

PACSPAM: CHEAP, FAST, AND OUT OF CONTROL

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Five authenticated political fundraising emails reach a private server in three days, and the instructive thing is that they pass: authentication certifies identity, never honesty, and generative AI has dissolved the last cost that gated a convincing forgery. Every specimen flies Democratic colors, an artifact of whose lists my spouse is on and not a verdict on which party is worse; the Republican machine is measurably worse, and it is not the subject. Following the fifth back through a shared post office box and a shared vendor leads to Mothership Strategies, the firm that built this network of committees; since 2018 it raised roughly six hundred and seventy-eight million dollars from small donors and returned one and six-tenths of one percent to candidates, paying itself fourteen times what the candidates got. The mechanism is a decade old, the reporting has run for years, and the party keeps signing the checks, because shame is a damping term only where it carries a cost, and here it carries none. A worse offense against the polis than any “copyright theft” performed by AI.

Five political fundraising pitches authenticated and reached my private email server in the space of three days this week; I mean to dissect two of them, to call two more as witnesses, and to follow the fifth back to the firm that built them all. The instructive thing about every one is not that it lied but that it passed. SPF, DKIM, a valid one-click unsubscribe, delivery through a commercial relay; the signals the mail system was built to weigh came back green, or green enough to wave through. The Democratic Governors Association’s blast was fully aligned and riding the reputation allowlists, indistinguishable by any machine signal from a message you might have asked

for; Stop Republicans’ was already sitting on a public spam blocklist, SpamCop having named it, and it was delivered anyway, because the gate stops reading the moment a signature validates. The machinery that decides whether a stranger may reach you now checks one thing well, whether the sender is who they claim to be, and cannot check the only thing that matters, whether the sender is telling the truth or grifting. An entire industry has moved through that window and hung curtains.

A clarification belongs here, before a single committee is named, because every committee dissected below flies Democratic colors. That is an artifact of whose lists my spouse landed on, not a verdict on which party spams worse. On the harm a donor actually suffers, the Republican machine is measurably worse: in 2020, by the New York Times’s review of the FEC filings, the Trump operation and the Republican National Committee refunded more than a hundred and twenty-two million dollars to WinRed donors, a refund rate of 10.7 percent, much of it driven by pre-checked recurring boxes, one of them an internal “money bomb” that silently doubled the gift, against the Biden operation’s twenty-one million and 2.2 percent on ActBlue; the FTC fielded nearly seven times as many complaints about WinRed as about ActBlue. But WinRed does not write to this house. This essay is about the mail that arrives, and the mail that arrives here is blue. The quarry is the machine, not the party. I am being brutally clear, and not partisan.

It is worth remembering what a convincing lie used to cost. To produce a piece of email that looked legitimate enough to open and personal enough to believe, you needed a small supply chain of scarce human hands: a copywriter to compose the bespoke grievance; a designer to lend the thing the visual grammar of an institution rather than a boiler room; a developer to wire the funnel; a broker to rent the list. Each hand was an expense, and each expense was a governor.

And a delay. The copywriter capped how many distinct lies you could tune; the designer capped how legitimate you could look; together they kept the field of convincing forgeries small, and populated only by operations funded well enough to pay for all four. The cost of the counterfeit was quietly doing filtering for users of email; most of what reached eyeballs had cleared a price bar, and the price bar was a rough proxy for seriousness. Political operations knew this economy intimately; the story of the last few years is the story of how every one of those governors was pulled out of it at once, and thus the resulting flood.

The designer deserves particular attention, because that is where the cost load historically bears most strongly. The designer was never selling decoration; the designer was manufacturing credibility. A ransom-note layout read as fraud on sight, so the friction of needing someone who could make an email look as though it came from a real organization was itself one of the last honest cost based filters that existed. The look of legitimacy was (weak) evidence of legitimacy precisely because looking legitimate cost money, and the people willing to spend it skewed toward the people who were what they claimed. That is the filter that died going into the current election cycle. Looking legitimate is now free, or close enough to free that it rounds down to zero cost. Because generative AI.

Here the generative model earns its place in the argument, and not as a writer of essays or a painter of pictures; it earns it as a cheap lubricant for that friction. The old workshop proverb offered cheap, fast, and good, and told you to pick two, on the assumption that human labor was the binding constraint. Remove labor as the constraint and the proverb dissolves: you may now have cheap and fast and good-enough, all three, in unlimited quantity, tuned per recipient (Costco survey! Los Gatos warehouse!), at a marginal cost that rounds to nothing. The copywriter is now a prompt; the designer is a template the

model fills; the funnel is rented by the month; the dossier is a purchased file of modeled attributes; and the domain is a cheap top-level domain registered for a dollar on a promo. None of these tricks is itself new; the fake reply-thread, the invisible ballast, the séance run on a stale row are old crafts, any one of which a patient con man could have worked by hand a generation ago, and, as we will see, a professional firm has worked by hand at industrial scale for a decade. What is new is that none of them needs the hand any longer, nor the four hands, nor the budget those hands added up to: the labor that used to gate the whole performance, and with it the cost that made the performance a filter, is precisely what the model dissolves. Every governor that throttled the production of convincing, personalized, professional deceit went into the same rendering vat at the same time. What you get for free, unbidden, riding along with the cheap and the fast and the good-enough, is the fourth term nobody ordered: out of control. The means of production of persuasion have been handed to everyone, and the first customers of any democratized forgery are the forgers.

And the tuning, held to the light, is a séance with a dead record. BOLD Democrats, the official arm of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, reached my spouse under the display name “me, B. Laurel (2),” forged to render in the inbox as though the message were her own reply to herself, beneath the subject “FWD: re: Brenda’s Costco Membership,” a conversation faked mid-stream; inside, it hailed her as a Los Gatos Costco member and scolded her, by name, for neglecting its “poll” about defending her local warehouse. She is neither a Costco member nor a resident of Los Gatos, and the address it dunned her at is Locus Voci, the house in the Santa Cruz mountains that we left ahead of the CZU Lightning Complex fires of 2020. The intimacy is not knowledge; it is a ghost sold by a data broker, the profile of a person who used to live somewhere, animated to read as though a

neighbor were writing. The machine does not know her. It knows a stale row and asserts it with the confidence of a friend, which is worse than knowing nothing, because false familiarity is the entire mechanism of the con; the machine addressed a woman who no longer exists at a house she no longer occupies and asked her for twenty-five dollars, with thirty and seventy and a hundred laid a click beyond.

Nor is the “poll” a poll. A poll is a question asked by someone who wants to know the answer; Forward Blue’s offered three doors, YES, NO, and UNSURE, each a wrapped tracking link that logged which she pressed and reported nothing back to her, and beneath them the single thing it had been built to ask, a recurring monthly donation. There is no response a recipient can give, ambivalence included, that is not a click the sender banks; the survey gathers no opinion and publishes no tally, because the measurement of opinion was never its office. The costume varies only in cut: Forward Blue runs a poll, the Democratic Governors Association runs a petition, “ADD MY NAME” against a postal-service rule, and Stop Republicans runs a fake arithmetic, a “300%-MATCH” on your thirty-five dollars that no ledger will ever reconcile; three garments over one body. And the fifth mailing, the one that gives up the machine, dispenses with even the pretense of a distinct address: a committee calling itself Progressive Turnout Project asked Brenda, “Do you have a Costco membership?”, YES in red and NO in blue, each a wrapped link whose own internal name betrays its destination, `act_stoprepublicans_com_surv_debate`, so that a poll sent under one committee’s letterhead funnels its clicks into a second committee’s survey and, from there, into a donation page. The question is not idle either; it files whether she holds a Costco card, a fresh attribute for the next season’s tuning. Each of these manufactures the sensation of being consulted, or enlisted, or multiplied, to seat a small reciprocity in the mark before the ask arrives, so that the button she pressed to voice an opinion becomes the foot

she has already set in the door. It is the costume of civic participation worn over a collection plate.

What licenses all of it is a carve-out with noble parentage and a squalid afterlife. The law that forbids deceptive commercial email, that lets the FTC pursue a merchant for a counterfeit countdown clock, a pre-checked recurring charge, or a phantom match that triples a gift on the button and nowhere in the ledger, stops at the border of political speech, which the First Amendment rightly guards and the statutes accordingly exempt. The intent was to keep the state from silencing dissent as “spam”; the effect is a sanctuary with robes for the grifters. Every technique that would be a tort or a crime in a storefront, the invented deadline, the false scarcity, the negative-option subscription slipped past the eye, the survey-shaped chute into a charge, is not merely tolerated but constitutionally sheltered the instant it wraps itself in a candidate’s colors. A monthly-donation box that would earn Amazon an enforcement action earns a PAC a revenue stream. The fraud statutes still reach the outright thief who keeps the money, and a prosecutor jails one now and then; but they stop well short of the larger, tidier traffic that forwards the money faithfully enough and lies only about the reason for the ask. The FTC is forbidden that civil field; the FEC that might have taken it instead sits deadlocked three against three, and the deadlock is not an accident of appointment but the design running as intended, a stalemate the commissioners preserve because the two parties that seat them both feed at the same trough and neither will risk a majority that might look too closely at the machine filling it. It is a referee hired to swallow his whistle, and he swallows it.

There is a third agency, and its one moment of speed is the most damning fact in the file. The FCC governs the channel rather than the content, the calls that reach a phone, and for a brief interval in early 2024 it moved like a body that meant it: after a cloned-voice robo-

call of a counterfeit President Biden urged New Hampshire’s primary voters to skip the polls and “save your vote,” the Commission ruled within weeks that an AI-generated voice is “artificial” under the old telephone statute and may not call you without your consent. That is as fast and as plainly as the federal government has ever moved against a generative-AI deception, and one of the vanishingly few times it has named the technology outright as the instrument rather than gaveling open another study of it. It named it in the voice channel, days before a primary, when the fake spoke aloud and frightened it; it has said nothing of the same intelligence writing the same lie into your inbox, where the counterfeit is silent and spooks no commissioner. Three agencies, then, posted over three layers, the content and the money and the channel, and the operation is built with a surveyor’s care to come to rest in the seams between all three: authenticated at the transport layer, exempt at the content layer, unpoliced at the money layer, and beneath the notice of the one regulator that has ever proven fast enough to matter. We wrote a shield for the pamphleteer and handed it to the mechanical boiler room.

And it is a boiler room, in the plainest sense, though its true dimensions show only from the back office, never the retail floor. On the floor the tells are small change: BOLD Democrats brags in its own footer of fourteen million dollars raised at an average gift of \$12.84, read generously a wonder of small-dollar breadth, read against the technique that harvested it the steady throughput of a refinery. The fifth mailing points somewhere larger. Progressive Turnout Project, Stop Republicans, and their siblings are not unrelated grassroots outfits that happen to share a house style; they share a Post Office box in Evanston, Illinois, they share the same fundraising vendor’s link-wrapper and the same stray Grammarly extension bleeding into the shipped markup, and they were, in large part, built by one firm. That firm is Mothership Strategies, founded in 2014 by two alumni of

the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee's digital shop, Greg Berlin and Charles Starnes, who took the act-now-the-deadline-is-tonight style they had piloted for the party and set up in business for themselves; the committees whose colors we have been reading, Progressive Turnout Project, founded the year after by Harry Pascal and Alex Morgan, and Stop Republicans and End Citizens United beside it, now function in large part as Mothership's own clients. A Stanford political scientist, Adam Bonica, sat down with the Federal Election Commission filings and produced the figure this whole essay has been walking toward. Since 2018 the network raised roughly six hundred and seventy-eight million dollars from individual donors. One and six-tenths of one percent of it reached a candidate, a campaign, or a party committee. The consultant was paid fourteen times what the candidates were: about one hundred and fifty-nine million dollars went straight to Mothership, against some eleven million that reached the causes the whole apparatus invoked. Put it in the coin of a single gift and the machine confesses. Of the twenty-five dollars it asked my spouse for, a candidate would have seen about forty cents, and the firm that wrote the email nearly six. A charity that delivered a cent and a half on the dollar would have its officers indicted; this one holds a Post Office box in Evanston and a decade of tenure, because the only word that separates the fraud from the franchise is the one printed on the door. The self-licking engine is not a metaphor and not an emergent surprise; it is a going concern, with a founding date and a client list, whose product is the email itself. Not a prince in Lagos, but a domestic, DKIM-signed, FEC-registered outrage refinery, legal in all but the last particular, and honest in none.

The part that should burn is that none of this is news. The mechanism is a decade old and has been described, in outlets friendly to the very party it feeds, in language no one could mistake for praise; former Democratic digital hands have called the model a wildly deceptive

approach that treats supporters like garbage, and the trade has its own affectionate name for it, “churn and burn,” the deliberate incineration of a donor’s goodwill for the cash it throws off on the way down. The reporting has run and run, the warnings have been filed and filed, and the party keeps signing the checks; the chair of the House Democratic Caucus, Pete Aguilar, is among the members still routing money to Mothership after years of it, because the machine raises money and raising money is the only variable its customers are graded on. Which returns us, by a shorter road than the firm would like, to Wiener.

Norbert Wiener would have named the failure without flinching, and not fondly. A system holds steady because something damps it; pull the damping term and it does not settle, it runs to the rails and splatters. Spam was damped by the cost of its own production, and we have poured acid over the main brake it had; but there was supposed to be a second brake, and it is the more interesting one to watch fail. That second brake is shame, and shame is only a damping term if it carries a cost. Here it carries none. The operation is legal, the take is enormous, the tactics raise money even as they scorch the donor, and the referee is deadlocked by design; so ten years of exposure enter the loop as pure input and change nothing, because there is no channel on which shamelessness is ever made expensive. What remains is a positive-feedback loop with both its governors gone: the cheaper the lie, the more of it; the more of it, the more the honest signal drowns; the more it drowns, the higher the reward to the loudest liar and the lower whatever shame a system incapable of feeling it might have felt. The cost did not totally vanish, of course; it was moved, shoved downstream onto every recipient, each now expected to perform unpaid the forensic reading that the impossibility of cheap fakes once did on their behalf: to notice the reply-thread forged into a stranger’s From-line, “me, B. Laurel (2)” at the caucus PAC and “NEW re: USPS for [her email address]” at the Governors’ Association; the identical Gram-

marly extension bleeding into the shipped markup of committees that turn out to ride one vendor's rails; the two survey buttons whose own names confess they lead to a sibling committee's funnel; the zero-width joiner splitting a maildrop's address so it cannot be searched against its siblings, and, at the most authenticated and allowlisted sender of the lot, splitting the committee's own domain inside the legally required "paid for by," so that even the confession of authorship is engineered against search. Almost no one has the time or the eye, and the machine is betting, correctly, that they do not; the odds are with the house. The last insult is reserved for anyone who ever cared to make a thing well: the look of labor, the earned authority of good type set with intention and a page that respects its reader, was for five centuries a roughly honest sign that labor and intention were present, and it is now available for nothing to anyone content to simulate the work without doing it. We have built an engine that manufactures the appearance of care at industrial scale and loosed it in the one channel where the appearance of care is how a stranger buys a moment of your attention; and, in the old reliable way, the counterfeit is driving out the coin.

I look under the surface of the machinery, so I see the gift in detail, writ large.

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