

1995

## EMOTICONS: Breaking down e-mail facilitated communication

Patrick McInturff

*University of California, Davis*

Pat McInturff

*California State University, San Bernardino*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/jiim>

 Part of the [Management Information Systems Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McInturff, Patrick and McInturff, Pat (1995) "EMOTICONS: Breaking down e-mail facilitated communication," *Journal of International Information Management*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/jiim/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of International Information Management by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@csusb.edu](mailto:scholarworks@csusb.edu).

# EMOTICONS: Breaking down e-mail facilitated communication

**Patrick McInturff**  
University of California, Davis

**Pat McInturff**  
California State University, San Bernardino

## ABSTRACT

*The use of E-Mail expedites the rapid transfer of facts, data and reports, making the Information Super Highway an efficient communicative process. However, E-Mail is not historically well suited for personal, quality, one-on-one communication. The purpose of this article is to discuss devices, techniques and strategies to enhance the personal nature of E-Mail transfers.*

## INTRODUCTION

Fast. Efficient. Powerful. Effective. The Information Superhighway (ISH) is ready and open for business. With a PC or Mac and a modem one can log on to a series of interlinked servers and computers in the United States whose actual number can only be roughly estimated. And if that is not enough, a slip connection can be hooked up to your computer and the Worldwide Web, a network utilized by millions upon millions of people in nearly every country in the world, can be explored. There is no place in the world that a person can go in less time than it takes to reach that place using the Internet and the Worldwide Web. Anyone can access the ISH using a modem. Generally, with the help of a computer, modem, and a cheap communications software package, users of the Internet call up a local service via telephone. From there, users may access any number of services, such as e-mail, news groups, bulletin boards, library records, software archives, etc. It is easy to download (copy) information, text, programs, sound bites, video clips, and the like, from such servers to one's own computer for private use. If the information sought is not located at the server, it is a simple matter to Telenet (call and log on) to another server (possibly thousands of miles away) in search of the desired information. Under such circumstances that the information sought cannot be found directly on the Internet, it is common practice to leave a message on a newsgroup or bulletin-board requesting anyone with such information to reply. And people do reply. Depending on the information sought and the duration of time the request is left on a bulletin-board, a person might receive as many as a hundred responses to a single request, all within the space of a few days. That kind of current

information cannot be procured by *any* amount of skilled library research. Fast and efficient. But does the Information Superhighway make the transfer of information *too* fast . . . *too* efficient? The dynamics of information transfer over the Internet, with its speed and far reaching potential, may actually be serving to affect a breakdown in personal communication.

With gigabytes of data being sent every which way over the phone lines every minute, one must ask what information is being sent and to what destination. The bulk of much of what is being sent is most probably comprised of medium to large sized programs being downloaded from servers. However, due to their large sizes (let's say more than one megabyte) and the limited demand for them, the actual number of such file transfers is relatively small. While the number of megabytes resultant from electronic mail and direct modem links is presumably less than the volume of large program transfers, the number of individual e-mail messages and direct modem links between remote computers on the Internet, at a given time, must necessarily be enormous (well into the millions of messages being sent at one given time) and significantly larger in number than any other form of telecommunication information transfer. It is therefore logical to explore the dynamics of information transfer and communication on the Internet by looking at trends in e-mail.

The majority of individuals who use e-mail on the Internet can be classified under one of the following groups: government, academia, university students, business, recreational users. (While not all Internet users fall under these categories, the majority of them do and so only these groups will be considered.) Furthermore, since all users of e-mail must be sending their correspondence to another person who uses e-mail, there is a significant overlap of the groups. The majority of e-mail messages sent by government personnel for instance ends up going to other government employees, but a significant portion likely finds its way to the in boxes of people in academia (professors, researchers, experts in specific fields) as well as people in business (attorneys, accountants, government contractors). Likewise, e-mail sent by students is mainly received by other students, though a significant portion also finds its way to individuals in academia. It is not at all uncommon to observe "e-mail dialogues" between students and faculty at large research universities and small private universities, alike. Recreational users, due to the diverse nature of their group, most probably find their e-mail correspondences directed to any and all of the other four major groups. The number of recreational users, however, is significantly less compared to the other groups.

At first glance, e-mail would seem to be the ultimate choice of communication in corporate America. Due to its nature, it does not tie up long distance phone lines. After a message is composed by a user at a given location, it is sent to the server to which the user is connected. After the message reaches the server, it is stored there for a little while until a few other messages going to roughly the same location from other users accumulate on the server. The server then proceeds to send the group of e-mail messages going to the same place to a transmission location. At that location, the messages are sent via satellite to a receiver near the server of the individual to which the messages are addressed. From the receiver, the messages again travel short distances over phone lines until they reach the appropriate servers. The messages are then stored on their respective servers until the individual to which the message is addressed logs on

to his server. That individual is given a message upon logging on indicating that there is new mail to be read. Because the satellites utilized in the transmission of e-mail are already largely in place and the cost of their maintenance is relatively low compared to the cost of transmitting all e-mail exclusively by telephone lines, e-mail is less expensive even than talking on the phone long distance. Text can be transferred over infinitely large distances in very short periods of time. Upon the arrival of e-mail messages at their desired locations, they can be copied off of the server to the PC in the office of the user. From there, the message can be converted into simple word processing documents and printed. Or, the messages can be edited and transmitted back to the original sender of the message. Whole books can be sent via e-mail transfers over the Internet for editing. The day of the hard-copy manuscript is nearly behind us. The fax machine is not far from complete obsolescence since large faxes require many sheets of paper and a considerable amount of time to print. The e-mail message requires no paper and no special machine with only one specific use. Nearly all professors and students have computers and nearly all computers sold in the 1990s come with modems. Given that most people in academia have computers with modems or at least have easy access to them, the only thing that would be necessary for individuals in academia to use the Internet would be the desire to do so. Universities are doing a great deal to push the use of the Internet and e-mail among students and faculty. At the majority of universities in the United States, students and staff alike can get e-mail accounts and addresses for free (free with the price of tuition for students, that is). Computer labs are common fixtures at universities now where anyone with an e-mail account can use a terminal to get onto the Internet. There is an increasing trend for professors to accept papers, reports, essays, and homework transmitted by e-mail.

The areas in which e-mail out-performs other conventional forms of communication are many. It takes infinitely less time to send an e-mail message than a letter. There is a cost associated with sending mail via traditional postal routes. The greater the mass of the correspondence sent through the mail, the greater the postage. Faxing documents, while taking much less time than using the postal service, takes longer than sending e-mail. Other costs associated with fax use are possible long distance phone call charges and the possible poor printing quality of some fax machines. Additionally, the cost of the paper used can add up in the long run. And, as with sending things by conventional mail, the hard copy cannot simply be converted into a text file on the computer. It must be retyped if it is to be manipulated by a word processor. While a phone call is still probably the most effective way to transfer a great deal of information at one time, the information is not written in hard copy and is therefore transient unless it is recorded on paper or remembered by the recipient of the call. With e-mail, the message transferred can be either printed to hard copy, if so desired, or simply read from the screen of the terminal of the user to whom the message was sent. There is no "postage" cost associated with large or small messages. The cost of e-mail for recreational users is usually a monthly fee paid to a large private server, like America Online or Compuserve, regardless of the volume or number of messages the subscriber receives or sends. For students and people in academia at universities who support the Internet (one would be hard pressed to find one that did not) the cost of e-mail and Internet use are absorbed by the university since most universities encourage "stepping into the 21st century" with the use of the Internet. But can e-mail really *replace* the other conventional modes of information transfer and communication?

## SAYING WHAT GOES UNSAID

It is important to analyze the manner in which people communicate in our world without the use of e-mail. By doing so, a qualitative comparison of just how effective e-mail may be in actually communicating with respect to conventional methods of communication can be made. When two people speak to one another in a room, the words spoken are really only a very small part of what is communicated. Facial expressions and body language play a large part in *saying* what goes unsaid. Furthermore, interpretation of facial expressions and body language by parties communicating face to face greatly influence the direction of conversations. For example, distress can be easily visible in a person and is communicated by both the expression the person wears and the posture of that person. Our culture is such that communication that causes distress in a listener is considered vaguely rude. By the same token, during face to face conversation, interest in a specific subject can be detected by a brightening of the eyes or an inclining of the neck. The natural response of the person who is speaking and notices that a particular interest is taken by a listener in a specific subject or idea being communicated is to steer the conversation toward the subject of interest. Gestures also help to communicate what goes unsaid. A shrug indicates indifference or non-comprehension. An outstretched palm might suggest acceptance and friendship. Gestures, body-language, and facial expressions all combine to provide a second level of communication in face to face encounters and conversation. These visual devices of communication describe attitude, approachability, demeanor, and personality and are crucial components of the workings of traditional communication.

Aside from the visual aspect of communicating what goes unsaid in conversation, there is also a significant auditory second level of communication that occurs in face to face conversation as well as conversations held over the telephone. The question of understanding an idea or thought that is communicated verbally shifts from comprehending *what* is said to the *manner* in which the idea or thought is verbalized and what auditory effects are used to aid in the delivery of that idea or thought. Intonation, volume, and inflection all play huge roles in conveying information verbally above and beyond the precise nature of what is said during verbal exchanges. Little changes in the pitch of a person's voice can indicate excitement, concern, anger, etc. Likewise, the way in which subjects are broached can indicate the gravity of the subject being discussed. Circumlocution signals listeners that the subject material discussed may be offensive or distressing. Dramatic pauses showcase and serve to reinforce important ideas and thought developed in conversation. There are numerous ways in which verbal interaction communicates more than what is said.

Even in the written form letters, literature, reports, and memos have devices for secondary levels of communication. Modern writing conventions include the use of bold face type to indicate very important information. For example "The meeting begins at **8:00 a.m.** Attendance is **mandatory**." Text can be set off by either italicization or underlining. The standard method of reference to a book is to underline the title and capitalize the initial letters of title words. References to articles are invariably italicized. Furthermore, the use of italics can be seen in many instances to point out irony, reinforce ideas, and clarify thoughts. Consider the sentence, "There is often a significant difference between what a person *believes* and what a person actually

says." Here, italicization of the words "believes" and "says" reflect how the author of the sentence would have verbally said the sentences. Either by verbal inflection or through writing conventions, the author of the sentences would wish to point out that there is a substantial comparison between a person's thoughts and how that person communicates them. Regardless of the specific instance where traditional conventions are used in writing, they have become a necessary tool in communicating when visual and verbal interactions are not possible.

All of the secondary levels of communication serve one specific purpose. Whether a word is italicized, a person's voice catches in their throat, or a shrug follows an imperative statement, the secondary level of communication in written, verbal, or visual interaction (or any combination thereof) aids in the insertion of a human aspect into a world of sense data, facts, and figures. The art of communication is inextricably linked to both the transfer of raw data as well as the transmission of thoughts and feelings about that data. Without the human aspect, largely provided by the secondary levels of communication found in the traditional modes of information transfer, communication as a whole suffers and reverts into a very cold and uninviting state. The quest for knowledge and understanding is singularly dependent upon communication; when the form of communication lacks the human aspect and becomes off-putting, the quest becomes a meaningless chore and detracts from all academic pursuits.

### **E-MAIL: WHAT IS SAID IS WHAT IS SAID**

There are virtually no opportunities to integrate secondary levels of communication into e-mail messages. Part of the reason why this is so stems from the software used to compose and send e-mail messages. The most common programs used by universities to allow students and faculty to send and receive e-mail are PINE and ELM, PINE being the more common of the two. When an Internet user wishes to send an e-mail message or to check if there are any messages that have been received, the user simply calls up the server with a modem and accesses one of the e-mail programs. With PINE, the program actually runs on the server. There is no specific e-mail software on the PC that is used. The program is menu driven and there are such options as "Access Inbox" and "Compose Message." If "Compose Message" is selected, a very limited word processing program is accessed and the user can type out the desired message to be sent. At this point, the obstacles that all but eliminate the secondary levels of communication in e-mail messages come into play.

Due to the minimalist nature of the PINE program's embedded word processing utility, the standard written communication conventions are absent. When composing a message in PINE, there is no way to underline or italicize. There is no option to make text bold. The obvious result is that there is no dressing for what is written. There are only the words stretching out across the screen of the PC. This makes it very difficult to write in the traditional sense. Important points cannot be set off with underlining. Books and articles whose titles appear in the body of the text cannot be properly acknowledged. Punctuation and capitalization become the only means of applying a secondary level of communication to e-mail messages. In order to overcome this disadvantage, the author of an e-mail message has two options. Rework the message to include

the secondary levels of meaning written in the primary form (that is, completely spelling out what is meant) or exclude the secondary levels of meaning entirely and just concentrate on the facts, figures, and sense data. Either course of action has major consequences for the dynamics of communication via e-mail. If the author elects to try to compensate for the lack of available writing conventions, then the message necessarily becomes much longer. While printing one or two words in bold face in an everyday memo or letter may be very effective in communicating or reinforcing a certain idea, to communicate the exact same idea in an e-mail message might require two or three more supporting and clarifying sentences. Alternately, if the author decides that it is not worth the time to write a longer message that more completely develops his thoughts or ideas, then the author sacrifices the depth and degree to which anything might have been communicated in the first place. Thus, writing e-mail messages can have a significant negative impact upon communication.

Newer users of the Internet and e-mail tend to write longer messages. The newer user will be more likely to try to clearly explain his thoughts, even though it means writing longer messages and leaving little left to interpretation on the part of the recipient of the message. However, the length of e-mail messages, as the user writing them becomes more experienced with the Internet, tends to decrease. This may be because the author perceives it to be a waste of time to meticulously rework sentences and ideas, trying to overcome the limitations of e-mail, or it may be because experienced users will have developed long term e-mail dialogues with a relatively fixed number of other Internet users. It is a fact that people who are in constant contact (whether it be by e-mail, by telephone, or by letter) with one another tend to communicate less per interaction than people who are not in constant contact. It is not at all uncommon for e-mail cliques to develop among groups of people, especially students and faculty. This is perhaps most evidenced by the "list" phenomenon. Lists are very common among people who have been on the Internet for a while. The way a list works is simple. Chris Chem Student, who is bored waiting for a slow reaction to take place in his lab, decides to make a funny e-mail message. He comes up with the topic, "100 ways to drive your roommate crazy (or some such thing)." Still, with nothing better to do than wait for his reaction, he writes down as many humorous things as he can think of that relate to that topic. When he is finished, he looks it over and decides that his friends Pam Professor and Bill Biology Student would appreciate the humor so he composes an e-mail message containing the list. Chris generally shares interesting and funny e-mail messages with these friends. His friends each decide that they really like the list, so they each send it to another e-mail clique. Before long, almost everyone in the country has seen the list, but the originator of the list may know only two of the 10 million people who have had a chuckle over his creation.

### **LISTS AND EMOTICONS: ADDING A HUMAN ASPECT**

The fact that almost all lists are humorous indicates two things. The first being that e-mail might not be as efficient as it is believed to be. It must be asked how many of the messages being transferred in a single moment are actually original messages and how many are simply passed on for entertainment value. Knowing that some of those lists that end up in everyone's inboxes have a mile of forwarding attached to them, suggests that a significantly smaller proportion of

the total number of e-mail messages sent in a day are actually original. The other interpretation that arises from the observation that the multitudinous lists that abound are humorous is that people who use the Internet are *compelled* to implant a little of the human aspect into a form of communication that is streamlined for efficiency and speed. It is a nice feeling to open up your inbox in the morning before work or class, and amid the numerous memos informing that there are three meetings you need to go to this afternoon, there is a funny little list of David Letterman's Top Ten Reasons Why Jessica Lange Won an Oscar.

There is further evidence that the presence of e-mail lists stems from a societal (in the Information Class at least) need to implant a human aspect in e-mail. This evidence comes in the form of Emoticons. No one is really sure where emoticons developed or when, but they have been popping up in e-mail correspondence for a few years. The emoticon is a combination of letters, numbers, and/or punctuation marks that form simple pictures. For example:

- |         |         |         |         |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| (1) :-) | (2) :-( | (3):-I  | (4) :-< |
| (5) ;-) | (6) :-0 | (7) 8-) |         |

There are infinitely more emoticons whose number is only limited by the imagination of the person writing an e-mail message. The basic smile emoticon (1) is used to evoke a cute or joking second level of communication. Alternately, the sad face emoticon (2) indicates that the user is unhappy about the preceding statement or is dejected. The indifference emoticon (3) suggests just that, indifference or apathy. The angry emoticon (4) is invoked to show a negative reaction to a statement. The winking emoticon (5) is used when the user wishes to follow a sarcastic statement that might be misinterpreted as mean or cruel with a reference that it was made in jest. Emoticons can imply surprise (6), or they can be tailored to more accurately represent the user (i.e., the user who invokes the seventh emoticon might wear glasses).

Emoticons are necessarily crude. While their numbers are almost limitless, they are composed of a very finite number of characters. Prevalent in e-mail messages, they are generally used to follow up a statement or sentence. For example, the message, "Bob, after the meeting at 3:00, Dr. Woodrow would like to speak with you in his office," is very plain and is rather impersonal. However, if an emoticon is used, "Bob, after the meeting at 3:00, Dr. Woodrow would like to speak with you in his office, :-(" then it is clear that the meeting may not be pleasant and it adds a tone of both sympathy and understanding from the sender of the message. More than anything, it adds a sense of personal interaction. While this does not completely convey a second level of communication, it provides something more than just the facts and figures, albeit sometimes ambiguously. It is not just coincidence that emoticons are simple caricatures of actual human faces. The face is the most prominent aspect of a person's being that conveys identity. This speaks to the fact that e-mail users, whether consciously or unconsciously, have recognized the impersonality and lack of humanity in their medium and have tried desperately to overcome such restrictions.



## **CONCLUSION**

E-mail aids in the rapid transfer of data, facts, reports and raw information. This follows the theme of the Information Superhighway--to make more information available to more people in less time. However, e-mail is not well suited for quality one-on-one communication, evidenced by the utilization of near hieroglyphic symbols in current e-mail messages. E-mail lacks the human aspect that is crucial to effective human interactions. Furthermore, if the user does not revert to the use of hieroglyphics to convey what he wishes to communicate, he is necessarily compromising his purpose in using e-mail as well as the objectives of the Internet. To overcome the limitations of e-mail, the user must either communicate less in a given amount of time, or communicate more in a much larger amount of time. Both situations fly in the face of the aims of the Information Superhighway. E-mail and other technologies that encourage extreme streamlining of thought lead to a breakdown in communication and discourage human interaction.