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# Op Ed -- Putting Email In Its Place

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## Op Ed — Opinions and Editorials

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We all know email is unsurpassed as a communication tool for things like sending out an agenda or a document to review prior to a meeting, or for quickly communicating simple things to a large group like "our online catalog is down." It's super for short sending vendors' product overviews to all relevant staff.   Its byproduct — a searchable history of correspondence and contact information — is a marvel. It makes international correspondence — which can otherwise be difficult — very easy;  allows geographically widespread professional committees to efficiently complete work between meetings;  offers us free access to intelligent professional listservs and newsletters;  and sure makes submitting articles for publication easier for the author and publisher.

So why, then, have I come to think of email as a burden as much as it is a gift?

Let me count the whys:

**Number 1.  Email has become — at least in my library system — the default form of communication**.  One *almost* feels one has to have permission to call someone or stop by to talk, or call a meeting.  Email has superpower capacities, but it's not the best form of communication for a large portion of library-related communications.  Would you have your track team's star sprinter run the marathon, and expect her to do just as well?  No. But somehow we have drifted into allowing email to become the baseline mode for communication of all purposes and situations.

**Number 2. There is too much email**. Sure, our spam filters are improving all the time, but the proportion of junk to quality is remarkably high.  I receive dozens of messages per day that are filtered into a spam file, and that's after our Web server took the worst off the top. At least half of the rest of the mail I receive is unwanted or unneeded.  Even with many filters in place to find the important messages and hide the unimportant ones, I am still shifting through hundreds of messages per day to decide which ones to read.

One of our librarians has confided to me that while he was a very early adopter and public enthusiast for email when it was first available through BITNET, now "I just sigh or groan with email these days. I have not found a balance with keeping up with the messages and doing the physical work." Another colleague told me he feels essentially "chained to [his] desk" by email, since everyone expects him to be on top of it.  He can't spend the time

he'd like with out-of-office activities like faculty contract and outreach as easily.

There is a paradox in our lives:  our jobs are inextricably entwined with email. In fact much of my own work in licensing and ordering digital resources is carried out (efficiently I might add) in email. But even while we use email to get our work done, email keeps us from getting some essential parts of our work done.  It is more difficult to sit in quiet and think clearly and deeply, or plan.  It is sometimes more difficult to remember the big picture, or see patterns, since we are working in a transactional mode through email so much of the time. Responding to dozens or even hundreds of messages per day, at the speed required to read even 1/3 of them and reply in some fashion, seems to have retrained my brain over the last decade to think in hyperlinking, manic spurts. I jump from one idea, one problem, one person to another, trying to quickly assess the issue and respond clearly.  It's demanding and in some ways satisfying;  it's never boring.  But this transactional, speed-obsessed, high-volume processing has crowded out other kinds of thinking and this worries me.  Days pass quickly, it's true, and lots of work does get done, but there can be a soulless quality to the sound-bite workflow that is email.

**Number 3.  Email has subtly shifted from being a convenient form of communication** that did not require the recipient to be available at the time it was sent, into a demanding model where as one colleague put it, "many expect email to be almost instantaneous, despite the fact that it is by nature asynchronous…. Many expect email to work like IM [instant messaging], and it obviously does not."  Another librarian calls this "escalating expectations." She says that "We are so accustomed to instant response, and that contributes to the pressure."

**Number 4.  Email is often misunderstood**. As we've all become aware, email lacks nonverbal cues and the real-time back and forth of a conversation.  It is very difficult, if not impossible, to render "tone" in email.  For these reasons, it is remarkably easy for even carefully-crafted email to be misconstrued. The librarian who was an eager BITNETter now says, "A lot of times, I answer email with an office visit or phone call, because I can

clear up misunderstandings much faster…. I think that perhaps a short meeting works better than a message that has more than two replies."

**Number 5.  Email is dreadful for problem-solving or decision-making.** In my own experience, I've seen multiple rounds of discussion spin out of control as few of us gamely tried, without any of the normal exchange of group discussion, to resolve a complex technical and policy-based problem.  After flailing about for too many workdays, we finally ended up meeting and — in about 20 minutes — reached a common understanding about our current situation and next steps.  Email seems to work particularly poorly among multifunctional groups of recipients who work in different arenas, like systems, acquisitions, and reference. These individuals have fewer shared assumptions and, especially in our rapidly-changing environment, may have evolved slightly different terminology to talk about the same things.

It strikes me that since human evolution favored those who worked and communicated cooperatively in small groups, it makes sense that passing digital notes may not be the best way for our species to resolve problems.

**Number 6.  Length only adds to the probability of misunderstanding.**  If email is not extremely short, it will be misread or partially read.  This seems to be largely because of the demands created by the volume of email, and possibly also because of some limitation inherent in reading on screen.  Whatever the causes, any email of even moderate length and complexity will be misunderstood, at least by some readers.  Since everyone is using email to communicate absolutely everything, as one colleague of mine (who by the way is a big email fan, and finds email, especially its archiving capabilities, indispensable in his work) has said (with what I think is a very diplomatic use of the passive voice):  "When senders are prolific with email, and their messages often contain huge amounts of information… filters get used. … [M]y tendency to read the complete messages from [prolific email senders] is diminished. … I'm sure I miss valuable information because of this." (I'm afraid to ask if I'm one of the offenders he has discreetly "filtered," and vow to be short and to the point in email from now on.)
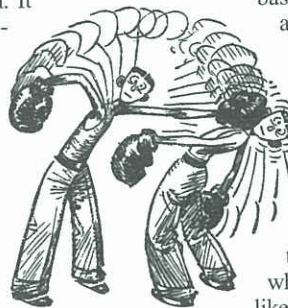
## Beyond Email Paralysis

When email came on the scene, I was ecstatic. I figured I could use my favorite communication mode — the linear written narrative — and all my communications would be perfect. No more phone anxiety! No more drawing a blank over a key point, while trying to find just the right words! Well folks, those phone calls and meetings are looking fabulously productive — positively seductive — at this point. I yearn for more of the productivity of exchanging ideas in person, the surge of energy that comes from talking with someone else, the connection and camaraderie that comes from asking about someone's day before taking on the business at hand, together. In short, as unlikely as it might seem, email (along with a few other forces, like parenthood) has made me into an extrovert. I'd rather talk it through than type it out.

So here are a few recommendations which I think might help maximize the best of email and diminish the worst. I'm reminding myself as much as offering these thoughts for you readers:

- Please take time before using email to ask if there is a better means to communicate the issue at hand.

- Please don't use email to ask me about an extremely urgent problem that you want addressed immediately. Call me or come see me.

- Please don't email me about a problem any more complex than an address change. Call me or set up a meeting. Sure, use email to send a written summary we can refer to at the meeting if the issue requires that approach. But don't use email for the actual exchange about that text.

- Please don't use email to try to reach a group decision.

- If you do send email, keep it short. (I need to remember this rule.) If you must present a longer text, use layout, whitespace, and typography to highlight the key points and make the message readable, or send the longer text as an attachment with a clean, fully word-processed document.

- Please don't use email to ask me for a special personal favor, since I might miss the message and would feel terrible about the consequences of that. Come see me or call me.

- Please don't email invoices unless they require rush payment; certainly don't email them if you are also sending them by mail or fax.

- Please don't email renewal requests unless there are significant changes to relay. Send a simple renewal form by fax or in the regular mail.

- Please don't use email to ask me why I haven't responded to an earlier email. Call me.

- Please include a phone number in your email signature file.

- Please don't assume I've read your email.

If you have thoughts about the use of email in libraries, by all means, call me! 🌳

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*Column Editor's Note: I want to extend a special thanks to my **MIT Libraries** colleagues, most of whom really did not want to share disadvantages of email without also singing its praises, but who responded quickly and with typical insight and conciseness, over email, when I asked for their ideas: **Nina Davis-Millis, Jonah Jenkins, Michael Noga, Peter Munstedt,** and **Arnie Sheinfeld.** — EFD*

# ATG Interviews Focus on the Scopus Design Process

by **Judy Luther, MLS, MBA** (Informed Strategies; Phone: 610-645-7546) <judy.luther@informedstrategies.com> *www.informedstrategies.com*

With the creation of **Scopus**, **Elsevier** has employed a user-centered approach to product development that engages the customer throughout the design process instead of approaching libraries to beta test a developed product. In their White Paper **Amy Knapp**, Assistant University Librarian at the **University of Pittsburgh**, and **Spencer de Groot**, User Interface Architect at **Elsevier**, describe how librarians, researchers, and designers are involved in an iterative process from conception, through development and then testing.

To understand how this process works and what was learned about user needs and their preferences, *ATG* interviewed **Harriet Bell**, Senior Marketing Manager at **Elsevier**, and two of the Development Partners for **Scopus**: **Warren Holder**, Electronic Resources Librarian at the **University of Toronto**, and **Amy Knapp**, Assistant University Librarian at the **University of Pittsburgh**. There were 21 institutions that collaborated with **Elsevier** on **Scopus** and more than 300 researchers were involved in the development of this large bibliographic search and navigation service.

### The Product

*ATG: How and when did Scopus get started? Where did the name "Scopus" come from?*

**HB: Elsevier** has been developing bibliographic databases for 30 years. With the growth of the Internet and increasing amounts of scientific information available online, we were aware of the need for reliable navigation tools across the mass of potentially unstructured and disparate data. Web-savvy scientists are no longer prepared to learn specialist command language or search syntaxes — they want a tool that's as easy to use as any Web search engine. This was the background, but we didn't know exactly what the right type of service would be. We decided to partner with a group of 20 institutions to develop a vision for an all-science resource. We explored concepts through onsite focus groups, colloquia and intensive market research, looking at the main challenges and frustrations faced by both librarians and users.

Five main requirements emerged. We learned that navigation is the next big thing and that users want to find what they are looking for as well as experience the serendipity of finding relevant information that they hadn't been looking for. Librarians wanted the resource to be:

1. A single entry point to the world's scientific information that was not publisher specific
2. Simple and easy to use
3. A database of peer reviewed publications that are both fee based, combined with a search across freely available scientific information on the Web
4. Integrated with other library resources
5. One click away from full text.

**WH:** The **University of Toronto** has been a development partner with **Elsevier** since the inception of this project two years ago to develop an "uber" search engine on as much content as possible. Over the course of 2 years, **Elsevier** listened to what was said, sent us draft designs and was focused on "getting it right".

**AK:** Our work with **Scopus** began with a discussion focused on the user's need for information. It didn't begin with a discussion of product features.

**HB:** The origin of the name **Scopus** actually came from one of the very first brainstorming sessions in May 2002. At the end of the day we went on a nature walk and the forester pointed out a bird, the Phylloscopus Collybita, and noted that it has a better navigation system than a Boeing 747. The bird became the inspiration for the team to build an improved navigational tool and **Scopus** was used for both the project and the product name.

*ATG: What is Scopus? Is Scopus designed to work with all disciplines or just the sciences?*

**HB: Scopus** is a navigation tool that covers 14,000 peer reviewed titles from 4,000 scientific, technical, medical and social science publishers. Over half the titles are from Europe, Middle East & Africa, and there's a big chunk from Asia, as well as publications from the developing world. We aim for wide geographic coverage. Non English language peer reviewed titles are included as long as there are English language abstracts. **Scopus** covers electronic-only publications and over 400 are Open Access titles. **Scopus** is driven by user demand. We are actively assessing the need for coverage of other disciplines, and of other types of content.