

Love on the net

Today, many of us meet our partners on the Internet and profess our undying love and devotion via email, writes Frank McKenna.

The email, or "courriel" as the French now insist on calling it to stem the incursion of English words into the French lexicon, is a wondrous and multi-faceted thing. How blithely we regard it with no thought to the stupendous expansion of human-to-human communications it has facilitated within just one generation.

This now ubiquitous means of communication and expression would have been unthinkable to our parents or grandparents who struggled to compose two or three letters a year to distant relatives and friends and waited patiently for months, sometimes years for the 'turnaround' necessitated by steamships and railways and taciturn postal workers stoically slogging through the snow on foot.

With electronic communications travelling at the speed of light (or sometimes marginally slower if an older, lesser megahertz, aging and weary server blocks its path and slows its forward motion) we can conduct almost instant conversations with associates in distant climes with nary a thought to the wonder of it all.

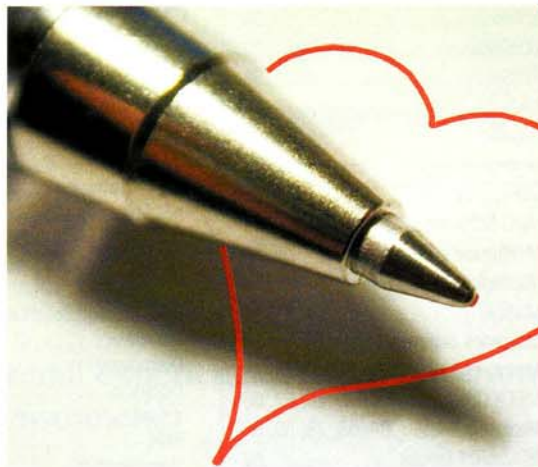
Emails now easily comprise eighty-percent or more of all business and personal communications. It would be a much higher proportion had not lawyers, (the last bastion of the paper supremacists); all over the world resisted the trend by insisting on non-standard paper lengths, unintelligible language and billing by weight of paper. Would it be they discovered "Tools/Word Count" on the Word toolbar they could have abandoned this ancient form of revenue generation and made far more money by learning how to "cut and paste" and write voluminous, equally incomprehensible emails; charging by the word.

Have any of us really had time to think about the wonder of it all? Probably not, because the email revolution has snuck up on society slowly and inexorably over the last thirty years until it now permeates every facet of our business and personal lives. When I was young we met young ladies at church and dances, school, college and work. Today we meet our partners on the Internet and profess our undying love and devotion via email.

This new paradigm in human relationships came too late for me to enjoy but it would have been greatly appreciated in my youth. It is extraordinary difficult to mislead someone over your height, appearance or other facial or bodily characteristics when asking for a dance, rejection was my greatest fear and embarrassment as a young man competing for a partner. Via email we can be whatever we wish to be either innocently or fraudulently

and all us men with "great faces for radio" can do far better than we could in the 'olden-days'; at least until that fateful day when we and our true-love finally meet. Hopefully, 'she' has been as creative with the truth as we have so there is no great discrepancy in the 'hope-versus-reality' aspirations of both parties.

How would email have changed our past had it been available? How will email and its successors change our future? Will the human race retreat into a world of electronic communications eschewing face-to-face contact in an effort to avoid contagion from SARS, AIDS, Mormon missionaries, born-again-Christians, the homeless and relatives in need of money and advice about which computer to buy? Will the increase in communications further the advance of the human race or will the diminishing amount of human contact retard



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our development?

What will be the next big advance after email? Will we all have brain implants within 30 years and then communicate by direct thought as easily as we think of a distant friend or relative? Don't laugh or discard this idea too quickly. I think back to my coal miner dad in 1952 in austere post-war Britain and try to imagine how he could have conceived of something so extraordinary and far-reaching and revolutionary as email.

What's next? Whatever it is you can be sure of two things. Someone has already thought of it and someone else has already begun designing the embryonic technology that will support the mind-mail system of the future. In laboratories around the world the next phase in human-to-human communications is already under development and it too will sneak up on us just as its predecessor did. The successor to email is out there; the majority of us just aren't aware of it yet. IDM