E-mail for Democracy? A Comforting ImageA Commentary on Morrisett's Habits of Mind
and a New Technology of Freedom

By [INGA E. TREITLER](#)

Wisdom, and clarity of thought and vision - critical values to any society - are fostered by focused, deliberative processes. Examples include many of the ancient strategy games like chess or the West African game of Wari; debate; and reading and writing. Reading and writing in particular are highly culturally embedded activities. They can be allusive and dense in references beyond the words selected, therefore requiring broad contextual knowledge and experience.

To the extent that the populace at large possesses and values the capability for measured thought and respects discourse, debate, and dialogue, that society will show greater democratic potential (whether or not this potential is realized depends on other factors including constraints on communication that typically emerge from the political realm in repressive societies). Morrisett identifies the written medium as a means to protect and enhance freedom in society. My comments address that theme and do not take in the entirety of his very rich and inspirational article.

If E-mail is a written medium, as Morrisett assumes, our electronic era has within its grasp a tool that could foster the qualities of wisdom and clarity of thought and vision. And if the goal of universal E-mail/Internet access is achieved, the next decade could be seen as analogous to an era in centuries past when diaries and letters were a critical means of sustaining social and family relationships. Morrisett wrote that Thomas Jefferson was "a champion of reason and rationality... lived in a time when the communications system supported the habits of mind associated with reason and rationality." The analogy conjures up an image of individuals sitting at computer terminals writing each other letters, albeit not by candle light, composing ideas, ordering thoughts, rereading words, then pushing SEND; reading, reflecting on implications, drawing on vast stores of literary and experiential knowledge, constructing multiple interpretations, and emerging the richer not just in information, but in experience and in skills of logic. The image is appealing and bears great comfort to democratically minded people. If this is how a significant segment of the population does in fact use electronic mail, then indeed the future is exciting. As Morrisett points out, these are the intellectual conditions under which the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights were deliberated and framed.

Morrisett also noted that "...reading opens the door to symbolic thought, and without that skill the citizen is severely handicapped. The corollary skill of writing also has special cultural value: A means of ordering and communicating thought, the discipline of writing is a powerful antidote to sloppy thinking."

Let me suggest a different analogy. Electronic mail is like a telephone. People "grab" a keyboard for quick transmission of thoughts, often to unburden themselves and go on with other activities without "wasting" time or mental energy. An indication of this pattern is the frequency with which one receives E-mail that is not only replete with typographical errors, but is also commonly missent, contains faulty information and often instantaneous and uncensored emotional responses. On the phone we halt, we stutter, we jumble... Certainly, there are just as often lofty, erudite, and elegant messages transmitted across the fiber optic cable or copper wires, and these would be a Thomas Jefferson style.

Business and office settings lend themselves to the telephone analogy. The advantages are widely recognized in the business community. Information transmittal is nearly instantaneous but communication is asynchronous, that is it does not require that the receiving party be present at the time of information transmittal. In an overly dense information society it is a relief to unburden oneself of an obligation to communicate (take that off the to-do list). The telephone-style E-mail does not lend itself to deliberation in the same way as does letter and essay writing and reading.

When we use E-mail to contact bureaucratic superiors; and friends and relatives who

come at the seasons-greeting-card frequency of interaction (grandparents; cousins; college roommates) the Thomas Jefferson model of communication is apt. We are likely to reread such missives, check facts, check spelling, and ponder over phrasing. In short we want to make the right impression because by the time the message has been read, corrections could be costly.

Multiplicity and creativity of the Internet is part of its richness. It may be that the following quote from Morrisett goes against the very freedom and individual empowerment that is the essence of the Internet:

"the widespread use of E-mail will promote deliberative response over immediate response, and active thought over passive reception."

Understanding that there may be more than one analogy for how people now use and in the future will use E-mail bears significant implications both for policy and for commercial and social opportunity. Universal E-mail makes sense only to the extent that the functions it serves are of interest to the users. I will close with the suggestion that promotion of the Internet as a public policy issue cannot be driven by a utopian vision of a populace empowered by enhanced deliberative capabilities that come from greater access to the written word. Rather, the question of multiple analogies is suggestive of a research area, namely the identification of user styles and user applications to determine if and when users are either intimidated or driven away by linguistic expectations from other users that are not met, whether because of preference or because of educational levels or cultural backgrounds. Policy and product development will emerge that match these styles and uses, but not when driven by ideology.

Inga Treitler is working on a concept to combine anthropological methods with high end telecommunications technology and interactive software to develop visualization techniques into a collaborative decision support system to aid in complex decision making involving multiple stakeholders.

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