

Is Curiosity Dead in Academia

By Reid Cornwell

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I have been trying to rally consensus for a center for Internet research. I defined target market segments and collected names and email addresses to announce my effort. These were:

Members of Internet professional associations, some of which are also university professors. (100)

Companies whose products and services related to the Internet. (100)

University professors whose specialties parallel the stated goals of the center and who identify themselves as being involved in Internet related research. (203)

I emailed all 403 with the subject line containing, "**The Center For Internet Research.**" Each contained their surname, a question related to their specialty, a request for their opinion, and links to the center and to its underlying proposal.

48 percent of the members of the professional groups responded, but conspicuously absent from these responses were the educators. The private sector companies produced a better response with 63% responding. The group of university professors yielded 5 responses and 1 registration for a response rate of .05%

Future Now, an Internet marketing and metrics firm, indicates you can expect a 1.8% action rate from unsolicited, untargeted email campaign e.g. even a blind squirrel occasionally finds a nut. A targeted, unsolicited campaign response rate should be greater, particularly when the message is highly specific to the target group

The academic group and the questions asked were as follows:

Computer science and engineering "What is the next great technology for the Internet?"

Communications arts and graphic design "Marshal McLuhan said that advertising is the great art of the 20th Century. What is your opinion? "

Business "How has the Internet affected business on Main Street?"

- o Marketing
- o Advertising
- o Accounting and metrics

Psychology, "If self is a social construct, what is the effect of the Internet on the development of self?"

- o Social
- o General

Sociology – "If self is a social construct, what is the effect of the Internet on the development of self?"

I have always held certain learning centers in academic awe; UC Berkeley is one of these. Berkeley produced one of the more curious responses. The illustration below is the email I received from them.

BCGIT does not know enough about your organization. Please keep us out.

Berkeley Center for Globalization and Information Technology
University of California, Berkeley
101 Moses Hall, MC 2370
Berkeley, CA 94720-2370

Tel: (510) 642-5992
FAX: (510) 642-3020
Email: bcgit@uclink.berkeley.edu
Web URL: <http://bcgit.berkeley.edu>

I quickly responded by asking what information they wanted. I have not received a reply. My server log also reveals that no visitor came from the Center's IP address.

The log revealed that, of the 5 replies from Academia, 4 visited the website i.e.

198 professors did not muster the curiosity necessary to compel them to investigate.

Clearly my email had failed to generate the desired response..

Greg Reardon, Director of Technology and Marketing, Fuld and Company, asks, "Why should someone open an email from a source they don't recognize; that might contain a virus or that is just simply spam; or that doesn't have a compelling personal reason for looking at it? I almost trashed your email because I didn't recognize tcfir.org at first."

It's got to appeal to the audience of one; so what you're talking about cuts through the clutter. When one emails someone outside of their "circle", it can't be viewed as just communication any more; too often it is "junk mail" and in the trash it goes. The author has to "market" his correspondence appropriately, "Appealing at some emotional level with his intended reader."

Did curiosity compel him to open an email that was not part of his circle and was not immediately recognized?

I waited a week, revised the email had another professional marketer write the copy, added color and re-sent to the same 203 professors. The 5 responded again and 198 did nothing.

These results are completely unexpected. They challenge my long held belief that our universities are bastions of intellectual curiosity and places where new ideas could be introduced, discussed, and challenged. But first there must be questions driven by the prime questions. WHAT AND WHY?

I assembled a team of professionals that could have insight into the results. They were given my materials and my logic for the choices I made. The following five possible explanations came out of their dialogue:

1. Spam is so pervasive that important information is getting lost in the trash.

2. This segment of the Internet does not see the possibility of email as an extension of their communication strategies.
3. They have lost their curiosity and choose not to investigate emails even when they have clear indications of relevancy to their chosen disciplines.
4. Technology represents an attack on the values and traditions of the institutions and is therefore resisted out of hand.
5. In centers for such research in most big universities these kinds of ideas get grants. I was then perceived as competition.

I don't believe that any one of these explanations explains what I have observed. I propose the lack of apparent curiosity is a complex interaction between these forces.

SP, a professor at a prominent southern university says, "I can tell you that a large portion of any communication that comes into a university mail network never gets through the spam filters. So, yes, we have a serious problem in that regard. The IS operations folks are well justified in erring on the side of too much protection and security given the past behavior of students in general and the statistical likelihood that a university system is likely to be the target of computer villains."

Don Beville, an editor for a major college textbook publisher, exposes another problem causing this email bottleneck. He writes, "In the past two/three years, state/federal budgets have squeezed money from these universities causing them to lay off mostly teaching adjuncts that carried the load of teaching the big freshman/sophomore courses. With the budget cuts, fulltime tenured faculty must not only teach large sections of students but must continue to write for grant money; carry out research; and publish research papers. Several professors tell me that they get between 50/100 e-mails a day from students plus 10/15 e-mails from vendors like me. There is no time to perform all the duties that is required of them today. "

Andrew Hyder CEO of Subjex Corporation (<http://www.subjex.com>) provides a different view of the Spam issue. He concludes, "I too questioned that your lack of response may have been because of spam filters. However, this I assume, if true, still teaches us that they do not use the Internet to its potential because the end result is the same."

I have found in my experience that the market crash has severely affected the confidence academia, business developers and investors have. The Internet euphoria that existed in 1999 has been replaced with a slow caution filled return to the Internet. After all nobody wants to be wrong (again) at predicting the future.?

A psychologist on the team speculated that, If it is true that people do what is important to them, then it could be concluded that Spam is being used as an excuse to avoid what is unimportant. Can we agree that if they perceived email as an important tool they would devise a strategy to winnow through the trash?

Is it possible that the requirements for terminal degrees have replaced passion and experience as requirements for teaching at the university level? Is it possible that the rigor of getting these degrees strangles curiosity? Is it possible that professorial positions are jobs rather than honored positions?

Gary Buchala, a technology development leader at Internet2, has observed that colleges and universities are enormously resistant to integrating Internet technology into their teaching and research strategies. The Pew Internet and American Life project in a 2004 study on the future of the Internet reports that tradition-bound universities are not likely to go virtual. At Harvard and other major universities being on campus is still a status symbol.

Another observation by SP is that, "While faculty are very quick to jump on the latest technical trends (e.g. nano-bio-anything) in hopes of landing grants, funding, recognition, and other factors that lead to tenure (a concept that should be open to serious debate), for all those same reasons they are going to be slow to share the glory of such endeavors until or unless there is some assurance that at least some of that glory is sure to flow their way. It is unfortunate, but I'm not surprised at your response from academia to an "internet forum" on the topic of the Internet. On the other hand, I can almost guarantee you that, if you had somehow found sponsorship to hold a traditional conference on the subject with several brand name plenary lectures, the turn out would be huge. Faculty would clamor to be able to present their work, rub elbows with the intellectual elite, and work the halls in hopes of gaining an edge on future funding opportunities (unrestricted grants only, please). It is clearly open to debate whether these behaviors are just part of the academic gene pool or whether our traditional systems require and engrain it."

Is it possible that academia might in some way fear and/or resent the potential of the Internet (especially as it threatens the traditional classroom)? "This is clearly a factor and a problem", says SP. "I've been witness to a department at a well regarded institution that is in the middle of an endeavor to redefine its mission and reconstruct both its academic and research content to be more relevant to the current economic and technical environment that prevails in the US today. Due to the fact that over half the faculty are tenured and have no desire or incentive to "re-tool", it could be years, if ever, before this department becomes technically competitive in keeping with the stature of the institution. While faculty are rewarded for "visionary thinking?", they resist "visionary behavior" lest they find that they have caused their own obsolescence."

Finally, there is the issue of academic arrogance. Why should I waste my time reading your e-mail on a subject when it's clear to me that I already know all there is to know? I frequently have faculty ask me how this view or that view compares to views in the "real world" from whence I came. I'm flattered on those few occasions when I sense that the question is asked with sincerity. Unfortunately, most such questions are at least tongue-in-cheek and at worst out right disdain for the private sector that employs their students and pays the taxes that support their existence in academia. The more common view is that academia is the source and origin of all knowledge. In this case, the response is totally predictable. SP suggests that this attitude is pervasive.

Dr. Nancy Baym, academician at a large Midwestern university and member of The Association Of Internet Researchers (<http://aoir.org>), provides unintended support for this arrogance.

She writes, "Maybe I am too stuck within academic conventions, but I am not sure what a free-standing center will mean in terms of producing Internet researchers. I don't know how this center would relate to existing institutions. I don't know how it will be uniquely able to accomplish what is not being accomplished elsewhere."

SP goes on to say, "I suppose the bottom line is that, spam issues aside, unless you can break through the pervasive "what's in it for me" attitude, I don't think you can expect a different result from the academic community (oxymoron intended)."

Spam is a significant problem, but is it a scapegoat in lieu of addressing more fundamental issues? The fact remains, as Internet professionals, if we do not deal with Spam we can't expect others to be curious about what we want to communicate. Our message will be lost in the trash and we cannot expect them to use this marvelous tool appropriately and to the best advantage.

Professor Emeritus of Virginia Commonwealth University John McGrath, believes that competition for grants and other financial support creates an environment that fosters territoriality. He writes, " I think you have missed the obvious. There are Centers for such research in most universities and they use such ideas to get grants. You, are then competition."

The panel agrees that computer mediated communication and education has fallen behind the acceptance and use by the students. They concluded that despite the obvious advantage of being able to educate more people and despite the advantage of changing the role of university

professors from teaching to an auditorium to being personal learning coaches, these institutions appear to be dragging their feet on change. Many of the most prestigious learning institutions are resistant to the benefits of the Internet."

All of the institutions represented here have clearly articulated technology plans of which email is a major component. It is also clear that the behavior I have observed is inconsistent with these universities stated goals. The problem appears to be in execution and institutional rigidity.

Obviously the phenomenon is more complex than my simple question, but, if curiosity exists in academia, it is eroded by these forces. In the end, the cause becomes irrelevant because the outcome is the same. If educators are not routinely asking questions and investigating new ideas, then curiosity is hobbled, if not dead.

Are my experiences statistically significant? Probably not! Are they experientially significant? You bet. I hope that my observations are wrong.

People resist change because, they are more afraid of the good unknown than the bad known.

In the Temple of Academia curiosity is at a premium!