

Friendly Web Pages, Letterheads Bridging Four Media Cultures

By Eugene Garfield

The Scientist 11[18]:9, September 15, 1997

In 1959, C.P. Snow presented a lecture on *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, published as a landmark book (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1959). This classic expresses the tension between the cultures of the sciences and the humanities.

There are clashing cultures in communication technology, as well. Since the advent of the Internet, the postal system has been aptly described as "snail mail." This traditional postal culture is rapidly dying. It is increasingly used merely for the delivery of periodicals, junk mail, and catalogs rather than for personal communication.

The postal system can be traced at least as far back as Marco Polo in the 13th century. However, it wasn't until 1837 that the official European postal system began. In America, Benjamin Franklin served as our first postmaster at the end of the 18th century. From then until World War II, letters could be delivered overnight between Philadelphia and most East Coast cities.

I regularly receive "snail mail" from colleagues here and abroad who have not yet fully adapted to the culture of the long-distance telephone call, even though its cost has been significantly reduced. Nevertheless, the telephone is still a dominant medium for person-to-person communication.

About two decades ago, the era of practical facsimile began, although photo-facsimile had been in use by newspapers much earlier. In less than 10 years, fax machines became almost universal and continue to be used heavily today for transmitting manuscripts rapidly. Graphical material is easily accommodated. However, the fax will fade away as electronic transmission of texts by E-mail becomes the norm. Telegraph and telex are now rarely used by scientists. In fact, they can be classified as an extinct culture. The increased use of Federal Express, United Parcel Service, and other competitive mail systems demonstrates that neither fax nor the Internet can yet deal with large and complex documents in a cost-effective manner.

Three years ago, I asked readers to include E-mail addresses on letterheads (E. Garfield, *The Scientist*, May 2, 1994, page 13). I have not noticed significant progress. Perhaps the reluctance to change letterheads simply means that "snail mail" is used so rarely as to make the change seem pointless.

Similarly, in the Internet culture, the listing of telephone numbers and street addresses is disdained. Early E-mail aficionados considered telephone/fax or postal identification to be unnecessary. Identifying the sender's complete name and affiliation

seemed to have no relevance. Quite often one can respond to an E-mail inquiry only by first asking who is "calling." These practices are gradually changing as E-mail increasingly replaces surface mail. Academic and industrial Internet directories often provide access to all four media (mail, phone, fax, E-mail, and Web site addresses, known as URLs, or Universal Resource Locators).

For scientific communication, restricting address information is an abomination. In the world of science, privacy is, in my opinion, a privilege that should be confined to one's residence. Anything less prevents legitimate communication. I've never been happy about anonymous scientific communication (E. Garfield, *Current Contents*, #11, pages 5-7, March 15, 1976, reprinted in *Essays of an Information Scientist*, 2:438-40, 1977). We all would like to be protected against junk E-mail, but that will not be solved by preventing legitimate E-mail contacts.

Some E-mail enthusiasts assume that everything can and should be explained in writing. But a five-page E-mail message may be insufficient where a one-minute phone call would suffice. I am not suggesting that any of these cultures is superior to the other.

Each has its place today until technology obliterates the distinction further. That is what will eventually happen with fax, but until then we must keep all options open.

What I've said about putting E-mail addresses on letterheads applies equally to scholarly and scientific journals. E-mail addresses

increasingly appear in published articles and, thank goodness, postal addresses are usually included. However, it is amazing that decades after the introduction of zip codes, these are not routinely included, while fax or phone numbers in journals remain a rarity.

Journal editors as gatekeepers should set a better example. While some include postal addresses, they usually omit E-mail addresses. It is tiresome to find a reference to an interesting editorial that omits any address at all. It is provincial, in the era of large-scale, rapid dissemination of information, to assume that every reader is holding the journal in his or her hand when, in fact, often the reader has only a photocopy of an article provided by the library. Consequently, the editor's address is not accessible unless the journal is retrieved or an Internet address search is launched, and that can be an even more frustrating experience.

In the next several years, all leading journals and most small journals will be accessible online. It should require just a click of a mouse to contact an author or editor by E-mail. This is important if feedback, particularly to editorials, is to be facilitated. It is unfortunate that one encounters many home pages where access to an editor is made extremely difficult. As a matter of policy, *The Scientist* provides E-mail addresses and URL hot links whenever they appear in our stories. If you haven't seen this in action recently, simply visit our home page at <http://www.the-scientist.com>

Eugene Garfield can be reached online at egarfield@the-scientist.com.