

The mail bag

Eric Blair

26 March 2004

90% of the mail to [national feminist organization] is renewal slips and assorted other forms that just have to be put in little piles and processed; for those, see yesterday's rant about re-entering numbers off of printouts. The other ten percent has handwritten notes on it which may or may not require attention.

These forms with handwritten notes are the embodiment of a conflict. The sender, off in Manhattan, KS, or LA, CA, is looking for a little voice, a momentary connection with somebody who agrees with them. The receiver, me, just wants to know what string of numbers to type in to the 'source' field in the database. I don't want to imply that the entire process is purely impersonal—somebody in the organization looks at the big box o' letters and gets some feel for public opinion therefrom. But the reply envelope is a lousy place for both human contact and political debate. Almost everything, whether a single line or three pages, is marked in the database with a single capital letter, so brevity, the soul of wit, is as encouraged as ever. Some of the things in the big box o' letters:

- Empty envelopes. By mailing back the business-reply envelope, the sender costs the organization something like fifteen cents and five seconds of labor. Way to stick it to 'em, Mr. Puerile. [Thrown out.]
- Apologies from people who sympathize but can't afford to contribute. These vary between one line and three pages. The mode are pensioners, who write a paragraph about how they can't contribute like they used to, sometimes with a little something about Bush ruining the economy. The typed letters go into great detail about the author's life, how they make their money, and how things have been in recent times. [Flag Q.]
- Political rants. These come on both sides of the debate. The opposition usually works in one liners: '*GO BUSH*', or 'Please take me off your list, because I don't support murderer. [sic]' The support goes into much more detail, often mailing in clippings or diatribes. 'We must free our bodies from the laws males have oppressed us with. [...] This is our jihad! [writing in Arabic]' From a man who enclosed a ten dollar check: 'I am a Black man, and you White women have been bad to us in the past. You lied about being raped and had us lynched. You must never lie.' This organization endorsed Carol Mosley Braun for President, and many people wrote in to express their displeasure with the endorsement. [Anti-rants are flag R.]

- Name corrections. Most are just polite fixes, but the amusing ones are the people who are totally pissed off about it, as if you've just peed on their family crest. 'No person named "Eller" at this address. My name is Feller. Please correct and resubmit.'

Many people write in titles like Ph.D.; I am qualified to say that this is hopelessly gauche. I use my title of 'Doctor' for only two purposes: grant applications and reaching my pals at work when the boss picks up. I really don't understand the benefit of informing somebody that they need to fix their database to indicate a successful thesis defense. I have yet to see anybody with an M.S. insist on being called 'Master'. [Put in the 'address corrections' pile.]

- Requests for less mail. Some are just a line, 'Please, no more requests until next year,' and some are very vehement. The vehement ones are typically a form letter on a separate page, which the person is sending to all the charities that send the person mail. They threaten to withdraw funding—or worse—if they get more than two pieces of mail per year. [Flag T.]

The requests for less mail make a lot of sense: this organization sends faithful members about a mailing a month. Any of you with a pulse have received mailings like these, and know that they have little informational content, and are basically just begging for more cash. As such, they are annoying, and sort of a waste of resources (paper, the receiver's time).

You can identify it from the outside, with the printed image of handwriting which doesn't fool a single person on this Earth into thinking somebody hand-wrote something onto your form. The type is funny, because each letter has to be printed separately, to personalize the greeting and the amounts asked for. People who have contributed in the past get boxes with larger numbers than others. The majority of people check off the lowest box, regardless of the amount listed therein. [And the neoclassicists say people spend their money rationally...]

I remember when I got my first letter like this from the LA County Bike Coalition. When I first joined, the LACBC was a small organization, with maybe a few hundred members. To me, that letter was sort of the end of the early era where Ron the president knew everybody in the organization, and the beginning of the earnest lobbying phase.

The other thing worth noting about these mailings, by the way, is that they are immensely profitable. They really are an effective way for the organization to raise the funds it needs to keep lobbying and informing the public. From what I've seen poking around in the database where I shouldn't, a typical mailing by this organization will cost \$15,000 and bring in \$25,000 in contributions, which probably makes impersonal and annoying mailings like these hard for an organization to resist. I mean, what else in this world almost guarantees a 70% return in two months?