Things come late to Texas. New trends—bell bottoms, body piercing, transcendental meditation, gourmet coffee—start on the east and west coasts and gradually work their way inwards. Like great weather systems, they lose strength as they traverse the heartland. By proper geographic positioning, Americans can and do shield themselves from the full force of these trends.

I live at the end of the road, in Galveston, a barrier island a mile off the Texas coast. Things come very, very late to Galveston, which is why most of us live here.

Nevertheless, e-mail has arrived, seemingly in its full force. It started out benignly enough. One day there was a computer on my desk. Some time later, my secretary spent several hours teaching me the four buttons I would need to push to receive or send e-mail. I liked it. To e-mail a short note to a clinical colleague about a consultation was an improvement over playing telephone tag.

But then people began to discover the group lists. With one push of the key, they could e-mail everyone in their department, even everyone in a school. Because I am on the faculty of several departments and schools, I am on many lists.

The School of Nursing started first. Each day I get 5–15 messages from individuals in the school, informing me of recent occurrences. A faculty member writes to request that we all clean up after ourselves in the conference room. A secretary informs me that another secretary’s father is out of intensive care and is improving nicely. Someone else has changed her name and e-mail address.

I do not know these people, or even their conference room. At least I did not know them until recently. Now they clutter up my inbox and my frontal lobes. And the practice is spreading to other schools, other departments.

Now I am on a list called “researchers” whereby I am assaulted with requests for advice on subjects I cannot pronounce. These lists can progress exponentially. For example, the chair of my department forwards all messages he gets from the “researchers” list to all faculty in his department, ensuring that I receive each bit of trivia twice. And I am on some sort of “administrators” list, such that I get urgent warnings from the assistant director of the animal facility about his impending vacation, with instructions on whom to call if I require the services of an assistant director of the animal facility in his absence.

It is so easy to push that button: “all faculty and staff”. The temptations must be enormous, especially for those who do not otherwise publish. A little bit of electronic immortality. DELETE, DELETE, DELETE. Delete without reading, though my computer throws me accusatory warnings when I do so. Deleting without reading produces some of the same anxiety as does ignoring a ringing telephone.

There has to be a better way. Can the geniuses of cyberspace turn their efforts to developing a censorship chip which, instead of censoring pornography, would identify and eliminate all vapid communications?

A more righteous solution would confer some price on the sender of these group messages. Might we add a button for “return to sender—unread”. Alternatively, perhaps the “send to list” button could be outfitted with a small electric shock, which could be adjusted up or down by the recipients of the message. Or maybe public ridicule will help. Those who inflict their messages on the rest of us should periodically be reminded how boorish it all is. Goodness knows, I try to do my part.

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