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**October 14, 2004**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Mass E-mail Campaigns May Do More Harm Than Good**

### **Report: Internet is shifting how public participates in regulatory process**

**PITTSBURGH**—Groups that send out tens or hundreds of thousands of similar e-mails seeking to influence government regulations may be “inadvertently petitioning themselves into obscurity,” according to a new report by a University of Pittsburgh professor.

“The assumption has been that the more people participate in the policy-making process, the more they’ll be listened to,” said Stuart W. Shulman, assistant professor of information sciences and public administration at Pitt and senior research associate in Pitt’s University Center for Social and Urban Research. “The fact may be that the more they participate in mass e-mail campaigns—without creating substantive, detailed, specific new information relevant to a decision—the *lower* the agency estimates the role of the public to be over time.”

Federal agencies promulgate more than 4,000 new regulations each year; the term “electronic rulemaking” refers to the use of information technology and the Internet in this process. The public has a right to participate under the “notice and comment” provisions in the federal Administrative Procedure Act of 1946.

As a part of his work leading the eRulemaking Research Group—Jamie Callan, associate professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University; Eduard Hovy, research associate professor of computer science at the University of Southern California; and Stephen Zavestoski, assistant professor of sociology and environmental studies at the University of San Francisco—Shulman has published a report, available in hard copy beginning today, about the impact of modern information technology and the Internet on the federal rulemaking process.

The report examines such questions as: “What’s the proper role of public discussion in rulemaking? How do these technologies both create new opportunities and liabilities for people who want to engage in the process?” Titled “The Internet Still Might (but Probably Won’t) Change Everything: Stakeholder Views on the Future of Electronic Rulemaking,” the report is based on a series of workshops and focus groups the eRulemaking Research Group held in June, as part of a study funded by a small grant for exploratory research from the National Science Foundation (NSF).

In the mass e-mail campaigns that many organizations use to try to influence decision-making, people often will send the suggested form letter as-is, or with slight and often insubstantial modifications. Occasionally, they will tack on important comments at the end of the form letter. If the government receives multiple letters with no “substantive” difference between them, many agencies place only one copy in the official record, but it is often difficult for government employees to decide exactly which comments make a letter substantially different from others.

“It is probably not well-known to a lot of people who submit these comments that if their comment is part of one of these campaigns, it may end up in the recycling bin,” said Shulman.

Shulman argues that by creating databases of the public’s comments and building appropriate tools to analyze them, federal agencies will be able to make their decisions with the best available information. How these tools are designed and used will impact the nature and scope of public participation.

“The report argues that we should talk openly about this, because the regulatory process results in literally billions of dollars of costs and benefits to the economy every year,” said Shulman. “It is important that these issues be aired openly before technical choices are made that have far-reaching practical implications.”

Shulman and his group are launching a four-year study of electronic rulemaking, funded by a \$1.1 million NSF grant. “We’ll keep doing basic research into what these technologies can do with text,” said Shulman, “but it will all be tailored to an applied research project, in which new tools developed via computer science research will be used both by people who write public comments and those who actually have to read them.”

The report is freely available for download and in hard copy form at:  
<http://erulemaking.ucsur.pitt.edu>.

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