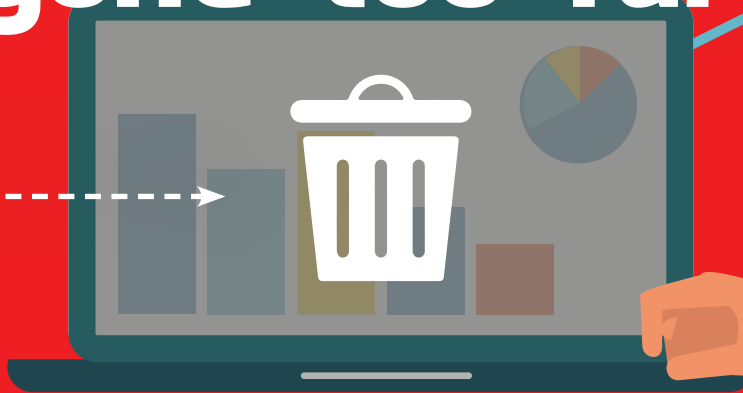# Has the paperless push gone too far?

Letter carriers have seen firsthand how the Internet is changing the mail. Our satchels are often lighter than expected, while the piles of packages in the back of our trucks keep growing as Americans order more goods online.

But as businesses and governments move closer to greater dependence on the Internet, pushback against the actual effectiveness of Internet communications and over security concerns is re-focusing attention on the advantages of maintaining the option of postal mail.

"The Internet is going to continue to grow as a basic communication tool, of course, but as it does, we may see the limits of its usefulness," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "And the advantages of postal mail for many kinds of communication will become clearer."

One important advantage mail has over the Internet is that paper is a physical item that can command attention more readily than an e-mail or web page can, especially when access to it involves simply opening an envelope. Going paperless may save money, but it also can backfire if the message fails to reach, or interest, the intended audience.

Social Security backs down

The Social Security Administration (SSA) learned this lesson recently when it tried in 2011 to move to sending all personalized statements to workers online, eliminating paper statements by mail. In a budget-cutting move, SSA announced a plan to require workers to go to the Social Security website and sign up for a web account to see information on the statement, such as salary history.

The plan was a flop. Millions of workers either didn't bother to sign up online or never even knew about the online statements, if they even used the Internet, or trusted it, to get financial information. Faced with complaints and concerned that too many workers were going without this vital information, Congress told SSA to boost the number of workers who receive statements, even if that required mailing paper statements. In response, SSA brought back the paper statement option and resumed mailing them in 2014. The SSA's statements go every five years to workers between the ages of 25 and 65, and every year to workers and retirees ages 65 and older.

"We have listened to our customers, advocates and Congress," Acting Commissioner of Social Security Carolyn Colvin said in a statement, "and renewing the mailing of the statement reinforces our commitment to provide the public with an easy, efficient way to obtain an estimate of their future Social Security benefits."

The ease of Internet communication has resulted in important messages getting swamped in a sea of e-mails, social media posts and other messages that compete for attention. Prompting Internet users to go looking for the information on the Internet, while keeping the sensitive data private, proved too difficult for SSA.

As advertisers who continue to rely on postal mail ads know, communication isn't worth anything if it fails to reach its target or if nobody actually reads it. That's why they continue to use the mail.

A recent study by the Direct Marketing Association found that direct mail is up to 30 times more effective than e-mail in attracting new customers. A study by marketing firm Epsilon showed that two-thirds of consumers feel mail is more personal than e-mail and 70 percent prefer mail for receiving unsolicited information from unfamiliar companies. And advertisers understand that e-mails are as easy to delete as they are to send, while mail ads may lie around on a kitchen table to be discovered again later.

Internet access and use still not universal

Often lost in the conversation about going paperless is the fact that many people don't, or can't, use the Internet. A surprisingly large number of Americans either prefer not to use the Internet or have no Internet access.

A study by the Pew Research Center and the Department of Commerce shows that 41 percent of Americans over 65 years of age do not use the Internet. The Federal Communications Commission says 55 million Americans—17 percent of the population—lack Internet access at standard broadband speed, including half of rural Americans. Even if they have a broadband provider in their area, one in four households in a Census Bureau survey reported no Internet connection, even dial-up.

Even consumers who have Internet access may simply prefer to receive paper statements or to have paper statements to complement their access to online information. That may be why, according to Javelin Strategy and Research, half of consumers who have Internet access still receive bank and credit card statements by mail.

To date, many government agencies and businesses have continued to offer mail communication through the Postal Service's universal network as an option for people who prefer not to use the Internet or have no access to it. But that is changing, and those people may be left out if it goes too far.

Advocating for consumers

Consumers for Paper Options (CPO) is advocating to preserve the ability of consumers who want paper statements and

documents to continue to receive them.

CPO's most recent effort has been lobbying Congress to pass the Personal Access to Paper Election Reform (PAPER) Act, H.R. 3673. The bill, introduced by Rep. Dan Benishek (R-MI), would require the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to resume mailing paper forms and instructions to individuals who filed a paper tax return for the preceding tax year. The IRS stopped mailing the forms in 2011, even though more than 10 million taxpayers still file by paper.

"The short-sighted IRS decision to stop mailing tax forms, even to citizens who still file by mail, has hurt millions of Americans, especially seniors and those living with disabilities," CPO Executive Director John Runyan said. "We hear from people across the country who simply don't have the option to file tax returns online and have difficulty accessing the paper forms that are supposedly available at post offices and libraries."

Working with consumer advocacy groups Consumer Action and the National Consumers League, CPO also is pressing the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to abandon its proposed rule to allow mutual funds to discontinue the mailing of shareholder reports and other important investment information to investors.

The SEC's own research shows that investors prefer paper statements: 71 percent of American investors said they prefer to read annual reports in a paper format rather than in online versions, and a large number of respondents also said that printed materials are easier to read and understand.

CPO and other advocacy groups already have succeeded in convincing some state regulators that pushing consumers to accept only online bills or statements is a bad idea. In a recent victory, the Pennsylvania Utility Commission barred phone companies from charging customers in the commonwealth a fee if they choose a paper bill instead of an online statement.

The looming security threat

Even if the day comes when every American has adequate access to the Internet and is comfortable using it, will they all feel safe with their personal data flowing through channels so easily tapped by hackers?

News reports of the hacking of data on the Internet are almost routine these days as thieves find new ways to score bigger and bigger online heists. A billion Internet records containing vital information such as names and addresses, Social Security numbers and financial records held by businesses and government agencies were illegally accessed in 1,500 major hacks last year, according to digital security firm Gemalto. At this rate, it's possible that online data has been stolen from almost every American, whether they know it or not.

The ease of sending information through the Internet and of managing and storing records on computers also makes data easy to steal. A patchwork of cybersecurity laws, a lack of regulation and the ability of cybercriminals to work from overseas make cracking down on hackers a serious challenge.

The Internet also is vulnerable to fraud. Scams and "phishing" attacks—tricking Internet users into volunteering private information—are so common these days that probably every American who has logged on to a computer has seen them. (Who hasn't received an e-mail from a Nigerian prince who needs a few dollars to get out of a jam?) Unfortunately, creative new scams that can still catch Americans off-guard emerge daily, and spoofs, in which scammers pose as legitimate companies, can victimize even the savviest Internet user.

No wonder a 2014 Pew Research Center poll showed that 57 percent of respondents felt insecure about sending private information by e-mail.

Contrast that with the security of the U.S. mail.

Our postal system has its own dedicated law enforcement agency, the Postal Inspection Service, that investigates and prosecutes mail fraud and theft. It has the power to intercept mail sent for the purposes of fraud and to prosecute violators of laws against fraud and anyone who tampers with or steals mail or packages. Even opening mail not addressed to you can be a crime. In 2014, arrests by postal inspectors led to 5,300 convictions.

Then there's the built-in security of sending a letter. Hackers can't view the contents from a distant computer or open and read the contents of millions of envelopes with one keystroke.

As private companies and federal and state governments look for new ways to communicate and transfer data via the Internet, its security limits are showing in sharp contrast with the locked-down nature of mail.

Pushback on paperless' new regulations?

Of course, this doesn't mean the Internet will be abandoned or the trends reversed, but some consumers and citizens might say "enough is enough" and demand that certain documents and data stay safe in a paper envelope transported in a letter carrier's satchel. And since trust is an essential part of communication, business and government will need to listen to such demands.

For instance, would anyone trust an e-mail message purporting to be from the IRS, saying back taxes are owed and demanding payment? Most people would rightly fear that this is a scam, and that's probably why the IRS sends notices like that to taxpayers only by postal mail, and likely will never change that policy. Some documents simply require the trust and security that comes with paper.

The federal government might even impose additional requirements on private companies to protect security and privacy. These new requirements could make the cost savings of going paperless less competitive with postal mail due to the cost of technology to comply with security mandates—or the liability costs of not complying.

Some laws already limit the scope of online communication for privacy reasons. The privacy requirements of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), for instance, rightly complicate the ability of doctors, insurers and other health providers to communicate with patients online by requiring extra security measures. Consumers might demand more protections like these for other data, while hackers might find new ways to defeat existing protections.

Displaced largely by the Internet, First Class mail volume has declined steadily since it reached a peak of 103 billion pieces in 2001. If electronic communication fails to overcome its own disadvantages, could that decline slow even more than it already has, or even reverse? (The decline already has slowed dramatically.)

Taking action

As consumers and citizens, we can help to assure that paper remains an option for those of us who want it. Some ways to act include:

- Telling businesses, utilities and government agencies that they need to keep paper options open so that the millions of consumers with no Internet access, or those who value security of private information, can choose to complete their transactions by mail.
- Supporting bills in Congress and state-level legislative and regulatory efforts that assure that everyone has access to information and bills by mail.

"The Postal Service is the nation's only universal communications network," Rolando said. "As more is done online, we must make sure that all Americans have access to the services they depend on, especially when they come through the mail." **PR**