The Worst Way (Not) to Communicate

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People love e-mail (Rogers, 1996; Boudreaux, 1996[1]), so much so that it has very nearly rendered what is now called snail-mail obsolete. I differ. As I remarked elsewhere, "I regard e-mail's as a hybrid between the oral and the written in a complex of ways," (Fulda, 2012: n. 2) without elaboration. I now take that opportunity. Put directly, e-mail combines the worst of the oral and the written, and since this was not so at its inception but is ever-increasingly so now and seems unlikely to abate, I wish it were relegated to the dustbin of history. As far as I'm concerned, its sole constructive use in the here and now is to send attachments which are *bona fide* written materials, as well as broadcasts of things that neither require nor suggest a response.

Probably the best way to make the case is by contrasting e-mail with its alternatives, face-to-face communication, telephone conversation, and postal mail. We will consider, in each contrasted form of communication, a variety of perspectives, principally the potential for miscommunication (as the title of this essay, read inclusively, indicates) and ethical considerations. Before beginning, I want to emphasize that people nowhere near each other's so-called wavelength may never communicate well and that people determined on doing wrong will do so no matter what the medium. The medium is *not* the message, but e-mail *lends* itself to all sorts of problems, unforeseen at its inception, but by now perfectly obvious. What is perhaps not obvious, and why I write this, is *why* e-mail lends itself to these problems.

Face-to-face communication has, since time immemorial, been the normal mode of human communication–for good reasons. By which I mean, not just the obvious reason, the prior infeasibility of any other form of communication, but its practical and moral superiority. Because two people facing each other have the full range of visual and aural cues, rudeness, deception, and miscommunication are far less likely–though crassness, artifice, and misunderstanding are all always possible. What makes miscommunication less likely is perhaps surprising; it is the commonly thought rude–but in fact often crucial–ability to interrupt, used judiciously, of course. A true conversation without any interruptions is much like a class without questions (and answers), a failure to engage. Indeed, arguably, such a conversation is not a conversation properly so-called at all.

The telephone ranks next. It has aural cues, but no visual cues; there is the ability to interrupt, but it is more often considered rude, rather than natural, than in a true conversation.

Next comes snail-mail. Like e-mail, snail-mail has no cues and there is no possibility of interruption. An epistolary exchange is not a dialogue, but a series of monologues, just like e-mail, and it is far

slower. However, therein lies its superiority. It takes far more time to compose a formal, written missive, seal it, address it, and post it than it does to fire off some ephemeral e-mail–which as everyone knows by now may not be ephemeral at all. (In the law, e-discovery is a "hot topic.") When something takes a good deal of time from conception to execution, the possibility of rudeness is reduced by the passage of time, as passions wane. Likewise, as one revises for clarity and with care, the possibility of miscommunication wanes: This does, of course, presuppose that one's letters are of the former sort, not mere e-mail's sent by post. To the extent that letter-writing has become a "lost art," then, this is no longer true. Artifice may also be less likely, as one must sign, which although it has no legal value has some sort of inner ethical value. Likewise, when one writes a formal letter one is more aware that one has done something with the potential for permanence, notwithstanding that e-mail is, in fact, often just as permanent. It is the *awareness* that matters, even more than the reality, in countering artifice. It would be remiss of me not to mention, at least in passing, that self-reported empirical research on the effect of technology on the production (their word) of deception in social psychology gives very different findings (Hancock, *et. al.*, 2004). I will just say here that I am thoroughly unconvinced, although a full discussion of why is not appropriate in this space.

The final point I wish to make concerns privacy. One can always surreptitiously tape anything, but one doing so is fully aware that he is violating social norms, basic ethical principles, and may be violating the criminal law. With e-mail, however, not only is the law murky, but it is just so easy to forward something to someone other than the recipient without permission–too easy. Of course, this violates the original sender's copyright, too. It is simply a canard that a copyright notice is required–although it used to be so, long, long ago. We live in an age when copyright and privacy rights alike are largely held in contempt; people largely have few compunctions about stealing intellectual property, violating authors' moral rights, or spilling other people's secrets without excellent reasons. Journalism and the archival "profession," in fact, thrive on these wrongs.

I wish it were not necessary to censor anyone or anything, including the Internet, yet even the most liberal countries are increasingly moving in that direction. The number of commentators decrying these moves is vast, but *why* doesn't anyone ask why this is happening? Could it just possibly be that collectively we are so massively abusing our rights that governments worldwide, including those not by any means considered oppressive by history's standards, feel that they simply have no choice but to step in? Could it be that we free citizens must look in the mirror for the answer to the move toward Internet censorship? An uncomfortable but enormously timely and powerful question.

It is ironic that along with multi-tasking (an inapt term borrowed from computing, which does not mesh with our human brains, and simply leads to distraction and loss of focus and concentration) e-mail has been bequeathed to the twenty-first century by the twentieth in the name of efficiency

(taken as speed), when the normal response to an e-mail is a follow-up e-mail, on and on. A recent *New York Enterprise Report* issue cites a 2012 study that "the average 'knowledge' employee gets 147 emails a day and spend 28% of her time at the office on email...." (Levin, 2013). Frankly, I doubt this figure; it is probably higher, and probably also excludes personal e-mail's read on company time, which is normally blamed on employees without considering that they have learned this practice from the company's own business policies!

All this calls to mind Irving Babbit's (124: 3-4) remark, "[W]e have the type of man who deems himself progressive and is yet pursuing power and speed for their own sake, the man who does not care where he is going, as some one has put it, provided only he can go there faster and faster."

Note

1. In fairness to Rogers and Boudreaux, neither of them would probably be as enthusiastic today; in 1996, most of what is said here did not apply. E-mail was still at its inception, although it had precursors available only to the few through ARPA, now DARPA, and in Europe, through the far-more-widespread Minitel. Also, Boudreaux' piece is largely about what the Internet *cannot* do; I refer mainly to his comment on p. 720, "As a forum for conversation, the Internet is dazzling." Indeed, in 1996, it was. Alas, it is so no longer.

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