POINT OF VIEW  By Rob Nixon

I t’s Saturday morning, and I’ve sought refuge in my favorite place to write: a café a few blocks from home. Ten years ago, I would have found the least mewing, the bleats of laugh- ter, the cup clatter, and the chatter way too distracting. But these days, I find them easy to screen out. I relish the mental solitude I can achieve here against a backdrop of buzzing human sociability. But what I value most is the sanctuary the café offers from the supreme distraction of our age: the silent and un- ceasing cacophony of e-mail.

To judge from the testimony of friends and colleagues, the volume of e-mail we process daily has reached some kind of crisis point. More and more, the medium has become both utterly integral and a major source of exhaustion and disquiet. I don’t know any academics who feel they would become better teachers or intellectuals if they received and sent more e-mail. I hasten to add that I can’t claim to speak from the thick of the phenomenon. I am just a regular 25-to-30-e-mails-a-day guy. They arrive from colleagues, former classmates, list administrators, stu- dents, ex-students, publishers, friends, family, and solicitous strangers (some wonderful, others out-and-out crankpots).

But even that moderate amount makes me rail against the merciless immediacy of e-mail, and feel as if I am constantly traversing water. How, I won- der, do deans and chairs survive the e- mail tsunami (80, 90 messages a day?) that crash down on them unceasingly?

Sometimes, one gets an inkling of the frustration at the top. A dean at my university sent a mass mailing accompanied by this appeal: “Do not reply to this e-mail. Please do not say yes, do not say no. Just come if you can”—thus sparing some administra- tive assistant carpal-tunnel syndrome from punching the delete button all the way to the hospital.

The distribution of my online affec- tions has undergone a radical reversal. A decade ago, I found the Internet laborsious, insubstantial, unenticing. E-mail, on the other hand, charmed me totally. I adored the frisson, the serendipity, the quick-flitting intimacy. I remember reading W. H. Auden’s line—“Now he is scattered among a hundred cities”—and thinking he had no idea how scattered identity would become. Or how exhilarating that could feel.

However, my romance with e-mail is now on the rocks. E-mail must rank as one of the most time-de- vouring time-servers of all time. Too often it makes nothing happen—fast. I don’t say this out of some Luddite sensibility: I’d make a very fearsome Luddite. I’m too used to the Internet at large, which appeals to both the hunter-gatherer and the pastoralist browser in me. My research and teaching alike are unthinkable without it. Unlike e-mail, the Inter- net doesn’t insistently demand responses. It seems less controlling, less of an imposition, and more of a re- source. Once upon a time e-mail looked as if it would become an inescapable part of university life. By now, however, it has come to feel like a Sisyphan labor akin to hawling out the garbage or shoveling snow.

E-mail has become efficient to the point of counter- productive—to the point of overwhelming the primary activities—teaching, reading, writing, and thinking—that we once hoped it might help sustain. The best teaching and reading require some professional space within which to give the illusion of inefficiency. It is in this space that we are most likely to be surprised by new ideas or to discover compelling ways to give fresh life to old ones. E-mail’s demands for metro- nomic efficiency threatens such expanses of “idle” creativity.

At the heart of the problem is e-mail’s paradoxical status. It is and isn’t writing. You bend over the same computer, tapping the same keys, straining the same muscles you use to write your lectures, your articles, your books. But what you’re composing is mostly epistolary: It’s not writing but meta-writing. A reply to a reply to a reply. The challenge is how to keep a technology with a rodentlike reproductive rate sup- plementary, not something that outwears our days.

Going to the café is one of my coping strategies. There my computer is reduced to a one-dimensional technology temporarily severed from interactive temptations and distractions. But such trips are a rare luxury. More often, I impose on myself a kind of in- verted curfew: I try never to check e-mail before 4 p.m. Like many people, I experience my best energy in the mornings. I try to reserve that dream-influenced, caffeine-charged creativity for the activities that mat- his chair with a seat belt. I’ve made the mistake often enough of using e-mail to kick start me. In my ex- perience, it warms you up for nothing but dispersion; the real writing is less likely to get done.

These days the buzz—and the money that follows the buzz—is all about connection. However, if we don’t force ourselves into regular periods of discon- nectedness, our students will be shortchanged. Acad- emics have less time than ever to read and write. That’s why intervals of withdrawal remain essential to our jobs as educators. Our task is to redeem infor- mation and connect with one another by stimulating and passion, into communicable knowledge. “Only connect,” E. M. Forster exhorted his readers 90 years ago, I think because he knew that connecting has become the easy part. Disconnection (in order to connect more deeply later) now requires the greater discipline and resourcefulness.

I wish e-mail were routed through some other ap- paratus than a computer—like, say, the DuctBuster. That would have two primary advantages. First, we wouldn’t be buried under a mountain of messages and e-mail, writing’s easy surrogate. Second, we wouldn’t have two physically unhealthy activities compressed into one posture: sitting and e-mailing. I’ve mentioned that writing locks us into a computer stoop. Now we must assume the same stance to absorb the ephe- meral-communication messages that used to pass through the telephone. No wonder our deldoil, tapiquires, and infraspinatus mus- cles go into revolt.

I have friends (retirees, artists, writers) who lead more isolated lives than I do, without a matrix of institutional respon- sibilities. I’m talking about the 5-or-6- e-mails-a-day folk, for whom the medi- um can still feel like something of a pas- time. Often they send me letter-length dispatches: long, witty, eloquent, and in- timate. I feel the need, the desire, to re- spond in kind. But mostly I’m e-mailed out and can’t endure more time filling up boxes on my computer screen. I watch with horror as my friends’ long missives sink into the bottomless sediments of unan- swered e-mail, turning into the digital equivalent of anthracite. These days, I’m more likely to respond by picking up the telephone.

This summer, I spent a month at an artists’ colony in New Hampshire. The setup there was my idea of e-mail heavens. Thirty artists shared a single phone line. You had to pack up your computer and laptop half a mile to the main residence to plug it into. What I adored was the sheer inconvenience of all. Going online became a conscious choice, not a facile reflex that could derail your train of thought. I checked my e-mail every three days or so. In between, I could build up a head of steam, without the temptation of logging on for an incidental glance and finding, an hour later, that I was still inside e-mail’s thrall and that the writing zone had fled.

The colony experience reminded me that I don’t want e-mail to disappear. I just need periods in my life when it is less relentless and less convenient. In modern life, e-mail is a boon. Yes, and yes, it can save time. But we’d do well to recall the Buddha’s re- sponse on being told that a sprout had shivered 0.1 second off the 100-meter record: “Let’s be careful before we invoke the Buddha’s inquired, ‘did she do with the time she saved?’”

To which I’d add: Write more e-mail?

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