

There's something about email: Technological and Cultural Interventions in the Problem of Inadvertent or Casual Rudeness in Email

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1 Introduction: No Need to be Rude Dear

The darker side of email is usually considered in terms of unsolicited mail or spam (e.g. Cerf 2005, Balvanz, Paulsen, and Struss 2004). The problem is well understood and numerous filter systems, along with a variety of legal remedies, have been developed to tackle it with varying degrees of success. Personal abuse including workplace bullying and sexual harassment are also well-recognised problems (e.g. Sipior and Ward 1999). As long ago as 1997 it was pointed out that the convenience of email encourages abuse and the ease of using email extensions encourages mass mailouts (Berghel 1997). It is also frequently noted that email eats into our time and that the sheer volume of them can make us not only less productive but more stressed (e.g. Beale 2005). These, however, are problems generated by the form of the technology other issues are raised by its genre. Email as a form of writing falls somewhere between a letter and a note. Because it is a relatively new medium conventions of polite address have not yet been fully developed (Baron 2003). This can cause anxiety, tone is frequently misinterpreted and offence is taken. Jokes are often misunderstood despite the development of makeshift emoticons such as the colon, dash, bracket smile (Hancock 2005). There is, it seems, something about email that makes it easy to be inadvertently rude – something about email, perhaps, that encourages it. This paper outlines a lightweight method for collecting data on this phenomenon; it then considers some examples and ends with sketches of technological and cultural interventions.

2 Method: Reciprocal Storytelling and Email Collections

This paper began as a conversation between the two authors who exchanged stories about rude emails they had recently received. This reciprocal storytelling was then extended in an email call to colleagues to send in examples of rude emails that they had received. Many of us have very large email archives which can serve as a resource. Surprisingly perhaps, it was found that a number of people specifically collected rude emails and these collections yielded a data set too rich to be adequately dealt with in a short paper.

3 Speed and Convenience

Going through an inbox can be a frustrating experience not just because the spam filter has missed so much spam but also because colleagues can appear to be being very rude in a routine manner. A colleague, for example, answers a question with a one word yes or no, as in the exchange below:

Hi James,
Is this where we're putting the discussion paper?
Ivan

Yup
-James

The context of any email exchange is of course crucial and it should be noted that the initial communication came from a subordinate and the one word reply received was from a line manager. The subordinate's message began with a greeting which the line manager eschewed. The ease of a three key press reply is clearly a factor in the brevity of the response and so too is the power relationship. But so too is the lack of established convention (Goldsborough 2005). The conventions which exist in conversation and epistolary exchanges are there to make social interaction easy and routine. Imagine a similar verbal exchange where a greeting is ignored, a question is answered with one word and the exchange is ended without a goodbye. The "dear" salutation of a letter is too formal for short notes and various forms of "hello" and "hi" have, to an extent, replaced it in email; but these are not well established and colleagues may feel that in a short exchange of notes no salutation is necessary at all, especially if time is short and emails are being answered at the same time that a number of other tasks are undertaken. But speed and ease are not the only problems.

4 Anonymity and Impersonality

While it has been argued that email is a casual form of communication, more similar in nature to the telephone than the letter (Baron 2000), it could equally be held that email can actually be as impersonal as a typical memorandum. The second author of this paper has recently established a standard reply of "Please sign your emails. I don't write to people I don't know" in response to a flood of communications coming from students via the university's virtual learning environment's capability to 'email tutor'. The students' ignorance of the name of the person they were communicating with seems to lead to a determination to keep the staff member similarly in the dark. A different kind of impersonality is generated by mailings to multiple users. This email was sent out by the technical support staff at a UK University to all staff and students.

Please be aware that computers are not sweets. They are not mix and match at your whim. If you have a problem with a component

do NOT go and take one from another computer, inform [deleted] of the problem and we shall solve it. You definitely do NOT go taking a mouse for example from another computer just because it is newer than yours.

It may be argued that the patronising tone and offensive manner in this email are typical of IT support staff. But there are conventions of the medium that, intentionally or not, make it worse, including the capitalised “NOT” (a usage which usually signifies a raised voice). No addressee is specified neither is a sender. It is a totally anonymous text without a particular reader or author. It is well understood in chat room domains that anonymity encourages abuse but in email it is not just the anonymity of the sender that is problematic; recipients are also anonymous, and frequently numerous, so the impersonality is multiplied.

5 Right Message Wrong Person

The examples of presumably inadvertent rudeness above are instances of the wrong message to the right person. Email also makes it very easy to send the right message to the wrong person. A colleague of one of the authors recently made the mistake of responding to a standard circular email with a tirade about one of the institution’s policy documents. The unfortunate correspondent only discovered that the reply had been sent to the entire mailing list when summoned to the manager’s office. This same manager, however, had previously suffered a similar embarrassment when a draft discussion document, meant only for the eyes of senior managers, was sent to the institution’s staff mailing list. The error was compounded by an attempt to ‘recall’ the email, which of course only signalled to the recipients that an error had been made, and further by one of the senior managers, who responded personally to the author of the original email and also managed to distribute the message to the whole institution. Each of these emails contained material that, while not exactly libellous, was certainly read by a number of their accidental recipients as patronising and dismissive of the staff in general, or of sub-groups or individuals. It could of course have been worse. Mass forwarding facilities mean that embarrassing emails can become global phenomena. Clair Swire famously sent an email to a lover saying his sperm was “yum”, he forwarded it to friends who forwarded it to friends until the distribution became virally global (Mikkelson 2000). Although this sounds like an urban legend it illustrates how technology can offer ever new opportunities for human beings to make fools of themselves. Recently Harry Shearer featured two email apology stories on the *Le Show* programme’s “apologies of the week” feature;. consultant Chris Nelson, author of the influential Nelson Report on American foreign policy in Asia, sent an exceptionally frank report intended for the embassy of South Korean to the entire subscribers list for the Nelson report. He warned the embassy that if anyone on capital hill saw it he would have to seek political asylum. In the report he said the administration’s failed policy towards North Korea and its bunker mentality would not change while Dick Cheney was vice president and described senior members of the Bush administration as “genuinely mentally unbalanced”. More than

800 people received it including those he criticised or identified as people who talked to him. Nelson said “In a single moment of stupidity I have hurt and betrayed many who have tried so generously to help and who share my deepest fears about Korea policy. Apology is impossible at this point I can only ask mercy”. Similarly, a New York assemblyman Willis Stevens sent out an email that referred to his constituents as idiots to 300 people in an online discussion group thinking he was sending it to an aid. The message said he was “just watching the idiots pontificate” within an hour he started writing his apologies (Le Show, Harry Shearer.com 3.6.9)

Microsoft Office 2003 features information management technology that allows users to put limits on how many times emails can be copied, printed or forwarded and it was advertised with the tagline “The oops I just hit ‘reply all’ era is over”. However just as a user may accidentally hit reply all they may also forget to mark certain messages as sensitive or even know that they are sensitive until it is too late. While these interventions begin to address the problems they cannot yet eliminate the kinds of human error described above.

6 Content Filter Systems: This Sounds Smug, Are You Sure You Want To Send It?

There are a number of email systems which attempt to warn users when they are about to send a potentially offensive message. In their email correspondence during the production of this paper the first author sent a message to the second in which, he typed a word which many people would consider obscene. Before the message was sent the system flagged up a ‘three chilli’ mood warning indicating that his message is “The sort of thing that might get your keyboard washed out with soap if you get my drift, you might consider toning it down”. This humorous message is displayed whenever curse words are found in a message. Of course the user is more likely than a computer to know whether a curse word will offend a particular person or not. Language is contextual but it would not take artificial intelligence to take better account of context. Systems can be instructed to recognise not only curse words but contexts in the sense of who the recipient of the letter is and whether it is a friend or work colleague. But such systems cannot recognise other forms of offensive emails.

7 Technological Interventions

There are a number of technological solutions that are already available or that have been proposed to solve these problems. Cooling off periods of five or ten minutes between the send command and actual sending would amount to an undo feature, though the delays caused to the otherwise near-instantaneous communication available by email would certainly curtail its use. Greetings as well as subscriptions (sign offs) could be automated, and perhaps personalised for attachment to particular contacts. It would certainly be possible to warn a user that their one word reply might be considered offensive. Warning systems could also be developed that would flag up

notes on tone, perhaps activated by certain key phrases or, even, syntactical variants. For instance, it would be possible to pick out the phrases “not being sexist but” or “not being racist but” or “not being personal but” and flag a message saying – invariably these phrases precede something offensive, come on guys who are we kidding? Other forms might be recognised to provoke a message like – you sound patronising, are you sure you want to send it. However, it is unlikely that most forms of rudeness could be identified by filters. By their very nature, sarcastic and ironic messages are inversions of their intended meanings, and it is hard to imagine a software solution to this obtuseness. Russell Beale recently suggested changing tools in order to address these problems, rather than use email for one word replies of the kind quoted above he suggests the use of instant messaging systems (Beale 2005). This might help colleagues whose brief messages are intended as chatty and totally informal rather than rude. However, technological and behavioural approaches are perhaps overly deterministic, and could be perceived as unacceptably interventionist. User behaviour can sometimes be shaped but not always controlled by design. Indeed, the development of “netiquette” might be better served by cultural interventions.

8 Cultural Interventions

Europeans sometimes decry the insincerity of the American phrase “have a nice day” and complain that it means nothing but “goodbye”. But this overlooks the fact that “goodbye” is itself a derivation from a previously more loquacious, and specifically meaningful phrase, “god be with you”. and that language in use is continually undergoing both morphological and functional modifications. Forms of greeting, farewell and address are particularly subject to grammaticalization, in which words can have both their form and meaning near-simultaneously changed as users adapt them to new communicative environments (Aitchison 2001). Ritualised forms of salutation and subscription develop over time to facilitate routine and easy interactions (Arnovick 2000). Netiquette (see website references below) already a powerful force in controlling users’ online behaviour, will undoubtedly encourage the development of modes of politeness in email, as long as the form itself can survive spam and remain an important medium. The finding that some individuals collect rude emails is in itself interesting and suggests that an anonymised institutional online collection of them might be, not only entertaining, but helpful in the development of boundary markers for inappropriate behaviour.

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