Electronic Mail

Jacob Palme

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There is a great need for textbooks which cover social and organisational issues related to electronic mail (e-mail). Questions like what range of activities can e-mail best be used for, how it can be more effectively used, and what the effects of its use might be on an organisation need to be discussed and understood by students, technologists and managers alike. Jacob Palme's *Electronic Mail* is one book which has sought to fill this gap. In pursuit of this task Palme has covered four main topic areas: (1) new communications models; (2) the social impacts of e-mail; (3) the economics of e-mail; and (4) technical characteristics of e-mail.

Palme begins by situating e-mail in relation to traditional media like television and print. Within this discussion is some analysis of the amount of time people spend engaged in using different types of communications media, and the differences between face-to-face communication and broadcasting with the use of e-mail distribution lists, e-mail within groupware packages and computer conferencing. Palme shows that e-mail is part of a growing array of print, electronic and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) media, and is important because of the new functionality it offers like the various forms of group communication it can facilitate. We are thus prompted to think not just of new communication but new models for communication. Furthermore, it is implied that we should incorporate e-mail into communication and information technology strategies.

In discussion of the social impacts of e-mail, the crucial question of determining how and when e-mail is successfully used is examined. Here consideration of the creation of new communication and the extent to which e-mail is a substitute for other forms of communication is outlined. There is a brief description of the change from hierarchical to network organisational forms, and comment is made about the changing roles of supervisors and managers as organisational hierarchies flatten—and the reduced need for command and control models of management. This section also includes mention of e-mail as a decision making tool, and claims that more people can be involved efficiently in decision making and that feelings of "togetherness" can be developed between users leading to improved decision making. The final discussion in this topic area is e-mail and the law. This is an area which has the potential to bring about many problems for individual users, organisations and governments. Legal analysis begins with a few points on ethics and etiquette, including some points about private use of e-mail at work. There is also some attention to human rights (freedom of speech, privacy etc.), freedom of information, copyright, national legal jurisdiction in a global environment and problems associated with enforcement of the law. Palme clearly sees the world-wide progress of the development of the law relating to e-mail as patchy and fraught with limitations in relation to policing.

In looking at the economics of e-mail, cost/efficiency analysis is a central issue. Indeed, much of the debate about the use of information technology in the workplace has revolved around this point. Palme assesses e-mail in terms of productivity effects and compares it to the telephone, fax, face-to-face meetings and so on. He then identifies the situations in which e-mail can deliver productivity gains. His claims are that when more than one person needs to be contacted and given the same information e-mail is better than the telephone; when short notes need to be passed on it is better than the post; and e-mail is better than face-to-face meeting if the group is large or if some of the group need to travel long distances and the duration of the meeting is more than one day. Of

equal interest is the discussion of fees, charges and other costs of using e-mail. Here Palme looks at the costs of setting up the hardware, the software, Internet access provision, and also the difficulties associated with developing proper charging processes. This last issue is important to recognise because internet service providers have had an ongoing struggle with developing appropriate charging strategies. There is also a brief description of the market framework for e-mail which is divided into three segments; public e-mail services, public messaging networks, and internal company e-mail systems. This segmentation is a handy antidote to any tendency to see the e-mail system, or the Internet generally, as a single monolithic entity.

Functionality of e-mail—including group mailing lists, organising the electronic storage of mail in folders and encryption—is discussed in the section dealing with the technical characteristics of e-mail. In addition, descriptions of the rationale of domain name protocols, the architecture of e-mail systems, authentication and authorisation, and digital signatures are explored. Completing this block of chapters is an extensive treatment of the issue of standards. We are reminded that there are a number of competing standards which have been used since the advent of e-mail. An important aspect of this chapter is the reminder that there are many variations of the main standards. These partial standards do not meet the criteria of the full standard but still provide most of the functionality and compatibility of the full standard. It is important that Palme shows that this diversity and flexibility is available because not all users have the same circumstances and needs.

At face value it would seem that *Electronic Mail* is a comprehensive treatment of the subject area. In fact, this is far from the truth. As a textbook exploring e-mail and its effects on people and organisations it is inadequate in its depth of analysis. The perspective from which e-mail is viewed in this book is the perspective of a technologist and the bulk of the discussion is about technical issues at the expense of other important issues. For example, Chapter 3, which covers the rather complex and large question of what is needed to make e-mail successful in an organisation, does so in marginally over one and a half pages; Chapter 4 assesses the business value and changes to organisational structures e-mail offers in less than seven pages. However, the chapter dealing with the establishment of standards for e-mail is nearly 80 pages of what is often peripheral minutiae.

There is a conspicuous absence in *Electronic Mail* of assessments of key issues like the effects of e-mail on organisational culture, information and knowledge management, and models for the implementation of e-mail which managers could adopt. Furthermore, we can learn very little about the importance of key predictors of successful implementation of e-mail such as ease of use, passive literacy skills, the importance of developing a critical mass of users and so on. These are all issues which focus on users and the users' environment rather than on the technology, and are the kinds of issues which are the most pressing and difficult to solve. It is, therefore, imperative that a considerable amount of time and effort should be apportioned to such areas in any textbook claiming to deal with e-mail and its impacts on people and organisations.

In the final analysis what is disappointing about *Electronic Mail* can be paraphrased as techno-centric naivety. For instance, Palme claims that the best predictor of the successful use of e-mail is to be found in an equation juxtaposing the effort of learning and the financial cost with the amount of contacts and information that the user can obtain with the use of e-mail (p. 7). Similarly naive is the view that the best way to take advantage of e-mail is to send high volumes of traffic through it (p. 7). These views of the dynamics of e-mail are not just simplistic, they write out of debate the kinds of issues mentioned above by minimising the importance of human agency in CMC. In short, a technological determinist outlook is privileged by Palme.

Another aspect of naivety is illustrated in Palme's frequent call to the weight of "general agreement in the Internet" to support his views. But is there any such agreement, or is Palme a voice for the white, male technicians who are the self imposed voice of the Internet (see for example p. 180). Is not the Internet a place which is far more culturally diverse than this and are a wider range of views available on it? The weakness of Palme's view is made all too clear in the claim that 'anyone, in any country, who believes in anonymity can set up an anonymous server' (p. 183). Those who are in 'general agreement' with Palme might have this kind of ability but most of the rest of us do not. In fact, it is highly likely that most e-mail users do not even know what an anonymous server is or even that such a thing exists. There is, therefore, a question of analytical balance to be addressed here.

Electronic Mail adds very little to the literature and holds out very little as a textbook for people interested in coming to terms with the spectrum of the organisational impacts of e-mail. The discussion of the technical aspects of e-mail is useful even if in many places it is rather tedious and tangential. However, it is the shallow analysis, lack of emphasis and narrow scope in handling human agency which are the failings of the book. Underlying these shortcomings is Palme's basic assumption that the issues of most importance are technological rather than human. In this respect it is significant that no explicit recognition is made of the importance of the social construction of technology. Indeed, one suspects that Palme is poorly acquainted with that body of theory. Palme's easy technological determinism is never far from the surface because *Electronic Mail* is, in fact, a hard sell for the virtues of e-mail and more generally the panacea of technology.

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