

COLUMNISTS

E-mail communication: practical vs. moral

My issue this week relates to honesty and discretion. It is prompted by my growing dependence on the use of e-mail. In my work setting it is possible now to send messages to literally hundreds of people with the simple jerk of a finger. It only takes seconds to type out a quick message, and it takes only fractions of a second to press the button that disseminates the message to scores of computers.

I really haven't spent much time thinking about this, and I've certainly sent my fair share of e-mails. Still, there seems to be something suspect about proceeding with this communications revolution without at least some sense of reflection on the effects of the ease with which our messages can now be broadcast.

It seems to me that the strength of e-mail rests in the one-on-one communication it affords. For example, I can send messages to individual staff members with great dispatch. They can respond quickly, with no time wasted waiting for telephone calls back and forth and with no extraneous chit-chat about unrelated matters. Paper memos become unnecessary and that saves money, time and clutter around my already too-messy desk.

News items about campus lectures or meeting schedules can be handled much more swiftly than had previously been the case, and it is easier to ensure that no one is left "out of the loop." Personally, I am able to e-mail my brother in Seattle very economically and have even sent important and inexpensive messages in a timely fashion to two friends in Brazil. All this makes me very grateful for e-mail capabilities and, with these us-



the
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life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

es in mind, I haven't the slightest reservation about proceeding wholeheartedly with this monumental cultural shift in our means of communicating.

But I do have a few questions about some other uses of the e-mail phenomenon. Some of these seem to touch on moral questions. For example, I wonder how aware we are of the sheer quantity of information that now passes our consciousness each day. The volume of information that crosses my path has increased enormously. This raises questions for me about how I can attend to so great a quantity of information and still maintain my concentration so that I can attend to important matters. As the number of information items entering my consciousness increases dramatically, I can sense that my attention span is diminishing as well. I sense myself hungering now for "new" items that will appeal to my freshly acquired appetite for constant stimulation.

My concern in this regard is that information can not be equated with knowledge. Neither is it to be acquainted with wisdom. It is simply information. I don't think that merely apprehending

great quantities of information increases either my knowledge of other people or the important realities of life. I don't think it enhances the wisdom I might possess about life's great issues or that I might bring to life's most significant problems, either.

In addition to the problem of the sheer volume of information that can now be disseminated, I think there is a problem concerning the kinds of information that have now become "common property." I recently received an e-mail about the health condition of a person with whom I had only the most distant relationship. That particular missive had been dispatched to a whole host of "general others." I could not help feeling that the individual with the health problem had been seriously violated. While the "audience" to whom the message had been dispatched included people in a variety of roles and job-related relationships, we really had no particular friendship with the individual involved. I was momentarily stunned that I had received information that I would ordinarily consider confidential about a near-stranger.

This episode left me wondering whether we are losing our capacity for confidentiality, and whether technology itself is causing us to forsake any real sense of intimacy or reverence. If the communication of truth has as its goal acceptance and response, I cannot imagine how the artless, almost anonymous, circulation of otherwise privileged information about others can possibly enhance either genuine relationship or trust among us. Personal information

communicated from one individual to another in the context of a trusting, gradually opening friendship is so very different from a glaring "public announcement" of facts about another individual's personal situation.

There is, in fact, no comparison between the two.

Sometimes I think we live in a country where the criterion of "truth" is whether or not it has been picked up in the media somewhere. I would encourage us to reflect about whether the real measure of personal truth is, instead, the quality of the relationship that surrounds the telling.

It seems to me that we worship a God who had the greatest respect for the word that conveys our truths. Our Savior is, after all, the Incarnate Word. It was the Word that became flesh.

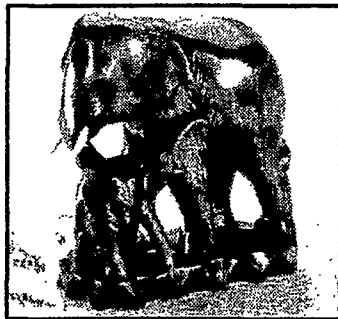
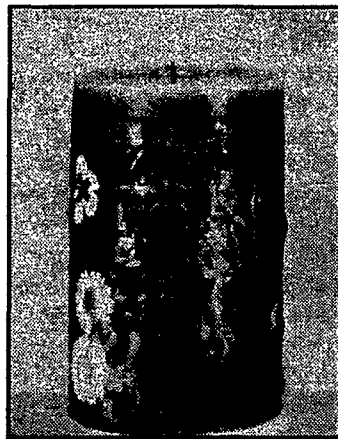
The Scriptures are replete with the sense that complete disclosure is sometimes not real communication: "There is still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you." (Jn 16:12) "Do not give dogs what is holy; do not throw your pearls to swine; they will only trample on them and turn and tear you into pieces." (Mt 7:6).

Respect for the intimate realm of one another's lives may be threatened by the ease of technological communication available to us. We will need to be vigilant about our need to develop skillful use of this wonderful tool so that true relationships will be enhanced and not endangered as we move forward.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.

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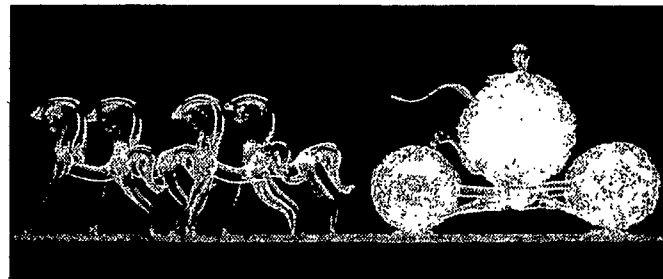
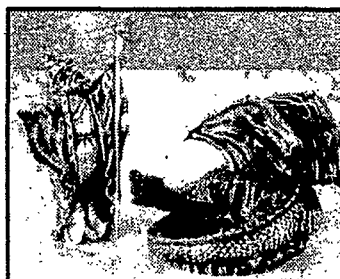
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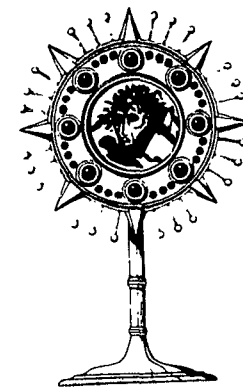
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