

How the Grinch stole YOUR email

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Have you ever wondered why that special email you were expecting never arrived? How it is that you missed that funding agency email? Has a monthly email from a professional organization that used to come regularly gone missing? You are not alone.

Beginning in June of this year Temple University introduced a new filter to "quarantine" suspicious email. This is not unwarranted. In fact, all colleges and universities monitor and intercept emails that are phishing scams or worse. This is the responsible thing to do. Responsible organizations also alert the intended recipients when they quarantine email. Temple University does not and, after they sit in limbo for two weeks, the messages are deleted.

How do I know this? As secretary of the Organic Chemistry Division of the ACS (the American Chemical Society, the largest scientific organization on the planet I might add), I am responsible for running an annual division election, which started on September 26th through a well-known third party election site. I waited for my ballot, but that email did not arrive. None of the ballots sent to my ACS colleagues here came either, but friends at other schools did get theirs. Puzzled, I contacted the Computer Services Help Desk and, two days later, the ballot showed up! Curious, I contacted the Help Desk again and learned that 20 of these emails addressed to division members with Temple University email addresses had been quarantined— with no attempt to contact any of the addressees – and then released after my inquiry.

Thus began six weeks of email and one-on-one exchanges with the very top administrators of Computer Services. It has been a series of denials, untruths and whitewash.

Every month the ACS sends me an email announcing the availability of four documents containing important information on the division membership and it is my responsibility to obtain and archive these files before they disappear. The last time I received one of these announcements was May 31st. I exchanged many emails with the ACS but we could not figure out how the mail failed to arrive. Now I know. Last week I received a link to the secret place where my quarantined email resides and there I discovered the November ACS notification.

The two weeks of my undeleted, quarantined email contained nearly 300 messages, not one of which were dangerous. I estimate that well over 1,000 emails sent to me have been secretly deleted by this program. This is only an estimate because anything over two weeks old is gone. How many of your emails have disappeared this way?

On October 10th, an email to me from an Associate Vice President of Computer Services stated, "As of Friday there were no messages with in [sic] the Quarantine for your address." While I cannot prove that this is a lie, because quarantined emails that old have been deleted, the size of my quarantined email repository and the duration of the quarantine program makes that statement unbelievable.

That missive came a few days after the same person told me, "if you feel messages are not getting through you can report them and the teams will review." As always, my limited clairvoyance lets me down again.

In early October I shared screen shots of emails from other universities with top Computer Services administrators. At those other universities, email quarantine generates a message listing the messages and providing options: Deliver, Whitelist, Delete, View. This is a simple software option that our university has refused to implement.

On Monday night (November 6th) I received an Orwellian email from the CIO of Computer Services stating "When we changed to the new filtering, we also started quarantining mail and clearly didn't communicate it well to users..." and "After reviewing it today, we are going to stop quarantining email that may be spam...."

Thirty six hours later my email continues to be quarantined. The latest batch includes six associated with the division election that is still underway.

What to do? You and I have no control over the fate of email arriving at Temple University. If you can't find an email that you were expecting, I urge you to ask the Help Desk and also write the security administrators at our Computer Services.

Should you want to contact me, please do so at scott.sieburth@icloud.com.

p.s. You might want to check <https://admin.protection.outlook.com/quarantine>.