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Electronic mail
as a news medium

Mark Pearson

E-mail news: A multimedia experiment

Visualise a community where the daily news is delivered in text form via personal computers. Journalists report the news as they would in any other newsroom. Editors work with the copy and prepare the text for publication. As with a newspaper, the stories are transmitted in text form.

Yet, as with radio or television, the transmission is instantaneous. Every member of the audience has access to a computer connected by an electronic mail network to every other member of the community. The medium is interactive, and readers have a number of options available to them.

They can choose to search and select certain news items and print them. They can choose to file the news electronically to read at a more convenient time. They can make the decision to discard a news item that does not interest them. They can respond instantly to articles they wish to correct or comment upon with letters to the editor.

Welcome to the world of the electronic newspaper. How far are we from seeing our news delivered in this way? A decade? Five years? Two years? No. It’s here now. One community of about 2,000 has had such a news service since January 1993. At Bond University, Journalism students publish an afternoon news bulletin in full-text electronic form. At 4pm, three days per week, more than 600 computers throughout the campus ring to alert their users to the fact that Campus-PM has arrived, containing the latest news from throughout the campus and beyond. For this community, the E-mail news bulletin has replaced the printed journalism student newsletter published in previous semesters.

The purpose of this article is to share the educational advantages of using electronic mail as a medium for student publishing and to challenge existing approaches to journalism education.

First, however, you need to understand that E-mail is, essentially, the electronic transmission of information (Vervest, 1985, p.xv). It is distinguishable from the telephone in that it does not require a direct, simulta-
neous connection between the end parties. Clearly, in its prevalent form it is also textual rather than aural, although some extend the definition to include voice-mail, a telephone-based variation (Dewey, 1989, p.2). The term “electronic mail” can refer to short text messages sent between individuals over a computer network, but it can be extended to refer to the electronic distribution of whole pre-composed documents in a particular software program (Vervest, 1985, p.12). It can entail one-to-one communication or can be broadened to encompass mass-distribution to lists of subscribers in the form of bulletin boards allowing conferencing on designated issues. Established national and international networks such as AARNet and Internet allow messages to be sent to any number of individuals locally or abroad.

The convenience of the medium and the user-friendliness of some of the software packages used for accessing it mean that in many organisations E-mail has virtually replaced paper-based memos as the primary form of textual business communication. The experience with the electronic mail system at Bond University demonstrates that it has gone some way to replacing the telephone for the relay of short, simple messages.

For example, most staff would now make a simple request like a room booking by E-mail rather than by telephone or printed memo. The widespread use of E-mail in a range of institutions has opened a rich array of research possibilities focusing on the implications of this medium on organisational communication. Sproull and Kiesler (1992, p. ix) have found that the use of electronic mail is changing the way people work and the hierarchical and time structures in which they operate.

The increasing use of electronic mail as a communication medium on campus at Bond University sparked the idea of transmitting the student publication electronically. Previously, journalism students had desktop-published small campus newsletters ranging in frequency from weekly to daily. Most were photocopied, with circulation limited to distribution at campus libraries and eating places.

While these newsletters served their purpose reasonably well, they suffered from the usual problems encountered by student publications in small journalism departments:

- Presentation quality varied according to the degree of expertise students had in sub-editing, layout, design and desktop publishing technology. In semesters where both reporting and editing classes were run, the newsletters only started to look respectable towards the end of the semester. In semesters where only reporting subjects were offered, the editing and layout responsibilities reverted to the lecturer.
- Either way, deadlines were extended to allow the editors time to fuss with the pagination program. This meant much of the news lost its newsworthiness. Certainly, campus news remained relatively fresh, but there was little opportunity to incorporate the latest national and international news from the wire service.
- Production concerns predominated at the expense of genuine concern with students’ reporting techniques and writing abilities. Too often it
became a matter of "just getting it out" rather than revising, reworking and updating stories to a professionally acceptable level.

- Printing and distribution were always a problem. Photocopiers break down and students are not known for their capabilities as circulation managers.

It is important that students experience the "real life" pressures of a newspaper newsroom so that they can appreciate the compromises that are made when tight deadlines and production constraints reach that critical point of impasse. However, it is a question of how much exposure they need to the real world scenario before it starts to lose its educational value and begins to occupy student and staff time which might be expended more profitably in fine-tuning journalism research, writing and editing skills.

Electronic mail presented distinct advantages as a medium for student publishing, as it provided an opportunity to overcome many of these difficulties. Advantages included:

- Full-text presentation of copy with limited formatting requirements. This results in a shorter lead-time between copy deadline and production time. In other words, if working to a 4pm deadline, a standard copy deadline can be 2 or 3pm, allowing just one to two hours for sub-editing and production of material which would take several hours to compose into page form. Important news items can be incorporated just minutes before deadline. Extremely important items can take the form of a separate bulletin, or as a news flash, at any time of day or night. While editing is still an important part of the process—all text must be sub-edited—the medium allows for a primary focus on research and reporting skills.

- E-mail presents no technical limits to the size of the publication. The size of the bulletin can vary according to the newsworthiness and quality of the material made available.

- The medium has the capacity to attach whole documents to a message, allowing for the bulletin to be published in newspaper format if required. If the focus changes from reporting to editing, or it is desirable that students actually publish a "newspaper", this can be attached in electronic form and printed out by the recipient if desired. This possibility depends on the system architecture being used. In the Bond University environment, such "enclosures" can only be exchanged between Apple users. IBM-compatible users are limited to simple text format.

- E-mail allows for extensive, free distribution at the press of a button. This does away with the printing and distribution hassle and expense. Recipients can be added to or deleted from a mailing list. It leaves the onus on the recipients to print out and photocopy the bulletin if they need it in print form or require multiple copies.

After some consideration, it was decided that the medium would lend itself to an afternoon daily news bulletin for the campus community. This would allow students to be rostered for same-day reporting assignments and the bulletin could provide a genuine "real life" service to its readership in the afternoon. As well as receiving campus news, students and staff could learn of any events in the wider world which had happened
since they last heard the news at breakfast or while driving to work. They
could also be updated on traffic and surf conditions before they finished
work for the day.

The focus of the exercise was the journalism student newsroom, contain-
ing Apple Macintosh computers and the AAP wire service. The project
utilised the combined efforts of students in the basic news writing and news
editing subjects, about 50 students in all. News writing students were
rostered as reporters for one day each week, while students from the
editing class took on roles as sub-editors and editors. Editors would host an
editorial conference at 9am, at which reporters would be assigned stories.
Some would come with stories already researched and ready to file. Others
would send them from their colleges to the newsroom on E-mail. From 10-
11am the lecturer would help students with their news writing, breaking
occasionally for formal instructional sessions. This intensive workshop
replaced previously simulated news writing tutorials. Between 2 and 3pm
reporters would look on while sub-editors prepared their stories for pub-
lication. From 3-4pm editors would complete final check-subbing duties and
compile stories into their order of priority in the bulletin. At 4pm the
bulletin would be mailed to more than 600 E-mail addresses throughout
campus, many of which are bulk mail centres for groups of students or staff.
Most would be reading the bulletin within minutes.

Other advantages to the use of E-mail as the publishing medium
became apparent soon after the first issues were published. Most striking
was the interactivity of the medium. Printed newsletters in the past had
attracted the occasional letter to the editor. However, the students re-
ceived more letters to the editor in response to their first few publications
than they had received in more than three years of publishing the printed
newsletters.

This is because it is so easy to respond to an E-mail message. With
Microsoft Mail, all the reader has to do is press the “Reply” button, type
the response, then press “Send” and the message goes back to the pub-
lisher. This facility had distinct educational advantages. Students learned
that mistakes in their reporting and writing had consequences which
could be embarrassing when they incited an angry response and a de-
mand for a correction. More important, though, was the feeling that they
were publishing for a real community which read and appreciated their
news service.

Another unexpected advantage was the capacity to use the E-mail
account as a research tool. Students started to make electronic mail
inquiries of their sources as an alternative to telephoning or interviewing
in person. This even extended to the use of the “conference call” to sources
where the whole interview would be conducted in text form on screen. Of
course, this raised a range of questions about the categorisation of such an
interview format and the relative power positions and ethical responsi-
bilities of the journalists and their interviewees. The E-mail system itself
helped present another research option. Students tapped into messages
mailed to the broad campus community and looked for new angles they
could take on the issues involved.
A further benefit was that the national and international networking facilities made it possible to mail the news bulletin beyond the campus walls to interested readers. We have not yet formalised this process, although we have sent copies to journalism educators and former staff members at other institutions. The students themselves opened electronic mail accounts so they could receive the bulletin on their own computers in student residences. This was a distinct advantage over the previous arrangement where students often found it difficult getting a copy of the desktop newsletter to see their own stories.

The medium presented its own problems. Being a full text file, relatively unformatted, it was not attractive typographically. This presents research opportunities for projects which consider the suitability of traditional typographical and design techniques for on-screen display.

Transmission was free so, technically, students could transmit every word they wrote in full text form. However, such self-indulgence did not necessarily suit the reader. Editors had to decide how much time a reader would be willing to spend browsing through a full-text document on screen and tailor the size of the publication accordingly. The number of items might vary slightly according to whether there was much news that day. We ended up with an average of about 15 stories of about five pars in each bulletin, with Surf, Weather and Traffic reports tagged at the end as regular items. This seemed to be manageable for both the students and the readers and printed into two to three pages of text.

A final problem was the choice of writing genre, style and level. The interactivity and sense of audience engendered by the medium encouraged students to use a conversational, direct address style of news writing, closer to that used on radio than that seen in most newspapers. While this was worth noting and discussing with the students, in the end we imposed a range of writing styles on the medium, to give students a broad range of writing experiences.

There is no doubt publishing an E-mail news bulletin has been an educational success in the subjects it serves. However, our experimentation with electronic mail and our continued use of it in our course signals more than mere opportunism, more than mere usage because it is convenient.

At one level, it is just another way of distributing a student publication. But at another level, it represents a shift in the paradigm of journalism and journalism education. Its use is itself a statement of direction, a window through which we might get a glimpse of the journalism of tomorrow. Deeper issues are worthy of consideration.

Journalism education has been entrenched in teaching professional practices which are fast becoming antiquated. The use of a novel medium for transmitting news helps students consider both the needs of journalism and the special demands of the particular medium. This helps teachers and students look at news and its audiences in a more generic way, free of the shackles of the traditional “print” and “broadcast” approaches to writing and reporting.

The mass media are becoming fragmented into micro media targeting
smaller interactive communities of culture and interest. As Jurensen and Meyer (1992) put it: "Before, a mass medium prospered by sending a few messages to many people. Increasingly, the media are learning to send many messages, each addressed to a few people" (p. 267). E-mail exemplifies that trend. It is important that journalists learn to access it and exploit it as a research tool and a potential medium of publication.

A world of information is becoming available to computer users who subscribe to on-line databases and electronic mail systems and bulletin boards. Journalism is not keeping pace with the availability of this information, nor have our courses equipped students to access them. Some authors have pointed out that access to such information helps free journalism from the institutionalised sources to which they have become beholden over generations. Koch (1991, p.326) ponders "what the effect would be of a Fourth Estate freed by these technologies to research and question critically the statements of officials". He argues that effective use of online data technologies by journalists will

empower writers and reporters by providing them with information equal to or greater than that possessed by the public or private official they are assigned to interview. The effects of this empowerment... will eventually redefine the form of the news in specific and of public information in general (Koch, p. xxiii).

Electronic mail technology opens a new window of research opportunities to journalists which have only started to be explored by some US journalists. As Leonard (1992) notes, much of the public data journalists would formerly access in document form is now only available on-line. Reporters who "ignore public information simply because it's now dressed in an unfamiliar format will be left in the dark" (p.65). The electronic mail network throughout Australia and the world makes the opportunities for student publishing that much more exciting. All that is required is a topic area and a list of subscribers and journalism students would have their own mass audience for a publication.

For example, journalism schools throughout Australia (and overseas) could co-operate to create a national E-mail newsletter on a particular topic. Stories from the various institutions could be E-mailed to a central newsroom and combined with stories from AAP and other features to create an electronic mail publication which could be disseminated on Internet to universities throughout Australia and the world at little or no publishing cost. Institutions could take turns at editing the bulletin, while students and staff could file stories during semester. Of course, such a project could target any topic. Subjects could vary according to the targeted audiences and the needs of the courses. Obviously, a national education newsletter would be a prime candidate.

The tens of thousands of national and international bulletin boards in existence represent a vast area of interactive public communication for which our conventional notion of journalism has as yet had little or no application. Thousands of people are communicating on all kinds of interest areas which are neither controlled nor accessed by the main-
stream media, yet the contents of these bulletin boards meet the accepted
definitions of news for the communities they serve.

These bulletin boards are a new frontier for journalists and journalism
in accessing and exploiting their information and in providing publishing
opportunities.

One such bulletin board, Computer Aided Reporting and Research,
hosts a continuous dialogue of information-sharing and research queries
between journalists and academics. Those who are interested might sub-
scribe to it to get a taste for the kinds of ideas and issues that are being
discussed. It is a medium without ownership problems, industrial demar-
cations or assumed formats for presenting news. It is a new genre of
publishing, and the groundrules are yet to be fully formulated.

However, it will not be long before the main media players move in on
electronic mail as a publishing form. News Corporation subsidiary News
Electronic Data (NEDI) has foreshadowed a subscription-based E-mail
news network for finance news which it planned to launch by the end of
1993. Called MiddleGate, the service will feature a general news section
selected by a team of editors and a finance news section based on reports
tailored to the reader's stock portfolio (Horey, 1993, p. 15).

The newspaper industry is fast learning that it must find diverse ways
of packaging and distributing the news it gathers for its pages. Publisher
of the Seattle Times, Frank Blethen, made this clear when he delivered the
keynote speech to the third annual conference on Talking Newspapers
and Telecommunications Opportunities last year:

The successful newspapers of the future will be the ones that
figure out how to enhance their core printed product while
reusing their database . . . to provide supplemental information
with as many delivery options as possible (Pagano, 1992, p. 19).

By April 1992, 150 US newspapers provided free interactive voice
services, more than 500 offered pay telephone services for access to full-
text databases, 11 offered a fax delivery of the following day's headlines
and seven offered local consumer-oriented Videotex services using home
computers or terminals (Pagano, 1992, p. 19).

Apple has released its Newton electronic notepad—a pen-driven pocket-
sized computer designed to send and receive handwritten messages and
eventually to handle information like finance reports and sports updates.
Knight-Riddler’s director of new media technology, Roger Fidler (1992,
p. 24), sees this as another threat to print as a medium:

Whatever uses develop, these new communicators will be infor-
mation hungry. To satisfy that hunger, businesspeople are al-
ready seeking alliances with newspapers, news wires, informa-
tion services and databases. And while devices such as the
Apple Newton may seem insignificant now, they represent only
the first wave of products that will emerge from today's rapid
convergence of computer, communications and information tech-
nologies.
Wherever possible, journalism education should position itself at the leading edge of industry developments. We did this with desktop publishing. From 1986 it was convenient for us to acquire desktop publishing programs to use in our newsrooms because they brought newspaper editing and design to our students' fingertips. At the time, many practitioners scoffed at the notion of on-screen pagination technology. Today most are spending millions to install it. Meanwhile, our graduates have been equipped with the skills to use it.

Some of our colleagues are leading the way with the use of multimedia technology and are examining its application to news and teaching. Professor Clem Lloyd has already developed a multimedia centre for his postgraduate journalism program at the University of Wollongong (Lloyd, 1992). More work needs to be done on the application of multimedia to the delivery of news, a field with enormous prospects for exploitation. Brown (1992, p. 78) foreshadowed an era where the boundaries dissolve between the home computer, the television, the video recorder and the telephone and fax. He identified multimedia as "just one of the myriad ways that new digital technologies are being integrated into human society and life" (1992, p. 80).

Journalism academics are well placed to examine such new technologies and experiment with their news delivery potential. If they can demonstrate their expertise at this, they may well attract grants from industry for the purpose. Obviously computers are not an end in themselves. They can only provide a means of enhancing learning experiences in a journalism program. Clearly, the use of electronic mail for the publication of student news bulletins is one means of meeting an immediate publishing goal while at the same time awakening students to a world beyond the conventional notions of journalism and preparing them for careers as versatile media communicators.

References

Mark Pearson is Associate Professor and Co-ordinator of Journalism Programs at Bond University. A version of this article was delivered to the Journalism Education and New Technology session of the Australian Communication Conference, Victoria University of Technology, July 1993.