A few years back I wrote a Jabs and Jibes piece on the abusers of email – those earnest communicators who electronically transmit to all and sundry the most trivial bits of information. In retrospect, I think I insulted the gods of cyberspace. They have wreaked their revenge.

Last week one of my colleagues forwarded me an email that had been sent to him, seemingly from my computer. It read, “see agenda – attached”. The attachment was a picture of what I believe we now call a commercial sex worker, focusing on her business end. It was a small picture, but she appeared to be holding a dildo, and demonstrating its uses.

My friend was polite enough to suggest that someone had “hijacked my computer”. He also mentioned that perhaps others among my correspondents had received the same message. More specifically, he said that I had been hacked, and everyone I had ever emailed anything to may now have the picture.

That’s when the paranoia set in. What if my boss, or my boss’s boss, or my boss’s boss’s boss, had been a recipient? Was that why he didn’t make eye contact at the last faculty meeting? Was that actually a smirk, rather than a smile, on her face when we passed in the hall? And how come only one person sent me back the dirty email? Were the other 237 or so recipients not surprised? Was this dildo demonstration the sort of thing they expected from me?

And how do I find out who got that email? “Pardon me, Dean, but have you by any chance received...”? A mass apologetic email would cause more trouble than it would prevent.

The picture was not even erotic. Pornography rarely is. I remember the first time I ever saw a dirty movie. It was 1964, in the basement of a fraternity house at my college, a 16mm film of uncertain origin, shown with a rented projector onto a sheet taped to the wall. The director was into close-up shots. Penises and vaginas filled the screen. We all laughed hysterically, celebrating the agility of the cameraperson.

How did he or she get the pictures without getting crushed?

That was before the sexual revolution – or at least before the sexual revolution had reached the middle of Massachusetts. Then came the age of sexuality. Everyone was having sex with everyone else, of either gender. At the medical school where my wife and I taught in the mid-70s, there were sessions for medical students on “swingers”. Couples would come in and explain their hypersexual lifestyle to the students, so that these future doctors would become unburdened of any puritanical prejudices. The anachronistic judgmental approach of their parents was to be replaced with an acceptance of all things as natural – if it feels good, do it.

This message did not fall on deaf ears (or should I say, on flaccid sex organs). Sex abounded. Among any three hospital physicians waiting for an elevator, chances were that all three possible matings had occurred in the prior year.

Sex has always confused me. When I was growing up sex was hidden, high risk, and a little bit dirty, and that didn’t seem right.

Then sex became safe and natural and open and inconsequential and very, very prevalent; and that was an improvement, but not quite right either.

Then came AIDS. Sex became dangerous again.

Now where are we? Sex certainly isn’t hidden – it’s everywhere. But it’s all so raunchy: sex with a snicker on TV, sex in all possible forms on the Internet. The golden age of sex has gone. Sex is dirty again. Flower children have been replaced by childhood pornography. Compared to that, I guess an illustration of dildo use doesn’t raise eyebrows anymore.