Virtual politicking is the use of email to support organizational politics. Surprisingly, despite the proliferation of email, its role in enabling political maneuvering is just starting to be acknowledged by managers and information systems practitioners. The Virtual Politicking Model detailed in this article synthesizes data from a series of real-life incidents in which email was used for political manipulation within and between organizations. The discussion illustrates the impact that email can have on life at work, alerting managers and practitioners to both its promise and its dangers.

In a review of the literature on email, Markus [4] offers three theoretical perspectives as explanations for the social impacts of email. The first is “technological determinism,” which holds that “the social outcomes of a technology derive primarily from its material characteristics, regardless of users’ intentions” [4]. One of the most important observations relevant to this perspective was made by Sproull and Kiesler [9], who noted that email has a democratizing effect on organizations, closing the gaps between individuals who are geographically, temporally, or socially dispersed.

The second theoretical perspective, “rational actor,” asserts that the ways that “people use the technology and what they try to accomplish with it are likely to affect the outcomes” [4]. Thus, the rational actor perspective holds that impact results, not from the technology itself, but from the choices individuals make about when and how to use it. Here again, a substantial body of research can be identified as supporting the rational actor perspective. For example, Sproull and Kiesler [8] suggested that subordinates may prefer to use email to interact with their superiors specifically because email suppresses the cues that convey their putative lower social status and helps conceal their emotional involvement.

The third theoretical perspective outlined by Markus is the “emergent process.” It postulates that “technologies and the choices of users interact with mutually causal influences that occasionally result in...
consequences unforeseen, undesired, and even unintended” [4]. Much of the research reported by Markus in her analysis of the effects of email on social life at work supports this perspective by demonstrating that email can be put to a variety of negative uses that are a direct result of managers’ efforts to minimize its potential undesirable effects [4, 5].

In reviewing the literature on organizational politics one should begin by defining what political behavior is. As indicated by Drory and Romm [1], there is little agreement among researchers on this question. Beyond the relatively wide consensus that political behavior involves attempts to wield influence, there are considerable variations among writers as to the means and the circumstances that distinguish political from non-political behavior.

When considering political behavior, an important distinction is made in relation to the scope of political activities (whether they are used by an individual or by a group). Thus, as indicated by Poole [7], when actors are unable to achieve certain political objectives on their own, they will form coalitions.

Several circumstances that determine political behavior have been singled out by researchers. These include: “acting against the organization” [6]; “an attempt to acquire more power” [10]; and “the existence of conflict between the parties” [2]. Kipnis [3] draws attention to the direction that the political act can take, indicating that political tactics are intended to manipulate either superiors or subordinates.

A Model of Virtual Politicking
Our model is based on two of the elements of political behavior previously mentioned: (1) the “direction” element [3]; and (2) the “scope” element [7]. These are represented in the model as two dichotomous dimensions:

- The Direction Dimension. Two values are identified in the “direction dimension,” upward and downward influencing, with upward influencing typically involving attempts by subordinates to influence their superiors, and downward influencing, involving attempts by superiors to influence their subordinates.

- The Scope Dimension. Two values are identified in the “scope dimension,” small- and large-scale, with attempts to influence on a small scale typically involving a group of employees such as a department, and attempts to influence on a large scale encompassing an entire organization or more than one organization.

The interaction between the “direction” and “scope” dimensions produces four distinct political tactics that are represented in the following sections by four real-life scenarios. Note that the names appearing in the scenarios are fictitious—all names of individuals and organizations have been withheld to protect their anonymity.

Scenario #1. Professor Jones is the head of the Accounting Department at U1, a small university. One of Jones’s first initiatives was to declare that email was to become the communication media of choice for the department. The secretaries were the first to be affected by the new policy. Their email screens soon filled up with short messages from Jones requesting immediate action. Failure to provide the service promptly resulted in complaints and reprimands. As time went by, Jones’s insistence that email be used by all spilled over to include the academic staff. When the secretaries left paper messages on his desk from professors who called and wanted him to call back, he routinely responded by email.

In early July 1992, Professor Lee, a member of the Department’s “old guard,” called the President of U1, requesting an urgent meeting. In the meeting, he complained a “systematic marginalization of senior faculty members by Jones.” He listed several incidents in which senior members, including himself, were not informed in time of upcoming meetings and were consequently unable to attend. In particular, he held a meeting only a week before, in which Lee’s teaching allocation for the next semester was decided in his absence. Lee claimed that he did not receive the email message that was supposed to inform him of the meeting.

The President reassured Lee that the matters he had raised would be clarified with Jones. A meeting between the President and Jones followed a few days later. Even though it took place behind closed doors, the rumor was that the meeting developed into an ugly confrontation, culminating with Jones’s resignation.

Analysis. The U1 scenario falls within the first
When considering political behavior, an important distinction is made in relation to the scope of political activities (whether they are used by an individual or by a group).

cell of the model (downward influence—small scale) since it is an example of a manager politically manipulating a small group of employees with email. Note that the model considers this tactic as potentially low-risk for top management because it involves a small group of people and is initiated by management itself.

Scenario #2. U2 is a medium-sized university. When its President, Professor Simpson, resigned in January 1994, he named Professor Bart as his preferred successor. Despite Bart’s outstanding qualifications, many U2 staff members were opposed to him becoming the next President. A key member of this opposition was Professor Burton. An Associate Professor at the Department of Biology, she had expected to be appointed Department Chair. When she was informed that another candidate (a male) was nominated for the job, she threatened to sue U2 for sexual discrimination. Following this incident, she presented her sex-discrimination claims to the “Senior Women’s Forum,” an informal group of about 15 senior academics who met regularly to discuss issues of common interest. In response, three Forum members offered to write to Simpson and propose that a position of Provost for Equity be created. Instead of responding directly, Simpson announced during the next Senate meeting that he was going to invite all senior women, senior or otherwise, to attend.

The promised discussion was held in March 1994 and attended by over 30 women. Several members of the Senior Women’s Forum suggested the discussion should focus on structural rather than personal issues, mentioning the Provost for Equity proposal as a specific measure that could address the problems experienced by U2 women. The discussion was concluded with Simpson announcing that he now understood the circumstances and would recommend to the Senate that an equity committee be appointed to study the situation in depth.

By the end of March 1994, an equity committee was appointed by the Senate to study the status of women at U2. Two months later, around the time that Bart took office as U2’s new President, the Committee presented its report to the Senate. The major recommendation of the report was that the antidiscrimination unit should be upgraded. The appointment of a Provost for Equity was not on the list of recommendations. Bart, the new President, announced that he would study the report and return to the Senate with a policy statement at the beginning of the new academic year. In April 1995, almost a year after the equity committee completed its work, not one of the recommendations in its report had been implemented.

Analysis. The U2 scenario falls within the second cell of the model (downward influence—large-scale) since it was an example of management politically manipulating a large group of employees through email. This scenario is an example of a conflict that management triggered and indirectly manipulated to serve its purposes. What appeared on email as a conflict between Professor Land and President Simpson was actually a situation in which both were working to achieve the same goal. Her crusade for the rights of junior women had the effect of undermining the Senior Women’s Forum and, indirectly, the opposition to Professor Bart. Note that the model considers this tactic as potentially low- to medium-risk for top man-
agement because, even though it involves a large group of people, it is initiated and controlled by management.

Scenario #3. U3 is an inner-city, medium-sized university. In mid-1991, when most members of the U3 community were already using email, a series of political events began to unfold. First was an announcement by the Provost that U3’s long-term objective was to gradually abolish internal research grants. Second was a memorandum from a senior member of the Faculty of Science, with copies to all email users at U3, criticizing the financial conduct of the university. In his email response, the President invited the academics to join a planning forum, enclosing a document outlining the agenda for the forum. Another senior member of the Science Faculty responded with an email message, listing a series of questions that the President’s document had raised. A third person—a staff member from another faculty—joined the email debate, criticizing the President’s document. In response, a top U3 administrator sent a letter to the local daily press, accusing the three professors (hereinafter, the rebels) of unprofessional conduct.

In early 1992, the President convened the promised forum. Since there was a rumor that one of the rebels was going to use the forum to request the resignation of the President, the meeting was attended by most of the U3 community as well as by representatives of the local press. Despite these expectations, the agenda was followed to the letter and the meeting was dispersed without a vote of no-confidence against the President.

Toward the end of 1992, the rebels distributed a “satisfaction questionnaire” to the academic staff by email, eliciting views about administrative procedures at the university. The results, which also were distributed by the rebels by email, reflected overwhelming dissatisfaction among respondents. Following the distribution of the questionnaire, top administration changed the email policy at U3. Access to the campus-wide mailing list was to be drastically curtailed and an email code of practice, specifying penalties for “misuse” of email, was compiled. At about the same time, email traffic from the rebels gradually decreased, until it finally ended.

Analysis. The U3 scenario falls within the third cell of the model (upward influencing—small-scale) since it is an example of a small group of employees (in this case, three individuals) utilizing email to politically manipulate top management. Management, which expected email to strengthen its control over employees, was surprised to discover that it had the opposite effect, offering the rebels an effective means for broadcasting their views. Note that the model considers this tactic as medium- to high-risk for top management because even though it may involve a small group of people, the political manipulation is directed against top management.

Scenario #4. In early January 1994, three weeks before the end of the Fall semester, faculty members at all seven Israeli universities went on strike. The reason for the strike was that salaries in the academic sector had eroded continually over the years to well below other salaries in the public sector.

Shortly after the strike started, an electronic distribution list was created for communication among the strikers. Within days after its establishment, faculty members from all over the country began to subscribe to the list. Messages transmitted through the list during the first weeks of the strike were predominantly from the union. Gradually, the list changed from a one-sided channel of communication to a multi-channel debate forum for discussions among non-activists on objectives of the struggle and methods for achieving these objectives.

Within the first month of the strike it became apparent that neither party to the dispute was likely to back down. This realization marked the beginning of an escalation that involved high-level officials, including the Prime Minister, and many members of Parliament. As the strike continued, the student unions became increasingly vocal, organizing violent protest demonstrations around the country. Following the Finance Ministry’s announcement that funds would no longer be transferred to the universities, the presidents of the universities announced the imminent closure of their institutions. This led to the administrative staffs becoming involved in the dispute, with their unions joining the students in their demand for an end to the strike.

Toward the end of the sixth week of the strike, it became clear that, if the dispute were not resolved soon, the whole school year would be lost. When the President of Israel offered help, summoning the parties to his office to discuss possible compromises, he was asked by the Prime Minister to back down. From this point on, however, not only the strikers, but also the government were under pressure to produce results. With the rift between the Prime Minister and the President, the dispute developed into a major political crisis that had to be resolved quickly. When two non-activist faculty members came up with a proposal that facilitated salary increases unique to universities, the two parties were, for the first time, willing to listen to each other. By the end of the third week of March, an agreement was drafted and the strike ended.
One of the most promising areas of research on the use of email for political manipulation is the study of its prevalence as a tool for industrial action.

**Analysis.** The fourth scenario falls in the fourth cell of the model (upward influencing—large-scale) since it was an example of a large group of employees using email to facilitate bargaining with their employers. The academics' strike in Israel was not triggered by the introduction of email. Nor was it the first strike initiated by Israeli academics. It was, however, the longest and most successful academic strike in Israeli history. It was also the first strike in which email was harnessed as the communication medium linking the strikers. As the strike was coming to a close, many messages acknowledged that email was instrumental in bringing a successful conclusion to the strike by facilitating communication between the strikers. Note that the model considers this tactic as the most dangerous for top management because it represents a direct attack on top management by a relatively large group of employees.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Going back to Markus's three theoretical perspectives, it appears that two of her perspectives [4], “rational actor” and “emergent process” are of direct relevance to our model. Following the rational actor perspective, our model makes the assumption that virtual politicking is a deliberate and purposeful behavior. Following the emergent process perspective, the model asserts that email may be utilized by employees for purposes that go against management’s intentions when implementing the technology.

How can we explain the political potency of email? Our data suggests four features of email as particularly relevant to its political potency:

- **Speed.** The fact that messages transmitted via email can reach their destination in a relatively short period of time is highly relevant to its political potency. Thus, the speed of email enabled the Department Head in scenario #1 to convene meetings at short notice and without some key members of the department knowing about them. This feature enabled the President in scenario #2 to respond to Professor Land’s “attack” within minutes after her message was transmitted, making the conflict between the two groups of women common knowledge at U2 almost instantaneously. This feature was also a key factor in the rebellion against the President in scenario #3, and the success of the Israeli strike in scenario #4.
- **Multiple Addressability.** The fact that an email message transmitted by one individual can reach large groups of individuals within and outside the organization is a major contributor to its political potency. This feature is what made the rebellion in scenario #3, and the strike in scenario #4 as successful as they were. In both scenarios, this feature enabled a group of people to launch an effective political campaign against their employers. This feature was also the means that made possible the campaign for the rights of junior women in scenario #2. Finally, in scenario #1, this feature gave the Department Head flexibility in exercising control over individuals within the department.
- **Processing.** The fact that email messages can be stored and manipulated by the receiver prior to their retransmission can also be put to political uses. This feature allows political actors to add comments to data previously collected, thus turning neutral messages into politically explosive ones. This feature was used in scenario #3 when the rebels distributed the results of the satisfaction questionnaire via email. Attached to the results were comments that made it clear that the rebels saw the results as supporting their claims. Processing was also used by the union in scenario #4 in reporting the progress of the nego-
tations to their constituency. In many instances, a quoted message from the government would be accompanied with comments that explained the union's position regarding the statement and how they intended to respond to it.

- Routing. The fact that the sender of an email message can control where the message is sent also has important political implications. This feature allows senders to transmit slightly (but significantly) modified messages to different groups of email users. This feature was used in scenario #1 when the Department Head sent messages about meetings only to individuals that he wanted to attend the meetings. In scenario #2, Professor Land created a mailing list for the junior-level women in which she transmitted information not intended to reach the other members of the university community. In scenario #3 the rebels took advantage of this feature to communicate between themselves, until it became evident this medium was not secure enough for this purpose. Finally, in scenario #4, the union leaders used this feature to transmit messages from the government to the members of their unions.

Linking virtual politicking to risk is probably the major contribution from this research. It is also the aspect that seems to suggest the most promising directions for further research. For reasons of simplicity, we have identified four political tactics that are linked to different levels of risk to top management. Future research may challenge this assumption by adding more values to each of the model's dimensions, thus adding more degrees of risk. Other possible directions for future extensions of the model could be to study its manifestations in diverse industries and national cultures.

One of the most promising areas of research on the use of email for political manipulation is the study of its prevalence as a tool for industrial action. Indeed, there are indications that the World-Wide Web has become a major arena for airing disputes by groups of email users. This feature was used in scenario #1 when the Department Head sent messages about meetings only to individuals that he wanted to attend the meetings. In scenario #2, Professor Land created a mailing list for the junior-level women in which she transmitted information not intended to reach the other members of the university community. In scenario #3 the rebels took advantage of this feature to communicate between themselves, until it became evident this medium was not secure enough for this purpose. Finally, in scenario #4, the union leaders used this feature to transmit messages from the government to the members of their unions.

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References


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