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Communicating in the Nineties

The discussion of the computer communications revolution to date has tended to dwell more on the methods than the content. The technology makes transmission easy, but it does not relieve people of the challenge of expressing themselves comprehensibly. Let's not let the machinery get in the way of communicating as well as we can...

At least some readers will be relieved to know that this is not yet another awe-stricken screed on the coming of the electronic superhighway. Enough electrical and human energy has already been expended describing the epochal possibilities of the Internet, the 500-channel universe, CD ROMS and all the rest. Enough paper has been run through printing presses to pack the ever-expanding computer sections of book and magazine shops with more than you will ever want to know about the paperless society. No, this is not about the mind-blowing things the new electronic communications technology might someday do for us — or to us. It is about how people are being affected by it in the great here and now.

To put an overblown subject in perspective, it should be pointed out that a transformation in communications has been under way in the developed countries for a number of years, but it has unfolded almost imperceptibly. The introduction of the photocopier wrought a permanent change in our ways of doing things by making multiple copies of all sorts of documents available with little effort and at a low cost. Economical long-distance and overseas telephone calling has popularized a practice that once was rare and expensive. Electronic beepers, answering machines, cellular phones and faxes have changed the way we communicate more than all the modems and graphical interfaces yet produced.

At the same time, though, most people in the western world are feeling the impact of the more glamorous developments at least indirectly. By giving rise to the global economy, the new world order of communications has affected the way their savings are invested, the products they buy, and — by speeding up the worldwide distribution process — the way their jobs are done.

In the past, only major corporations could afford the systems required to make the most of the computer's communications capabilities. Now, the relatively low cost of service and equipment has opened up new avenues of opportunity for a multitude of small companies and one-person enterprises.

As far as communications is concerned, all anybody in a developed country needs to do business today is a telephone, a fax machine, a computer, a modem, and the requisite software. With these at hand, consultants, small-scale vendors and the like can make a living while hardly ever leaving their homes.

Companies of all sizes have taken advantage of the reverse economies of scale to release employees to work at home or in satellite offices. This suits many people better than having to spend a lot of time travelling to and from a conventional office. As for the offices themselves, much of the communication done within them is now conducted by electronic mail.

People who work on-line in this way may "access" the facts and figures they want by simply calling them up on their computer screens and, if they so choose, down-loading them on their hard disks. Data bases and the Internet offer a profusion of information — all, as is so often said, "at your fingertips." The process need not take place in a work setting, however. Millions now "surf the net" for educational reasons or just for the fun of it.

In a society so enthralled by cybernetics, it takes the boldness of a boy willing to point out that the emperor has no clothes to question how much of this so-called information is worth having. The Library Association Journal of Great Britain did the unusual recently by commenting that "the *quality* [our italics] of electronic information sources has become a major issue during the past few years, as both information professionals and end-users are becoming increasingly reliant on information delivered in electronic formats."

The librarians are concerned that the rigour which once governed the publication of facts in journals and books tends to be lacking when information moves from one computer to another. True, it all depends on what kind of information you are talking about; computers are peculiarly suited to generating and transmitting accurate financial data. And no one doubts the veracity of an encyclopedia entry on a data base.

"The most chaotic collection of information in history"

Still, much of the off-the-cuff information coming out of cyberspace deserves to be treated with caution. As anyone who has chuckled at the meaningless "stats" on sports telecasts knows, the computer is perfectly adapted to churn out statistics of all configurations, whether or not they have any significance. Needless to say, statistics can be rigged every whichway to make a particular case.

Tom Burnam wrote in *The Dictionary of Misinformation* (1973) that the popular reverence for statistics has had "the particularly unfortunate result of making the job of the plain, outright liar that much easier.... And a lie cast in the form of a table or a graph or a row of figures is the most effective of all."

When a lie appears on a computer screen or printout, it is just that much more persuasive. Computer-generated material emerges in a neat, crisp form that lends it a mystical stamp of authority. Propagandists have shown themselves to be well aware of this psychological effect: the Internet has become a leading medium for political lobbyists in various countries promoting their viewpoints under the guise of objective information. Hucksters — to say nothing of outright charlatans — have been similarly quick to capitalize on the Internet's special properties. Meanwhile, gurus in Internet chat groups palm off opinions and rumours as unassailable fact.

For anyone who wishes to retain control over his or her own life, "facts" should always be approached warily. Who among us has not, at one time or another, read or heard bits of information that do not agree with our own experience or common sense? Why should we care whether we are being told the truth or not? Because if we assume that something which is false is true, we are in danger of acting to our own detriment on false assumptions. The simplest example of this is being duped into paying hard-earned money for a product that does not perform as advertised.

Short of being absolutely false, much of the information relayed on computer systems is inchoate, incomplete, trivial, or out of context. As computer journalist Howard Rheingold has remarked, the Internet incorporates "the most chaotic collection of information in history."

The sheer quantity of the material "on line" presents its own problem. People working in big companies especially complain that they are snowed under by useless, irrelevant and trivial "data for data's sake." E-mail adds further to needless piles of paper by encouraging repetition. Some managers have the annoying habit of copying everyone possible on missives that are only really relevant to one or two people.

Also, with the best intentions in the world, computerized information can be flawed by entry errors. The tremendous volume of the output makes them doubly hard to spot, since they tend to be buried in masses of figures or verbiage. An error which appears in a graph or chart may never be discovered because it looks so good ... so *right*.

In this and other ways, computerized communications quite literally present a case of the medium being the message. When Marshall McLuhan coined his famous phrase to that effect, he explained that it was so because "it is the medium that shapes and controls the search and form of human associations and actions." McLuhan never lived to see the personal computer used for communications, but we can now appreciate just how astute he was.

When it comes to human associations, the chief impact of using the computer as a communications medium has been to build walls of impersonality. When, for instance, E-mail messages are deposited in a person's file for a later response, the interlocutors do not share a true interaction as they would in a

normal conversation. They are separated both by distance and time. The same might be said of what is now known disparagingly as "snail mail," but the fact that outside parties might tune in to what is being said over computers makes a difference. Office workers report embarrassing cases of unflattering comments about colleagues, business associates and even customers being sent to those parties in error. Gone is the privacy and security of the written word carried in a sealed envelope.

Paradoxically enough, in another sense of the term, people can become all too "personal" when they have the buffer of cyberspace between them. This usually, but not always, happens when they are engaged in what the experts call "synchronous interactive discourse" and ordinary net-surfers and E-mailers call "chat."

Researchers studying news groups have noted a high incidence of "flaming." A research paper on the subject defines flaming as "the practice of expressing oneself more strongly than one would in other communications settings." Too true: if you said such things over the telephone, the other person might never speak to you again; if you said it face to face, you might fetch a punch in the nose.

The researchers speculate that flaming reflects a regime of "uninhibited behaviour" which may be partly due to "the paucity of reminders of the presence of other people and of social norms." Here we arrive back at the essential impersonality of the medium, which is reinforced by the fact that many news group members on the Internet go by code names. Even in inter-company E-mail where people might be acquainted with each other to some degree, they are not known by their names, but their initials. Thus the gap between living, breathing human beings is further enlarged.

Enlarging the gap between living, breathing human beings

The convenience of these sight-unseen relationships has turned some managers into electronic hermits. They like the sensation of communicating without moving from their chairs, causing their subordinates to complain that they hardly ever get to talk to their superiors in the flesh. It seems so much easier to sit back and let your fingers do the talking. The trouble is that fingers cannot talk.

Talking and writing are two different things. People were well aware of this in the far-off days when most of their long-distance communication was by letters. Historical researchers delving into correspondence from the 19th century may find themselves shaking their heads in admiration at the skill with which educated people in those days wielded their pens.

Some were better at it than others, of course, but the best among them obviously took great pains over their choice of words, seeing to it that the messages they wished to convey were clear to their readers. One way of re-establishing such standards in the computer age is to print out messages and read them over with a view to editing them before ever pressing one's send key.

Communicating without body language, smiles or frowns

To decrease the odds of being misunderstood, those sending messages should keep a sharp eye out for ambiguities, which are more likely to occur in writing than in talking. When thoughts are committed to a computer screen, the position of the words can make all the difference between things being done right and done wrong.

Consider how the positioning of a single word can change the message being conveyed: "ONLY these items will be acquired by the purchasing department"; "these items ONLY will be acquired by the purchasing department"; "these items will be acquired ONLY by the purchasing department." Though it is primarily the responsibility of the sender to put the right words in the right places, the receiver should never be shy about asking: "What do you mean by that?"

When people talk to each other face to face or over the phone, they will reiterate key points to elaborate on and clarify their meaning. They are less likely to do so when they are hitting computer keys. In verbal conversations, they make fluid adjustments in wording to allow for each other's feelings. On the telephone, people change their tone of voice according to whether they greet a message favourably or unfavourably. In face-to-face encounters, they can see each other's smiles and frowns and body language. Without tonal or facial expressions to reinforce them, polite requests can emerge as peremptory orders, and attempts at disarming humour as sarcastic gibes.

The dazzling speed with which electronic messages are transmitted can also detract from their meaning. Some E-mailers use their PCs as verbal machine guns,

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firing off verbiage in rapid bursts. Machine guns have a tendency to spray indiscriminately unless the operator has a firm grip and a steady aim. So it is with E-mail: there is a tendency to think that, if enough words are fired off in the general direction of the target, some are bound to hit their mark.

The finished appearance of the text leads to the dangerous assumption that, because it *looks* right, it must *be* right. It never enters some people's minds that they should rewrite messages, starting over again from scratch, if they are not satisfied that they have conveyed their full and true meaning. Some do not even edit or read their copy over to correct their spelling, punctuation, and syntax. If they bother going over it at all, they rely on their PC spell checks to do their proof-reading for them. A spell check does not guarantee accuracy. As long as a word is in the dictionary, it will pass it. As has been sharply pointed out, a spell check does not know the difference between "does not" and "doe snot."

Don't hurry: speed can be a false economy

The promptness of computerized communication raises a subconscious expectation of prompt reaction. While compressing into nanoseconds the time taken to pass messages back and forth, electronic systems have also compressed the time taken for research, consultation and deliberative thought. When managers received their inter-office correspondence on paper every morning, they could ponder questions and find out more about the details of the subject. Now they are under pressure to respond to a message the minute it pops up on their screens.

Speed can be a false economy if sufficient time is not taken to prepare a message properly. If managers hastily fire off misguided or incomplete responses, tasks that would only have to be done once must be done twice or more once the error is revealed. It is difficult enough to elicit the right action at the best of times without trying to do it in a hurry. Long before E-mail, a study by the University of Minnesota showed that at least 20 per cent of messages from top management were misinterpreted by people in the lower levels of companies. The motto of business communications — indeed, any communications — might be taken from the great German General Von Moltke. "Remember, gentlemen," he told his officers at a pre-battle briefing, "any order that *can* be misunderstood *will* be misunderstood."

Do all these reservations about electronic communication mean that we should go back to the old ways of doing things? No, of course not. We should use electronic systems to their fullest as long as we have made sure that the messages we send and receive on them are unmistakably clear. Economics dictate that they are here to stay, at least until such time as a new electronic marvel such as a voice-activated computer clears away the difficulty of expressing oneself in writing. They make a marvellous medium for communicating more quickly, thoroughly, and universally than ever before.

At the same time, computerized communication is only one mode in a constellation that includes the telephone, personal meetings, faxes and conventional mail. Thought should be given to which mode is most appropriate to the message at hand. When seeking information, data bases and the Internet are fine up to a point, but, time permitting, more and better-expressed information is likely to be found in journals and books.

For all its charisma, a computer is nothing more than a machine, and like all machines it needs to be handled with care, lest it injure its operator. We should not allow ourselves to be carried away by its seemingly magical abilities. Our brains simply do not function as quickly as the machines we use to transmit our thinking. What Marshall McLuhan wrote before the advent of PCs is even more valid now that computers have come to dominate communications: "I do not see that the physical existence of man is compatible with the speed of light."

Notice to Readers

Starting with our first issue in 1996, Royal Bank Letter will be published four times a year to reflect preferences among our readers. In a wide-ranging study of subscribers this summer, many said they would prefer receiving the Letter four times a year instead of six because of the general overflow of information in their lives. The format and content remain the same. The Letter may also be accessed via the Internet on the Royal Bank's Home Page, again to reflect changing habits. The first issue will be released December 29. Should you not receive your copy by the end of January, please let us know.

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