want to receive in response to their communications to their Members of Congress?
- What are citizens' perceptions of the communications they currently receive from their Members of Congress?
- How might congressional practices change to better meet citizen expectations and preferences?
- How might the grassroots community's practices for generating grassroots campaigns change to better meet citizen expectations and preferences?

The research will lead to the publication of a [second *Communicating with Congress* report](#) and additional training for congressional staff and the advocacy community on the research findings to improve the communications practices of both parties.

The research and reports will offer targeted guidance for improving practices and will lay the groundwork for more collaborative problem-solving. By themselves, however, they will not be sufficient to bring about the change necessary to transform communications practices on both sides. That will require a forum for decision-makers from the House, Senate, the public, and the advocacy community to: discuss the problems and misperceptions; devise collective solutions for solving the current problems; and articulate common practices for fostering the new Web-enabled communications tools. CMF also hopes facilitate this dialogue by helping to organize a task force comprised of decision-makers and representatives from the Senate, House of Representatives, advocacy community, and vendors that facilitate electronic communications on both the sender and receiver sides of congressional communications.

It is our hope that, at the conclusion of **CMF's [Communicating with Congress](#)** project, there will be a new model for communications between constituents and their elected officials—a model that reduces or removes the current frustrations, facilitates increased citizen participation in the public policy process, and increases a meaningful democratic dialogue that benefits our country. We encourage congressional staff and the various organizations that represent citizens' interests to participate in and contribute to this research by [contacting us](#).