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■ ■ E-MAIL

Electronic mail (e-mail) is an Internet technology that allows users to send written messages over vast geographical distances almost instantaneously. Unlike the text of traditional mail, such as letters, the text of electronic mail is typed on a computer and sent in digital rather than paper format. The technology has been available for more than thirty years—e-mail was invented in 1972. From a form of communication among an elite few, mostly researchers and academics, it has grown into a ubiquitous communication tool in technologically developed countries. In the United States, approximately 48 million people connect to their e-mail accounts on any given day, according to a report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Similar to other communication technologies that came before it, such as the telephone, e-mail has had a dramatic effect on the sharing of information, the creation and maintenance of relationships in a variety of contexts, and the development of new forms of community.

NETIQUETTE AND ELECTRONIC LITERACY

Whenever a new invention reaches the broad mass of potential users, some people are skeptical, and some immediately take to the product, technology, or new idea. In the case of a new technology, people have to develop not only an understanding of the medium but also the skill to actually use it. Fields of study such as media literacy and computer literacy have investigated the interplay between education and technology since at least the 1980s. The still-emerging field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) competency is already ill-named because today's technological skills go beyond simple computer skills. Technologies are continuously evolving. For example, e-mail is still not used by everyone in the United States, and already technologies such as instant messaging (IM) or short-message sending (SMS) via the cell phone are becom-

ing popular, especially with younger generations. E-mail, instant messaging, and short-message sending all rely on the same technological principle: sending a digital message quickly from one person to the other. Learning how to use one of these three media will facilitate the learning of any of the other two, or even still-to-evolve text message-based technologies.

When e-mail first became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many people thought of it as a completely new form of interaction. In fact, e-mail was not so different from many other forms of communication. Certain types of e-mail messages in organizations can be traced back to the memo of the twentieth century and even the business letter of the late nineteenth century. The similarities are mostly related to the structure of the messages and to certain types of polite expressions. Current research shows that even today, people pick up on politeness cues in e-mail messages and accommodate the level of politeness by using similar polite expressions, such as a greeting.

In essence, e-mail is not so different from other forms of communication because it follows similar etiquette. In the context of the Internet, etiquette is usually referred to as "netiquette." Netiquette describes the socially accepted norms and ways of behavior in the context of a certain online environment, including e-mail. Although many factors, such as the nature of the relationship, the purpose of e-mailing, or the frequency of interaction, play a role in determining these rules of conduct, some general guidelines exist and have been spelled out in many articles and textbooks on the Internet and e-mail. Especially when people interact with each other for the first time, impressions are quickly formed based on details such as proper capitalization, punctuation, grammar, spelling, politeness, and speed with which a response is sent. Because e-mail does not allow for the transmission of nonverbal communication cues, substitutes have developed. For example, to express emotion, many people use emoticons (icons composed of keyboard characters that indicate how an e-mail message should be interpreted) such as the well-known smiley face symbol: :-). Other people indicate stressing a word or shouting by CAPITALIZING. Acronyms such as "lol" for "laughing out loud" are used, as is cyberslang, which requires the reader to treat certain letters as syllables or even whole words. Examples include "cul8r" for "see you later," or "y do u luv 2 txt msg?" for "why do you love to text message?" Of course, whether the use of such nonverbal substitutes is appropriate depends on the context and the relationship

of the people interacting. Research has shown that groups interacting primarily through e-mail develop their own social norms and that conformity to these norms increases over time. When in doubt about existing electronic norms, one should remember that just as in face-to-face interactions, when interacting via e-mail it is better to be too polite or formal than too casual.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL COMMUNITY

For many people, movies such as *You've Got Mail*, starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, not only popularized the use of e-mail in the late 1990s but also legitimized forming online relationships. Long before the movie came out in 1998, thousands of people were forming both platonic and romantic relationships online. However, the general mass still distrusted the online environment for the formation of personal relationships.

Forming online relationships through the use of e-mail messages presents the first step toward forming online social communities. Traditionally, community is defined through geographic boundaries, among other factors. Developing close ties through electronic media overcomes such limitations. As sociologist Barry Wellman shows, a virtual group interacting electronically is, in essence, a social network. As such, the members of such a network often form close personal relationships that overall develop into a community. An early example of such an online community is discussed by Howard Rheingold in his landmark book about "the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link)." Here, people who were geographically dispersed formed close, supportive relationships that spilled from the virtual world of cyberspace into the physical world when one of the WELL members became sick. The feeling of community that the WELL members had forged was strong enough to overcome geographic dispersion and issues of anonymity in an electronic environment. Communication scholar Nancy Baym discusses another example of how people can form online communities through the posting of electronic messages. In her research on a UseNet (the protocol that defines how server computers handle newsgroup messages) newsgroup devoted to soap operas, she found many incidences of social support, friendship, and even identification as a community.

Of course, in order to develop relationships online through the use of electronic messages, people must overcome the same difficulties as in an offline environ-

ment, as well as technology-related issues. For example, trust, continuous engagement, similarity of interests, and agreement on basic social norms must be present both online and offline to develop close relationships. In the online environment, issues such as having the ability to express oneself in written form or forming an identity in a largely anonymous environment must be overcome. Appropriate forms of communication take on an important role in this context. People communicating with each other by e-mail or other forms of electronic messaging develop their own guidelines for appropriateness. When these guidelines, often not stated explicitly, are violated accidentally, miscommunication occurs. However, when guidelines are violated on purpose and this violation is perceived by both the receiver of a message and any third party who might read such a message, the transgression is commonly referred to as "flaming." The relationship of those exchanging electronic messages is important because it determines norms, violations, and appropriateness. What might be considered a hostile remark in one context might be considered acceptable in a close friendship.

Despite such difficulties, many people form or maintain friendships or even romantic relationships online. Some of the characteristics of e-mail, such as its interpersonal nature, its asynchronicity (not occurring at the same time), and its ubiquitous access, facilitate relationship development. Unlike the telephone, e-mail does not require two people to be available at the same time. E-mail overcomes time differences, travels geographic distance quicker than the traditional letter, and does not require expensive equipment such as video conferencing would. Although e-mail cannot replace face-to-face interaction, it is a useful communication tool for interpersonal, social purposes.

BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNITY

In addition to being used for interpersonal purposes and for social relationships, e-mail has become increasingly popular in the business environment. As technologies, especially Internet-related communication technologies, continue to develop, the traditional business environment has changed. Organizations have become more international, so that different offices around the globe have to communicate with each other. This kind of organizational form is referred to as a "distributed organization." In addition, some organizations exist partially, predominantly, or exclusively online. The employees of

any such virtual organizations have to communicate with each other. More often than not, they choose the medium of e-mail.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using e-mail in the organizational context. For example, e-mail is an asynchronous medium—interaction between people does not occur at the same time. Although the time lag may be as little as a couple of minutes, more often it takes several hours or even days to receive an answer to an e-mail. Although time lag provides advantages to companies or business partners in different time zones, it is a disadvantage when time is short and an immediate answer is needed. Computer-mediated communication researcher Joseph Walther has determined that when groups in the online, asynchronous environment of e-mail are given unlimited time, they can work together just as efficiently as groups working face-to-face (FTF). Unfortunately, time is often sparse in organizational contexts, and the performance of virtual teams who work with each other only in the short term is often substandard because they do not go through a group-forming process that includes the formation of the group's social norms.

But when groups in distributed or virtual organizations work with each other via e-mail for long periods of time, they go through group-forming stages similar to those of groups in the offline environment. Members have to learn to trust each other. Group norms and rules have to be developed, and work itself has to be defined. If formed, these norms tend to positively affect the frequency of interaction, the kind of information exchanged via e-mail, and the relationships of group members. Over time, it is even possible that people in organizations develop a certain form of community via e-mail. In this case, the people interacting via e-mail for business purposes come to regard their groups as having a sense of "togetherness" that sometimes even extends the feeling of belonging that the individuals might feel toward their actual, physical organizational environment. The tenets of the weak-ties theory explain that people linked to each other through strong ties (close relationships developed through frequent interaction) tend to recycle the same information. New information is mostly input through weak ties (existing connection with strangers and acquaintances with whom one interacts rarely or on a limited basis). E-mail certainly facilitates making use of weak-tie connections for gathering relevant information in the organizational context.

E-mail also allows access to new people. Although e-mail can strengthen existing organizational structures, it

can also break down organizational power hierarchies and foster status equalization. Now even lower-level employees can gain easy access to upper management. Whether upper management appreciates this input or feedback depends on the organizational culture.

Overall, e-mail has had a profound impact on the way people work in organizations. People now work with each other electronically, whether over vast geographic distances or on the same building floor. Much of the work itself has become digital in the information age. Even relationships are now formed and maintained through technologies such as e-mail or the telephone. Concerns about a depersonalization of the workplace have not prevented the development of new electronic technologies. The trend of interacting electronically rather than face-to-face is continuing.

THE FUTURE OF ELECTRONIC WRITTEN MESSAGES

As e-mail is becoming commonplace in technologically developed countries, other text-based messaging technologies are already gaining popularity. Instant messaging, which can be compared to one-on-one chatting, and short-message sending via cell phone are two examples. Similar technologies are sure to develop, especially as convergence of technologies becomes more and more apparent. *Convergence* means "two technologies merging into one," such as e-mail and the telephone converging into short-message sending. Fortunately, these technologies build upon each other and do not require their users to learn many new skills. When e-mail was new, knowing how to type on a keyboard and knowing how to open or save documents on a computer facilitated the learning of the new technology. Understanding current technologies enables people to learn new technologies much faster, which is why technology-mediated communication skills, themselves based on computer literacy, are so important. Current research is investigating the use of voice-recognition programs by which "mailing" could one day be vocal, rather than written. When these or similar new inventions become available, they will undergo the same process of scrutiny as e-mail did in the past thirty years. Rules of etiquette will form, and people will continue to use communication technologies for purposes such as relationship and community forming because those processes are part of human nature. Technologies are but tools used for human purposes.

—Ulla Bunz

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■ EMISSARIES OF DIVINE LIGHT

One of the most interesting and successful networks of intentional communities in the post–World War II era has been the Emissaries of Divine Light, or Emissaries for short. Yet most Emissaries do not live in community, and their spiritual vision explicitly states that communal living is not essential for spiritual development. Indeed, the Emissaries do not even keep an official membership list. They are a prime example of the paradox that communitarians for whom communal living is but a means to an end seem better able to keep their communities thriving than those who view communitarianism itself as the highest goal. For Emissaries, an intentional community can provide a helpful context for the spiritual unfolding of some people’s divine creative essence under certain conditions for varying periods of time.

ORIGINS OF THE EMISSARIES

Emissary “practical spirituality” was the brainchild of itinerant preacher Lloyd Meeker (1907–1954), pen name Uranda, who had a revelation of spiritual stewardship at age twenty-four and began attracting followers during the 1930s with his message of creatively and responsibly reflecting divine purpose in daily life. Eventually settling near Loveland, Colorado, in 1945, Uranda’s small group founded Sunrise Ranch on approximately 120 acres of dry, overgrazed land containing a few run-down buildings. This first Emissary community expanded to about 356 acres and became the world headquarters for as many as 200 residential groupings, as many as a dozen primary communities of 50 to 100 residents, and many thousands of supporters around the world.

In 1940, Uranda’s message attracted titled British noble and former Royal Navy officer Martin Cecil (1909–1988), later to become the sixth Marquess of Exeter, and thence Martin Exeter. Despite their starkly different backgrounds, Uranda and Cecil became effective coleaders of the Emissary movement, with Cecil converting his large inherited cattle ranch in British

Columbia into the second Emissary community, 100 Mile House, which has served informally as a second international headquarters of the Emissaries of Divine Light. When Uranda died in a plane crash in 1954, Martin Cecil assumed the full reins of spiritual leadership. Upon Cecil’s death in 1988, his son Michael, then married to Uranda’s daughter Nancy, took over.

OVERVIEW OF EMISSARY COMMUNITIES

Emissary communities have come and gone, in rural areas and cities, serving as working farms, ranches, spas, and hotels. Those that have lasted for decades have evolved according to the Emissary hallmarks of flexibility, practicality, creativity, and innovation. By the early twenty-first century, they spanned six continents, with the eight largest being ranches in Colorado (Sunrise Ranch) and British Columbia (100 Mile House), farms in Indiana (Oakwood Farm), Oregon (Stillmeadow), British Columbia (Edenvale), and Ontario (King View), a spa in California (Glen Ivy), and a hotel in England (Mickleton).

Those who have visited or worked at Emissary communities submit that the best way to understand them is not to read about them but to experience them, their residents, and their unique atmospheres in person and on site. The racial and ethnic composition of Emissary communities depends on their location, from North America to Europe to Africa to Asia. Including a number of titled aristocrats, residents come disproportionately from either ethnic or professional backgrounds with strong familial or service ethics: from Catholic, Jewish, or tribal backgrounds, and from the military, nobility, or helping professions. One of the aristocrats was Sunrise Ranch resident, artist, and former spy Conrad O’Brien-French, a family friend of Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond. Another is Princess Lee Radziwill of Rome, a member of the extended clan of former U.S. President John F. Kennedy.

EMISSARY PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

Trying to describe Emissary spirituality with any kind of precision is like trying to nail Jello to the wall. The Emissaries Web site (www.emissaries.org) describes the Emissaries as “a network of people whose primary purpose is to encourage the experience and expression of divine identity” (Emissaries n.d.). The Glen Ivy Web site describes the purpose of the Emissary program as “to assist in carrying forward a work of spiritual regen-