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copyright bills. By the time the bills were withdrawn from consideration a few weeks later, untold thousands of signatures had been collected and presented in opposition to the bills – a fact that may in future consideration of copyright protection keep things in a more stable and measured tone.

But in the back rooms of the political parties, people paid attention. Stirring up the Internet masses and getting them to sign a petition – regardless of whether they understood the issues – was seen as a powerful force that could be exploited.

And so we are now awash with petition pleas. They splash across FaceBook, clutter our email, are dutifully reported upon by the print and cable news outlets, and have reached a saturation point far above their value to public and political processes.

Petitions have always been with us, and have always been more than a little shady. There is no easy way to verify the signatures. There is seldom enough information given to make an informed decision. And perhaps worst of all, the inflammatory language of the petition information is designed to drive you to sign immediately – without time to do further research or reflection.

Why does this petition craze bother people like me? Three reasons:

- 1) On the Internet, no one knows you're a dog. Or to put it another way, no one knows that you are a 10-year-old kid, or someone from another country, or simply a person signing the same petition over and over with different names.
- 2) It's easy, because of this, to misrepresent the number of people who actually have a stake in the issue, a valid opinion, or even a true identity. In a population of a billion people on the Internet, you can garner a half-million signatures without blinking. Which may make the petition far less credible than it should be.

3) Petition drives are now washing over from the public arena and politics to the

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And it is less than one percent of the American population.

So I have come to regard the petition requests that arrive on my desktop in the same way I regard viruses and spam. If the petition asks me to share it with everyone I know, delete. If it is couched in inflammatory language but few or no facts, delete. If it claims that the elderly will be denied, children will be harmed, women have been insulted, families are at risk, or people are starving...delete. If it is shared on FaceBook or Twitter but has no web page or supporting organization, delete.

Angry voices and loud proclamations are poor substitutes for reasonable discussion and facts. That is true now more than ever, and on the Internet more than in any other part of our lives.

Income Tax

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