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Editor's notebook: Our E-Mails, Ourselves

by Barbara Apstein



In only a few years, e-mail has become enormously popular, almost completely replacing “snail-mail” for brief, personal communications. A convenient way to avoid “telephone tag” with people who are hard to reach by phone, e-mail is especially useful for contacting friends abroad, since it eliminates the need to calculate time differences and the cost of international phone calls. On September 11, with phone lines overwhelmed, e-mail was the quickest way to contact loved ones in New York and Washington.

Certain rules and restrictions regarding e-mail have evolved. We have learned that e-mail, especially in the office, is *not* private and that clicking “delete” does *not* remove that message from the computer’s innards. E-mails that strike the recipient as amusing or informative are temptingly easy to forward, occasionally creating embarrassment for the sender. One well-publicized instance concerned a young man who, on a slow day at the office, decided to update a few friends on his latest sexual adventures, only to discover that his e-mail message had been forwarded to hundreds of *their* friends.

On campus, e-mail is proving to be a convenient way for students and faculty to communicate outside class. Students can explain absences, ask questions about assignments, describe problems and send papers. A few weeks ago, having a free hour and a backlog of over 600 messages, I decided the time had come to clean my inbox. Most of the old messages—memos about issues long ago resolved, announcements of past meetings that I either did or did not attend—could be deleted instantly. Interspersed with these, however, were a number of electronic conversations and, scrolling through them, I realized that many of these exchanges would not have taken place, at least in the form they took, if e-mail did not exist.

Almost all the student e-mail correspondence I found fell into two categories, requests and excuses:

—I'm hoping that you would be so kind as to write a letter of recommendation for me...

—I was wondering if I could get a rough estimate of my grade so far...

—I've been home for a week with the flu...

—I finished writing my paper last night and when I went to print it this morning my printer ran out of ink. I tried to save the paper on a disc to print it on my friend's computer, but I have an iMac which is very different from any other computer...

—I know you have been expecting my essay. I know this sounds funny, but honest to God, my new puppy chewed the ac adapter cord to my computer and I can't even access the file. I think this is bad karma for the horrible semester I have given myself. I am trying to get a new adapter as soon as possible. Let me know if you want me to bother writing the paper or not...

These requests and excuses could, of course, have been communicated by phone or, eventually, in person. However, other messages would probably not have been sent without the existence of e-mail. Lisa, for example, hoped for a word of reassurance:

—I realized after handing in my paper that I had forgotten to put quotation marks around some of the dictionary definitions that I used. I'm hoping that this will not affect my grade too much...

Sometimes the sender wanted to avoid a face-to-face meeting. Sally, who had been absent from class for several weeks, wrote:

—I've been experiencing a great deal of stress lately. I know I've missed a lot of classes, but I've been keeping up with the reading and I'll have my paper ready to turn in on Monday.

If she had come to my office, I would probably have asked Sally about the causes of her absence and her stress. By e-mailing, she had, at least temporarily, dodged those questions. Sally hoped that, in the time it took me to read, reflect and respond to her message, I would decide to make an exception to my attendance policy.

Because time elapses between sending a message and receiving an answer, an e-mail conversation has a different dynamic from one conducted in person, particularly if some disagreement is involved. Verbal exchanges take place over a much shorter period of time, and the participants have no leisure to pause, reflect and consider. When arguments heat up quickly, participants tend to make statements and stake out positions from which

they cannot easily back down. Hostile body language and facial expressions, raised voices and the desire to create an effect can distract, inflame and intimidate.

In e-mail discussions, none of these non-verbal dramatic gestures are possible. Voices cannot be raised, tables cannot be pounded, objects cannot be flung across the room.

A real-time argument that might be completed in three minutes, could, using e-mail, occupy several days. The minutes and hours that elapse while people read, compose, type, and send, the waiting time during which participants engage in other conversations and take part in other events, all serve to defuse anger.

A recent e-mail exchange between a father and son illustrates this cooling-off process and demonstrates the potential of e-mail for argument resolution. The son, aged 23, reported being involved in a minor traffic accident, the latest of several. As he explained it, the driver in front of him had moved to the left-hand side of the road and slowed down, as if he were planning to turn left. The son then began to pass on the right. At that point, the driver in front changed his mind and swerved to the right, hitting the son's car.

The father wanted to suggest that although neither driver was obviously at fault, the son might have acted more cautiously. Having had some experience in this kind of discussion, he began not with an accusation, but with a few suggestive questions.

—ORIGINAL MESSAGE—

From: Father
To: Son
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2002 4:30 PM

Why do you think you've been in more than your share of fender-benders? Just bad luck? Or could youthful impatience be a factor?

The son, defensive, claims that he was not at fault and that the father would have acted in the same way.



From: Son
To: Father
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2002 4:41 PM

Yes, bad luck. I've been in three accidents, I think, which is not very many especially considering two of them were clearly not my fault (and the other people admitted this). The one this morning was not my fault either. Let me ask you, what do you do when you see someone slowing down on the left side of the road when there is no light anywhere near? You pass them on the other side because you assume they are turning.

The father suggests alternative driving strategies and diplomatically admits that *he* has not always been a model driver.

From: Father
To: Son
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2002 4:59 PM

Re: the one this morning: would you do the same thing again, or would you wait behind him, perhaps emitting a gentle honk, to see exactly what he's trying to do? If he had no blinker on, why did you assume he was going to turn left?

I have driven impatiently too frequently myself, so I know what it's like to be on your way to work and have some jerk slowing you up, and then you do something, not stupid, but not wise either, just imprudent, and most times you get away with it, but sooner or later fate catches up with you, in the form of a scrape, or under other circumstances, a speeding ticket or worse. It's happened to me. Few accidents are completely accidental and unavoidable. You could have avoided the one this morning, as I could have avoided those in my past. I drive more cautiously now as I have become aware of the large numbers of incompetent drivers behind the wheel in other cars.

Dad's accusation is now explicit: the accident could have been avoided. The son becomes a bit more combative.

From: Son
To: Father
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2002 5:13 PM

I would still pass him; he had pretty much stopped on the left side of the road, leaving me plenty of room to go by him. I suppose I could have waited and honked, but I assure you that in the same situation you would have done the same thing...I disagree that most accidents are avoidable. You say there are all these incompetent drivers on the road but then say that most accidents are avoidable? What about being rear-ended? How do you avoid that?

From: Father
To: Son
Sent: Monday, February 25, 2002 5:44 PM

I agree that you can't always avoid being in an accident, especially being rear-ended, but you can decrease the risk by trying not to stop suddenly (which is often a consequence of going too fast and then having to slow down rapidly).

The son is annoyed; he realizes that the conversation has turned into a lecture.

From: Son
To: Father
Sent: Tuesday, February 26, 2002 9:48 AM

Thanks for explaining what stopping suddenly means. It's not your fault if you get rear-ended, that's the rule. The person behind you should be paying attention (hence the reason I have never rear-ended anyone).

Dad repeats his contention that the collision could have been prevented and the reminder that the son has had more than his share of accidents.

From: Father
To: Son
Sent: Tuesday, February 26, 2002 2:04 PM

It may be the rule that it's not your fault if you get rear-ended, but it's still nothing to look forward to. The strategy of defensive

driving is to assume that an accident is likely and do what you can to diminish the risk. For example, you could have waited to see what he was going to do.

At this point, if the argument were being conducted face-to-face, the son would have stormed out of the room, perhaps slamming the door on his way out. Or, if the scene of the discussion were his own room, he might have adopted the well-known strategy of turning up the volume on his sound system to drown out the father's words. However, when the argument is being conducted by e-mail, these gestures are obviously not available. True, the son could click on "delete." But this pathetically undramatic gesture is made even less tempting by the fact that there is no audience to witness it, no angry parent to be left sputtering in frustration. As a result, an alternative dynamic takes over: the desire to have the last word.

From: Son
To: Father
Sent: Tuesday, February 26, 2002 2:29 PM

You jerk, ...you are such a hypocrite. I've seen you drive and I would not call it defensive exactly. You would have done the same thing had you been in my situation.

The father sees that there's no point in continuing the argument.

From: Father
To: Son
Sent: Tuesday, February 26, 2002 4:04 PM

O.K. Cease-fire. Truce.

A few hours later, and the son is calmer.

From: Son
To: Father
Sent: Tuesday, 26, 2002 7:19 PM

Don't get me wrong, I'm not upset or anything and I think you give a good perspective on it, but I'm not going to say you're right.

"I think you give a good perspective on it" must be regarded as a positive conclusion to this exchange, one which would have been unlikely had the participants been speaking.

Were Marshall McLuhan alive to witness the flowering of e-mail, he would no doubt be delighted to discover another form of communication in which the medium and the message are intertwined.

—Barbara Apstein is Professor of English and Editor of the Review

