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Drinking From the Firehose — Two Subjects Bugging Me Lately: Cell Phones and the Degradation of Email Service

by **Eleanor I. Cook** (Appalachian State University, Boone, NC) <cookei@appstate.edu>

By way of introduction, these two topics are not necessarily related, but they could be. I'll get to that near the end of my rant.

My first rant, which I have been saving up now for some time, is the typical one about cell phones. This is nothing new to most of us Baby-boomers, and maybe it doesn't even need repeating. But hey, I have a column to vent with here and darn it, I'm going to take advantage of that.

I own a cell phone. Or rather, my husband does and I get to use it when I go out of town. You know, for "emergencies." I also use it at home to call my friends who are out of town, but in-state. These calls count as "free" within our minutes limit. I have no idea what our minutes maximum is, but we usually don't go over it, whatever it is. And my husband yacks on this phone all weekend long when the rates go down.

Cell phone etiquette rules to live by:

- Never talk on the cell phone when driving.
- Never call people when in a restaurant or other public place, without going somewhere private to make the call.
- Don't sit in an airport, train station, etc. and talk business using a loud voice so everyone can hear what you are saying.
- Don't walk around talking on the cell phone.

I rarely leave this phone “on” for incoming calls. I guess I am old-fashioned. I also have not mastered the “one-handed thumb” technique that everyone under eighteen and lots of people over that age use with ease every day. I wouldn’t dream of talking on this cell phone while walking around — I am sure I would trip over something, and besides, who can hear anything in such an instance? I simply do not understand why people can’t perceive that these behaviors are rude! I wish everyone would follow my cell phone etiquette, but it is hard to enforce. Cell phones interrupt all kinds of ceremonies, sacred and secular. Weddings, funerals, court hearings, conference presentations, classrooms, operating rooms, you name it — the cell phone will ring in it! Most libraries and hospitals have banned them — often because they interfere with wireless technology. And courts are starting to fine rude offenders or even throw them in jail.¹

I am truly amazed by the people young and old alike, who casually and comfortably use their cell phones anywhere and everywhere. I will never forget witnessing a distinguished, elderly Italian gentleman attired in a stunning business suit who nonchalantly

pulled his cell phone out of his pocket on a train to Florence (Italy). His device was playing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" to let him know it was calling for him. It seemed so incongruous to me, yet I have the impression that all of Europe has come to depend on cell phones since standard phone service is undependable and way too expensive.

Next to my home computer, I have an old desk set with a dial. When my brother and sister-law came for a visit awhile back, their ten-year-old son saw this antique and wanted a demonstration — seems he had never used a dial telephone! It's true we never use this phone to call out from anymore, but it still works fine when someone calls in. It won't function at all someday soon, from what I hear, but I plan to keep it around. Maybe I can sell it on **eBay** if I wait long enough!

I am completely intimidated by the myriad of calling plans and choices of technology for cell phones. I see all the commercials — and I know you can get cell phones now that take pictures, whistle Dixie, tap-dance and maybe even beam you aboard the Enterprise. You can check your email — well — that is, if your email is working...which is a perfect segue to my next rant...

We all know that email's seamless connectivity has been coming to a screeching halt lately. Blame this on spammers, scammers and hackers, but the overall problem lies with the fact that we have become so dependent on it and the infrastructure is groaning under the weight of the traffic. So many people are using email for so many things.

At work these days, we take the Internet for granted. We simply cannot do our jobs without it. The recent “holes in the system” are causing significant problems with productivity and are causing failures with mission-critical operations.

On my campus, we were brought to our knees right before fall semester with the Blaster worm and other similar malicious interruptions. It's been a bad summer, frankly. I can only say I am glad that I have not forgotten how to use my old VAX email account — it's coming in handy.

We are entering a new age of email. We are seriously threatened by outside attackers who mean us harm. The spam, as we all know, is totally out of control. And email is not the only thing we need to be concerned about. As we become more and more dependent on online versions of journals and books, canceling and/or deferring the purchase of the print, we may find ourselves without resources that we assumed would always be at our fingertips.

My prediction is that we are going to find ourselves dead in the water sometime soon in a BIG way — either through a massive power outage, a serious hacker attack, or some other failure in the infrastructure. Will we be able to work around this?

What will we do? If we still have electrical power—use the fax machine, print a memo, or for goodness sakes—use your cell phone! 🐘

Endnotes

1. "Judge gets attention of cell phone users," *Charlotte Observer*, Sept. 10, 2003, p.16A

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