A tool for managing unwanted emails and boring people

Michael Hines
mhines3@illinois.edu
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Abstract

I present a system for displaying, coding, and ordering emails based on the previous experience of the system on the ratio of read to unread emails from senders. The goal is to eliminate unread emails, either by inducing reads or replies, or by filtering out unwanted emails from senders by selective filter parameters. The environment visualization is simply the email reader, with several small but powerful changes, such as color-coding and additional sorting parameters.

1 Motivation

Nowadays we have good spam filters for filtering out unsolicited emails. This means I no longer have to read about how I should be buying Cartier replicas with plastic chrome wristbands and zirconia insets at ridiculously low costs, but what about the other emails I don’t want to read? If the rest of the world is like me (and I suspect they are), they get loads of emails they never end up reading from people and places that legitimately obtained their email address. Today it’s impossible to spend a day on the web without needing an account on a web site that requires your email address. Some people rectify this by never giving out their primary email address to web sites, but this isn’t always convenient. Take for example the email from E*TRADE in the figure below. E*TRADE has my email address because I have a money market account with them. It would be unwise for me to give my bank a junk email address, but nevertheless the email I’ve received from them below is, simply, junk. God help me if I don’t receive 15 of the Facebook message or event invitation emails every day, because the world must be ending.

Right now someone is saying, “well, you idiot, why don’t you unsubscribe from those emails then?” True, each of these web sites I’m complaining about has its respective way of opting-out of the “needless” emails they send, but perhaps I want to get some Facebook messages from some people and not others. It’s not worth my time to go through every friend I have on Facebook and decide if they should be allowed to send me messages or not, and as often as I try to “unsubscribe” from emails I don’t want to get anymore, somehow more keep coming thorough. Which brings me to my solution:

2 Method

2.1 Archival

In the past, I’ve deleted these problem messages because they took up valuable room in my inbox. However, with the advent of multi-gigabyte email quotas, I and many other people have stopped deleting emails in lieu of “archiving” them. This archival of these messages is crucial to the function of this process. Every email must be saved (at least until a filter is created, see below), and emails must not artificially “marked as read.”
A sample of my unread email. Note the labels Inbox amongst Spam

2.2 Statistics

Now, I can build some very simple statistics on my emails. From each sender and also from each domain of each sender, we can calculate how many emails I’ve “ignored.” We can define ignored simply as any email that’s remained unread for 5 or more days. For me, this is overkill. The last email on my first page is only about two days old, and if an email isn’t read by the time it gets out of my sight on the first page, it’s hopeless.

2.3 Coding

2.3.1 Color

The email subject lines will be highlighted with a colored background, similar to the national threat level, that indicates how often emails from that sender are read.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Read/Unread</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Threat level status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exempted</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90%-100%</td>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Guarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80%-90%</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Elevated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70%-80%</td>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0%-60%</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Severe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, unlike the threat level, some emails should be expected to be blue or green.

2.3.2 Sorting

Emails will continue to be ordered by page based on time. For instance, if 25 emails are displayed per page, the top 25 emails will be displayed on the first page. However, each page will have its respective emails ordered by threat severity rather than time. Therefore, green emails will be at top and red emails will be at bottom. Emails that have been read will have their backgrounds dimmed.

2.4 Filters

So far, this hasn’t actually solved my problem of an inbox full of crap. So when emails get to the “red zone” a button will pop up inviting me to create a filter. The system can selectively look at the emails that I’ve ignored and also the emails that I’ve read, and make some educated suggestions on filter parameters.

3 Considerations

Some people are afraid of filters [2]. They feel that if they filter something into a folder, it’s lost forever. These peoples’ fears will be assuaged with a filter option that allows a selection of filtered messages to appear in a separate section below the red-colored emails. Only three or four of these emails will be visible at a time, but if users are curious, they can switch to filtered mail, or just view the list of email in their respective folders or labels.

4 Observations

Now, it’s possible that many of the emails I receive but never read are actually very important. For ex-
ample, I often get messages from group member for class project that I’ll entirely ignore (sorry if you’re reading this guys). I’m sure I’m not the only one. For these senders, it’s simple enough to provide an exemption list and override them with a classification of the user’s choosing. This will have the added side effect of moving them to the top of the inbox when sorted by threat level.

References
