

Encyclopedia of Global Studies

Email

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Print Pub. Date: 2012

Online Pub. Date: May 31, 2012

Print ISBN: 9781412964296

Online ISBN: 9781452218557

DOI: 10.4135/9781452218557

Print pages: 474-476

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

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10.4135/9781452218557

10.4135/9781452218557.n151

As one of the first widespread uses of the Internet, email has become an important aspect of computer-mediated communication on a global scale. As such, it has received considerable attention from different scholarly disciplines in terms of its popularity as a medium of communication, efficacy as a work tool, and impact on language.

Much of the data on email use in the United States comes from the Pew Internet and American Life Project. As of September 2009, trend data from this project reveals that 89% of American adults use email regularly; in terms of frequency of use, 58% of Americans send or read email daily. Putting these percentages in global context, marketing research by ROI Research indicates that email use varies by geographic region. As of April 2009, there appear to be regional differences in the penetration rates for email use: 87% of North Americans (Canadians and Americans), 74% of those in what ROI defines as “Asian Pacific” countries (China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Japan), and 63% of Europeans (United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Spain) consider email their primary form of online communication. Across these three groups and continents, email far outweighs the use of other Internet communications such as instant messaging, texting, and social networking sites.

By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, email began to lose its dominance as the most popular online activity. According to the 2009 Generations Online study by Sydney Jones and Susannah Fox, varied levels of email use are attributed to generational differences. Generations such as the “young Boomers” (Americans who were at that time 45 to 54 years of age) and “older Boomers” (Americans 55 to 63 years of age) were most likely to favor email over other forms of computer-mediated communication. By contrast, “GenY” or “Millennials” (Americans 18 to 32 years of age) were much more likely to use email in tandem with other forms of computer-mediated communication such as social networking sites, texting, and instant messaging. According to Jones and Fox, as of December 2008, only 74% of teenagers reported using email compared to 89% in 2004.

One reason that some users began to find email less attractive was spam—a menace to which no [p. 474 ↓] one is immune. According to ROI, while North Americans may have received more total spam in their email, whether residing in a North American, Asian Pacific, or European country, email users universally stated that spam constituted the largest percentage of all emails received. Indeed, as early as 2003, a report by Deborah Fallows signaled that spam was damaging to email use among Americans, 75% of whom reported that they were unable to stop spam from invading their inboxes. Several years later, in 2008, another PEW Internet and American Life Project study, also by Fallows, confirmed that the trend away from email continued, this time for a different reason: the increasing popularity of information searching. However, this being said, Fallows also stated that email remained the most popular online activity.

While email is used in a variety of personal contexts, the most frequent use of email is at work by what Fallows named “work emailers” in 2002 or what Mary Madden and Sydney Jones called “networked workers” in 2008. According to Madden and Jones, 62% of American adults who were employed at that time used the Internet or email at work. They indicated that, although work emailers acknowledged the benefits of Internet and email as creating more connectivity and flexibility, work emailers also were concerned by the demands and stress added to their lives as a result of being constantly “wired,” or connected online.

Work emailers employ a variety of email strategies to manage their use of this communication tool on the job. As indicated by Wendy Mackay, “prioritizers” use email to manage problems based on messages as they come in. By contrast, “archivers” concentrate on archiving information for later use. Whereas some earlier global studies of email use, such as Joseph Zelwietro's comparative study of environmental organizations, did not find great variation in email strategies linked to national cultural difference, later inquiries found that email strategies do vary by region. According to John C. Tang and colleagues, as of 2009, Americans were more likely to archive their email, while Latin Americans kept fewer email messages. In addition, whereas Europeans favored filing email into folders, Asians were less likely to do so.

The use of email at work is critical to international business. Findings of several studies indicate that English has become the lingua franca of email use for international business. As may be imagined, the need to communicate in English is not universally

appreciated, as it incurs heavier burdens on those whose first or native language is not English. In her work on Mexican executives, Christine Über Grosse found that Mexican managers are expected to master English in order to email and phone their English-speaking colleagues, creating extra pressure for their work emails to take place in what is, for them, a second or foreign language.

Julio Gimenez found that as international business relies on email, attention needs to be paid to cultural context. As this indicates, unfortunately, as with many topics in new media studies, the majority of existing studies relies on data from the United States; far less is known about the comparative cultural use of email from a global perspective. This being said, we do know that the predominance of English does not mean that email ceases to be used in culturally specific ways. For example, Leena Louhiala-Salminen and colleagues found that English is the primary language through which those living in Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) communicate with each other for work. Despite the long-standing predominance of a variant of Swedish as the traditional lingua franca of this region, English has become the primary language used in email for international business. This being said, they find that although they email in English, Finns and Swedes maintain culturally specific usage practices and communication styles. Email accounts for 16% of Swedes' time at work, compared to 29% for Finns. Whereas Finns (60%) favor “blunt” or “direct requests,” often using the imperative voice (e.g., Please send ...), Swedes are more likely to use “indirect alternatives” (e.g., Would you please send ...).

Innocent Chilwa's studies of email written in Nigerian English also point to the importance of local culture informing the use of email in one of what the author terms many emergent “new World Englishes.” Chilwa's study of “419,” or financial hoax or scam, emails examines the importance of greetings in Nigerian email. Chilwa explains how writers employ sociocultural greeting formulas to appeal to potential victims. In a second study on email and language, Chilwa [p. 475 ↓] indicates that, when email is written in a second or foreign language, this process transforms language. In the author's own words, language is “indigenised to the point that a native variety emerges” and, when this occurs, “discursive practices peculiar to that society and people soon become interwoven with the language” (Chilwa, 2010, p. 41).

Email is also transforming the English language for native English speakers. Increasingly, acronyms, alternate spellings, and other transformations of the English language are normative in email and texting. Examples of acronyms include LOL (laughing out loud), @TEOTD (at the end of the day), and LERK (leaving easy reach of keyboard). Examples of alternate or shortened spelling include ru (are you), OIC (oh, I see), and LEMENO (let me know). Yet a third group of emergent expressions includes A3 (anytime, anywhere, anyplace) and I33t (elite). Naomi Baron's studies explore how email is gradually stripping language of its formality. She argues that, as email becomes as ubiquitous as the telephone in terms of ease of access, the English language will continue to change.

Yet, as email changes the English language for some, there are often unforeseen consequences. Keri K. Stephens and colleagues examined how college students interact with their instructors via email in what they term “out-of-classroom communication.” They found that when students use informal language or text abbreviations, especially “ru” in emailing their instructors, these linguistic formulations are interpreted as violations of polite interaction. As this indicates, email use may lead to unintended miscommunication. Daniel Menchik and Xiaoli Tian found that email among colleagues can generate missed social cues when vocabulary is misunderstood or tone is not recognized. Finally, Anna K. Turnage warns that the intentional use of email for flaming (hostile or provocative mediated interactions) can lead to organizational conflict or the degradation of the work environment.

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10.4135/9781452218557.n151

See also:

- [Blogs](#)
- [Communicative Power](#)
- [Computing](#)
- [Computing, Personal](#)
- [Cyberconflict](#)
- [Global Communications and Technology](#)

- [Handheld Devices](#)
- [Internet](#)
- [Web 2.0](#)

Further Readings

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