Digital Communications Working Group
Final Recommendations

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Overview

This document summarizes recommendations from the Dormspam (Digital Communications) Working Group, formed in January 2024 to address questions posed by Chancellor Melissa Nobles and Vice Chancellor and Dean for Student Life Suzy Nelson.

Questions

1. What is the purpose of dormspam, and who is responsible for the [how-to-dormspam website](#)?

2. What recommended practices and policies should MIT adopt regarding dormspam or other electronic communication?

3. What expectations for dormspam use should be included on how-to-dormspam?

4. What steps should be taken if the content of a dormspam or digital message sent to a house list is reported as violating a student behavior policy?

Responses and Recommendations

Question 1. What is the purpose of dormspam and other house digital communications? What "official" MIT email lists constitute dormspam? Who oversees the how-to-dormspam site?

Purpose, Usage, and Oversight of Dormspam. This working group defines dormspam as a student-run vehicle for sending mass emails through mailing lists for undergraduate residence halls and fraternities (e.g., frat-chat) on moderated and unmoderated platforms. Table 1 (at the end of this report) summarizes residential mailing lists and their moderation status.

Students on the working group define dormspam as a decentralized, informal communication method for undergraduate students comprised of bulk email lists. This collection of email lists is administered through [MIT's Moira or Mailman email management systems](#). First-year students are automatically added to most dormspam lists after being assigned to their residences. They remain on those lists until they are removed by the owner or until they unsubscribe themselves. At this time, the lists are regulated by peers through informal social norms intended to control the high volume of emails. Examples of peer regulation include an opt-out functionality and the norm of "tagging" every email in the subject line, enabling recipients to filter unwanted content.

Historically there have been few concerns or complaints reported about dormspam content and use. Dormspam is used by hundreds of students each week to advertise events, share academic opportunities, return lost items to their owners, and broadcast other important information to the campus community. Additionally, dormspam facilitates community and belonging by engaging students – especially first-years – with information about student organizations, residential communities, and campus life overall. At the same

time, interpersonal conflicts and lack of awareness are often root causes of conflicts on dormspam and other digital communication platforms. The working group observed that as we consider changes to dormspam, we should also help students strengthen their conflict resolution skills, with the two efforts complementing each other. Undergraduates use dormspam almost exclusively, while students in graduate residences communicate with their house communities using tools like Slack and WhatsApp. Some houses endorse other community communication channels, such as Discord. Official resident lists are only used for in-house communications.

Recommendations in this report are intended to enhance best practices, to ensure users give their consent to being subscribed to an unofficial house digital communication platform, to address policy violations in a timely and appropriate way, and to strengthen students' digital communication skills.

Q1 Recommendations

1. **Communicate clearly about dormspam's purpose, usage, and management.** Dormspam and other residential email lists should be used primarily for advertising, events, club announcements, and surveys. That said, these points should be communicated clearly to residents: 1) Controversial topics may be discussed on dormspam; 2) Senders are responsible for the content of their dormspam posts and must follow MIT student behavior policies and guidelines; and 3) Sending dormspam messages that violate MIT policies or guidelines may result in senders being restricted from using the platform and/or other disciplinary action.

2. **Staff and students should partner to manage the how-to-dormspam site**, which is currently administered by students. Going forward, the site should be updated and maintained cooperatively by staff and students.

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Question 2: What practices and policies should MIT adopt regarding dormspam or other digital communication? Should dormspam messages be moderated? If so, how? Should there be an expectation/requirement to tag messages? How will tagging be enforced?

Q2 Recommendations

1. **Official house lists.** MIT manages official house lists, which are moderated and intended for communications from Housing and Residential Services (HRS), Residential and Community Life (RCL), DSL, and house teams. The lists are populated using official HRS data and are separate from dormspam. As a result, residents are automatically added to their house's official email list. HRS and House teams should inform residents of the purpose and rules for moderating their official house list.

2. **Consent through opting in or opting out of dormspam.** Moderating lists is labor-intensive. Absent moderation, students should consent to being added to an unofficial house list, including dormspam, or vehicle for digital communication. There are two ways to do this:

1) The HRS official list is *not* used to populate the house dormspam list. Each fall, students receive an email explaining dormspam's purpose, rules, and directions for *opting in* to dormspam.

2) Some members of the working group did not support the opt-in consent method described above. A compromise is to use official MIT lists for populating unofficial digital communication channels, including dormspam, but clearly inform users *how to unsubscribe or opt out* of an unofficial list. This might also include adding a link to "How to unsubscribe from dormspam" to the footer of messages.

3. **Digital communication, policies, and training.** Establish an implementation team to clarify policies and practices related to digital communications, resources for new students, and educational programs for students who violate MIT's digital communications policies and practices.

    3.1. **Communicate policies and guidelines** at the beginning of each year.

    3.2. **Dormspam lists should be moved to the Mailman platform**, which allows for managing membership, subscriptions, list moderation, and content review.

    3.3. **Posts to dormspam should not be anonymous**. Posters should be identified with their MIT.edu email address. This will allow staff and house team members to follow up directly with those involved on reported concerns.

    3.4. **Restrict dormspam to current, enrolled students.** Currently, non-residents and even non-students can send dormspam messages. Dormspam and other residential email lists should be restricted to current, enrolled students. Additionally, all students should have access to dormspam regardless of where they live. IS&T should provide guidance on how to navigate incidents when non-students use dormspam.

         3.4.1. **Note:** Not all working group members supported restricting dormspam lists to current, enrolled students. Some members felt that such restrictions impacted the sense of community among current students and non-students affiliated with a community.

    3.5. **Reporting dormspam concerns should be easy**. Clearly define how to report concerns and respond to complaints in a timely way.

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Question 3: What use expectations should be published on the how-to-dormspam site? Is anything missing from this site? Does anything need to be clarified?

Q3 Recommendations

1. **Abide by all MIT policies and guidelines.** Posts to dormspam and other residence-based digital communications platforms must adhere to all MIT policies and guidelines.

2. **The how-to-dormspam website should include:**

   2.1. The definition and purpose of dormspam, noting that dormspam is restricted to use by currently enrolled students.

   2.2. Names of lists comprising dormspam and their owners.

   2.3. Clear tagging procedures.

   2.4. Directions for opting in (or opting out) and unsubscribing from lists.

   2.5. Directions for filtering dormspam.

   2.6. A how-to-dormspam guide and system etiquette tips.

   2.7. Directions and help resources for users who have unsubscribed from dormspam lists to access dormspam content.

   2.8. Rules and regulations governing dormspam, including an explicit rule against posts engaging in harassment, discrimination, retaliation, invasion of personal privacy, defamation, threats or violence, targeting of groups or individuals, infringing intellectual property rights of others, or other violations of law or MIT policies.

   2.9. Complaint reporting guidance.

3. **Expand tagging rules** to include the recommendations below:

   3.1. Publish instructions for message tagging and filtering on the how-to-dormspam website, with guidelines on the importance of tagging to proper dormspam etiquette.

   3.2. Promote the use of email signatures on the how-to-dormspam website, beyond what is currently in place, to include "bcc'ed to dorms" to facilitate easy dormspam filtering.

   3.3. Develop residence-specific dormspam practices (e.g., tagging layers) in each house and communicate them to community residents at the start of each academic year.

3.4.   Ensure that subject lines for all digital communications provide information about the email content in keeping with practices currently promoted on the how-to-dormspam website.

Note: The working group recommendation for tagging reflects current practices on the how-to-dormspam website. However, not all working group members support the recommended additional tagging steps. Those opposed suggest that the effort required by list moderators and administrators to enact additional tagging measures would be onerous.

3.5.   Make students aware that they can view event information distributed through dormspam on the student-run dormsoup.mit.edu website even if they are not subscribed to dormspam.

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Question 4: What steps should be taken if a dormspam message or other digital communication violates student behavior policies?

Q4 Recommendations

1.   Communicate clearly in residence hall communications and community meetings, the processes for addressing misuse of digital communication tools and responding to harassment, threats, or other policy violations. Encourage students to discuss with their house team ways to manage or respond to posts they find concerning.

1.1.   Provide contact and process information for reporting and support resources, such as:

1.1.1.   Institute Discrimination and Harassment Office (IDHR)

1.1.2.   Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards (OSCCS)

1.1.3.   Committee on Discipline (COD)

1.1.4.   https://ist.mit.edu/stopit

1.1.5.   https://hotline.mit.edu/

1.1.6.   https://doingwell.mit.edu/support-3/

2.   In communications about opting in or opting out of mailing lists and on the how-to-dormspam website, clarify the interim steps that may be taken by groups such as DSL, IDHR, OSCCS, and the COD while a misconduct report is being investigated, including removing individuals from or temporarily shutting down a list.

2.1.   Communications should also state that MIT reserves the right to shut down a digital communication list that is alleged to cause harm to individuals and/or the community.

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Table 1. Summary of residence hall mailing lists and their moderation status

LIST	MEMBERS	MODERATION	OWNER NOTES (incomplete)	MOIRA/MAILMAN
bc-talk@mit.edu	609	Not moderated	Co-owned by the area director	https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/bc-talk
ec-discuss@mit.edu	974	Not moderated		https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/ec-discuss
frat-chat@mit.edu	1,176	Not moderated		https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/frat-chat
mccormick-announce@mit.edu	557	Not moderated	Heads of house and the area director own the list	https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/mccormick-announce
next-forum@mit.edu	1,072	Not moderated	List owned by students	https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/next-forum
nh-forum@mit.edu	455	Not moderated		https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/nh-forum
random-hall-talk@mit.edu	550	Not moderated		https://groups.mit.edu/webmoira/list/random-hall-talk
macgregor@mit.edu	764	Member emails not moderated; Non-member email held for approval		https://mailman.mit.edu:444/mailman/listinfo/macgregor
maseeh-talk@mit.edu	520	Member emails not moderated; Non-member email held for approval	Head of house co-owns the list	https://mailman.mit.edu:444/mailman/listinfo/maseeh-talk
new-vassar-forum@mit.edu	744	Member emails not moderated; Non-member email held for approval		https://mailman.mit.edu:444/mailman/listinfo/new-vassar-forum

LIST	MEMBERS	MODERATION	OWNER NOTES (incomplete)	MOIRA/MAILMAN
sponge-talk@mit.edu	514	Member emails not moderated; Non-member email held for approval		https://mailman.mit.edu:444/mailman/listinfo/sponge-talk
baker-forum@mit.edu	545	Member emails not moderated; Non-member email held for approval		

Members

- Matthew D. Bauer, senior director, communications, DSL
- Adam Berinsky, head of house, professor
- Bryan Bryson, associate head of house, associate professor (co-lead)
- Cullen Buie, head of house, associate professor
- Mitali Chowdhury, undergraduate, DormCon president
- David Darmofal, head of house, professor
- Enoch Ellis, undergraduate
- Maria Garcia Garcia, undergraduate, DormCon representative
- Rich Hilton, associate dean, DSL
- Nicholas King, graduate student, GSC representative
- Rebecca Lizarde, undergraduate, DormCon VP
- Jag Patel, senior director, IS&T
- David Randall, senior associate dean, DSL
- Judy Robinson, consultant, DSL (co-lead)
- Kristen Selheim, associate dean, DSL
- Jordan Tierney, undergraduate, DormCon representative
- Helen Wang, senior associate dean, DSL (co-lead)
- Jay Wilcoxson, counsel