E-mail netiquette, e-lists, and attachments

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It was a long time ago (in internet years) that I last discussed the use of e-mail, and in particular the use of attachments and e-lists (discussion lists). When I did, ALIAnet had less than 30 active e-lists, whereas now we have more than double that number. And whilst more recently I mused on the sheer impossible volume of messages, 'netiquette' was only briefly mentioned.

The phenomenon of e-mail use will undoubtedly prove fascinating to future anthropologists and psychologists, if only because it shapes the way in which many of us communicate — and not just via e-mail. The method of communication delivery is also fascinating, not just because of the existential nature of the confabulation, but also because it is the recipient that must accept the costs involved in receiving the communiqué. The latter point is worth further illumination.

For those of us who are old enough to remember, before e-mail, messages were delivered to us in small envelopes via Australia Post, known as 'letters'. These letters required a 'stamp' to be affixed to the top right corner, and that stamp required payment to Australia Post by the originator of the communication. The recipient was the passive agent in every respect, and did not have to contribute to the cost involved in delivery, other than to have a letterbox. When marketing became fashionable, a new form of mail appeared — 'junk mail'. Again, the only cost to the recipient was to have a mailbox, and indeed they could chose to filter these missives by applying a 'no junk mail' sticker to the letterbox.

Now let's skip forward to the 21st century... with e-mail in the ascendancy, and gaining in popularity as a means of communication. But who pays? For most net-enabled people, the costs are hidden. But here is a hint: if the true cost of e-mail was borne by the sender, junk-mail would evaporate almost overnight. And the other bane of online activity — attachments — would practically disappear too. Why is this so? Because it is the recipient, not the sender, that pays for transmissions.

Take a closer look at this example, a daily occurrence here at ALIA National Office. Jo Bloggs, a subscriber to aliaLIBRARY e-list (names have been changed here to protect the innocent and guileless alike...) sends a message to 1400 list subscribers. The text of the e-mail is 900 bytes in size (roughly 125 words, in plain text), and would normally take around 2 seconds to find its way to the person's ISP, another second or so to find its way across the internet and arrive at the ALIAnet list server, and take a further 60 to 70 seconds or so to be distributed by the list server to each of the other 1399 subscribers. All up, around 1.2Mb of data has travelled the internet in this one message.

And there are charges ascribed along the way. The ISP generally pays for the single transfer (in the form of cents per byte, usually) across the internet to ALIAnet, ALIAnet pays to receive the 900 bytes (based on volume charges of cents per byte), ALIAnet pays to send the distributed message to all 1400 subscribers (by volume once more, but this time multiplied by 1400) and the end-user — the individual subscribers — pay to receive the message, generally as part of their dial-up costs, which these days are more likely to have volume caps, after which penalty charges are assigned. As you can see, there are charges for both data out and data in — though some ISPs and bandwidth wholesalers do not charge for 'uploads' and in some instances provide limited credit for uploads. It is clear that the traffic in data generates costs, but what many e-mailers are unaware of is that costs are often applied in both directions, yet not always recovered. Jo has paid for less than 0.01% of this, and that is only if our subscriber is directly paying for any of it at all.

Now look at the example once more, but this time with a slightly different scenario: with the inclusion of an attachment. Using the same 900-byte message, Jo decides to send an attachment with exactly the same text, but in a nicely-formatted Microsoft Word document — with some bold and italic text to emphasize headings. The single Word document weighs in at a relatively hefty 27 980 bytes –- or more than thirty times the size. If Jo had put the same words into a table within a Word document, it would easily have reach many times even this amount. How much data is moved around the internet in this scenario? And how much is charged to the Association, to be recovered through membership fees?

The sums are not hard to work out: and a single 250-word message escalates into over 36 megabytes of data. Of course, I have not included the online time that is charged to subscribers when they *receive* this e-mail. This relatively simple message — along with the attachment — would take around 10 seconds to download. Imagine if the message contained a Word document that was ten times bigger...

When ALIAnet began, we compiled and drafted a set of loose rules that applied to the use of e-mail especially in relation to e-lists [http://www.alia.org.au/e-lists/netiquette.html]. Those rules have stood the test of time, and deserve revisiting. Apart from highlighting the costs involved, paragraph five stands the test of time:

> Keep messages as brief as possible, succinct, and to the point. Your impact will be greater. Remember that most e-mail users pay to receive each character sent. Most lists prefer to have short communications (more than two or three scrolling screen-fulls is rather inconsiderate). **Above all, do not send attachments of any kind** (list processors do not like them, as either text or compressed data), unless your list-owner has granted approval.

It should be noted that the phrase, 'Above all, do not send attachments of any kind' is highlighted in red text to amplify the point, both here and on the website. It is only fair to those who use ALIAnet e-lists to communicate. There are other pertinent points raised in the netiquette notes, and I thoroughly recommend that ALIA members (and others) visit the page if only to rediscover the art of being polite, civil, and grown up on the 'net. ∎

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