

### YOU'VE GOT MAIL!

Not so long ago avalanches of letters crisscrossed nations. They were the essential conduit for most communications, their purpose being vividly captured in W H Auden's poem, Night mail:

...  
*Letters of thanks, letters from banks,  
Letters of joy from the girl and the boy,  
Receipted bills and invitations,  
To inspect new stock or visit relations,  
And applications for situations,  
And timid lovers' declarations,  
And gossip, gossip from all the nations*  
...

Not any more. Now streams of electronic mail crisscross nations.

Sadly, one unforeseen consequence of the letter's demise is the loss of the time-honoured conventions and etiquette of letter writing. Emails increasingly commence with the impersonal and generic "Hi", and, at times, the identity of the sender is left to the imagination.

More significantly, email communications have changed our behaviour through their perceived urgency and sheer volume. Some people receive more than 100 a day, as "spam" filters fail to live up to their promise. In the vain hope of controlling the "inbox", some answer their emails immediately. For others, the day's first task is to deal with the inevitable new batch of emails. The seeming importance of each email demands immediate attention. How many of us have responded to the heady rush and clicked the send button, only to later regret the too-hasty reply?

Significantly, matters of confidentiality or sensitivity, once relatively safe in letters, should be avoided, as emails can be propagated widely at the click of a button.

But the most pernicious effect of emails is to reduce the already scant human contact in modern communication.

The electronic alert "You've got mail" can be both distancing and dehumanising.



Martin B Van Der Weyden

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