

Unlikely partners: Prefabricated 'joke' emails and the serious business of relationships

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Abstract

Prefabricated email messages, containing jokes, stories and other generic material, have become such a part of everyday life that their significance as instruments of social inclusion and reconciliation tends to be overlooked. However, research currently being conducted in Western Australia has identified the strategic and at times contradictory ways in which this form of email is being used by women to sustain relationships, and to generate a sense of connection, especially where those connections are strained and close to breaking point. Although some women view these messages as little more than a nuisance, to others they offer a safe and non-confrontational means by which to maintain tenuous links, thus leaving open the possibility of future reconciliation. There is evidence that some women value the detached and impersonal nature of prefabricated messages, and employ them strategically to 'sound out' potential relationships, while others use them as a means of extending their social support network by 'mining' email addresses embedded in forwarded messages. This paper seeks to highlight the important role these messages play in articulating and sustaining women's support networks, by exploring the diverse ways in which women have co-opted this 'frivolous' form of communication into the serious business of relationship work.

Keywords

email, women's use, sustaining social relations



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Introduction

Research over the last decade into the social implications of the Internet has demonstrated its increasing importance in connecting both local and geographically dispersed social networks. Implicated in this process has been the gendered appropriation of email, with research indicating that women have eagerly co-opted email to sustain and enhance familial and social relationships (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich 2001; Holloway & Green 2003; Pew Internet and American Life Project 2000). An ethnographic research project currently being conducted in Western Australia supports this research. More significantly, however, the research reveals the strategic and at times contradictory ways in which email is being used to sustain relationships, and generate a sense of connection, especially where those connections are strained and close to breaking point. In particular, women's attitudes towards prefabricated email messages—messages containing jokes, stories, images and other generic material that are forwarded from person to person(s) through email networks—demonstrate the paradoxical role these forwarded messages might play in managing personal relationships. This paper seeks to highlight the important and somewhat undervalued role these messages play in articulating and sustaining women's support networks.

Constructing a definition of prefabricated email messages

In researching background material for this paper, it has become evident that there is no universally accepted term used to define the sort of prefabricated emails discussed in this paper. While there is considerable literature and advice on the subject of *spam*—unsolicited commercial email messages that are sent out in bulk (Clyde & Lewis 1998; Khoo & Senn 2004, p. 210)—there appears to be much less research into other forms of unsolicited non-commercial emails. In Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich's account of how email is used to manage personal relationships, they describe these prefabricated emails as 'boilerplate messages',



and explain that they include ‘jokes, stories, sayings, greeting cards, pointers to music sites, and other prefabricated messages copied by the sender from one source and then forwarded, often to more than one recipient’ (2001, p. 542). More recent research describes these forms of email as ‘email forwardables’; an inclusive genre that encompasses ‘virus alerts, chain letters and various stories couched as warnings, petitions or requests for help, all with a directive to “Please forward”’ (Kibby 2005, p. 774). For the purposes of this paper, the term ‘prefabricated email message’ is used inclusively to describe both classic forms of ‘email forwardables’, and those emails containing jokes, anecdotes and other generic material that are circulated through electronic mail networks.

Typical of this category of prefabricated emails is the following ‘fairy tale’:

One day, long, long ago, there was this woman who surprisingly,
did not whine, nag, and bitch ...
But this was a long time ago ...
and it was just ONE day.

In this case, where there is no explicit request to forward, the decision to forward is usually based on whether ‘the recipient thinks that it is funny’ (Kibby 2005, p. 775). In contrast, other messages—particularly those that circulate through female communication networks—often have a more inspirational or spiritual quality, and request that the message be returned to the sender, as confirmation of the friendship, as well as forwarded on to multiple recipients.

Attitudes towards prefabricated email messages

Both research and anecdotal evidence suggest that prefabricated email messages are a particularly unpopular element of the Internet for a large number of Internet users.



According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 'unwanted email is the element of internet use that people complain of the most, with 44 percent of internet users reporting it as a problem' (cited in Kibby 2005, pp. 770). Preliminary findings from this current research project support the contention that many people find prefabricated emails annoying and time-wasting. The response to the following question reflects the attitude of many of the woman interviewed to these emails.

Q. What's your attitude to those generic emails, the ones that people forward on?

Oh well, it's just that there's so many of them. I can't stand ... if I see a teddy bear or a cutesy little sign, delete straight away. 'Forward on to ten friends', delete straight away, 'cause I can't stand them. Beautiful photographs, delete straight away, 'cause I'm sick of looking at beautiful photographs. ... And I never pass them on to ten friends. I don't think I've ever done that, so I probably should be dead by now [laughs]. I don't want to bug my friends with it, and I get a bit annoyed when I see people have sent them on to me. I think, please don't, I don't want to get them.
(Katrina)

Not all the women expressed such a negative attitude; several women seemed almost ambivalent towards such emails, perhaps conscious that many other people dislike them intensely. While Felicity enjoys receiving them, she is at pains to point out that she rarely forwards any of them on:

Q. Do you tend to get a lot of generic emails?

I get some of those ... I don't have friends who bombard you with them. They send a few and those few are usually nice to receive, because they are a few, and they're usually quite good ones. I personally don't send



them out. You would never have received one from me. I don't send junk emails. Once or twice I have sent something really nice, once of those feel good ones, to a friend because it's time they've needed a 'feel good' [message], and I've sent this and said, I really like this and I hope you do. But that's like, me to them. It's one, and it's been a couple of times ever. Other than that I don't forward them on. But I love to get them. I'm happy to get them, I'm happy to read them, and I have a big loud laugh. But I don't send them on. (Felicity)

Another interviewee reflects a similar approach to her management of prefabricated emails:

When people send those things that have to be passed on, ... they annoy the heck out of me. A lot of them I'm deleting, because I still think you make your own luck. There are some that are really beautiful, and I'll email those on to other girlfriends ... but I am getting to the stage that I get fed up with them, really ... I haven't got time ... a lot of them just annoy me. (Janette)

As both Felicity and Janette imply, their motivation for forwarding on prefabricated emails seems to be related to their desire to share an especially beautiful or uplifting message with their friends, rather than the pressure exerted in 'please forward' notices. Indeed, Janette's comment suggests she actively resists the subtle threats embedded in chain emails.

Strategic use of prefabricated email messages to sustain relationships

As Felicity's and Janette's comments suggest, although prefabricated emails are undoubtedly a problem for many Internet users, they may also perform a useful social function. Boneva et al. highlight the personal social benefits that can accompany this form of communication, noting that:



'[l]ike conventional greeting cards, these boilerplate messages serve to remind partners of each other's existence and, as such, preserve a relationship as a potential resource for companionship, advice, or social support at some later time'. (2001, pp. 542)

From this perspective, 'the content is not as important as the fact that it is sent. It is sent to confirm a social tie' (Johnsen 2003, pp. 166).

However, there can be a fine line between these emails being perceived as welcome reminders of a relationship, and such emails being viewed as irritating, time-wasting messages that devalue the friendship. This sentiment is reflected in an interviewee's remark in Kibby's study:

Some people seem to rely solely on 'forwards' as the way they communicate. It's as if they think sending a forward once in a while constitutes a real relationship. (cited in Kibby 2005, p. 787)

Indeed it could be argued that there are parallels between the articulation of social networks through the indiscriminate circulation of prefabricated emails to multiple friends and acquaintances, and the process of 'friending' on social network sites such as MySpace, wherein an individual's 'friends' may include acquaintances, music bands and 'cool' strangers (Boyd 2006). Furthermore, 'friends' chain emails, that request the email be returned to the sender as well as forwarded on to other friends, bear a striking similarity to 'friending' in that they articulate social networks in particularly visible ways.

For Kibby's interviewee the maintenance of a relationship relies upon much more than the occasional forwarding of a joke email. Presumably for this person, 'real' relationships are built upon regular and meaningful communion across a range of media, as well as face-to-



face contact where possible. This sentiment was expressed repeatedly in interviews conducted in this current research project, with comments such as the following being representative of many interviewees' attitudes towards managing relationships. For women such as Beth, the perceived low level of emotional connection, or social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie 1976) fostered through email is considered a poor substitute for face-to-face or telephone communication:

Oh, again, nothing compensates for a phone conversation or getting together for a coffee. It's a quick update of what's going on with our lives, and she might say it's been rough with mum, you know? If she said that, I'll ring. If it's something, if it's just a quick update of news that's fine, but if there's some indication she needs a bit of emotional support which you can't do, I really don't think it's [email] adequate. (Beth)

However, there may be occasions when a more detached level of communication is a prerequisite for contact to take place at all, such as where a relationship has become strained. In these situations, email can be a 'safe' medium, providing both physical and psychological distance when the relationship is tense or difficult. One of the ways in which Zoe uses prefabricated email messages to manage relationships strategically relates to her communication with a younger sister. Zoe consciously uses the medium of email to maintain a safe and non-confrontational line of communication with her sister:

[W]ith my sister in particular it's a very difficult relationship, and I think if we didn't have the emails we might lose all contact whatever. And I mean we had a huge fight ... a couple of months ago ... and after that I thought I'm just not going to go anywhere with her anymore. But then down the track there was something that came through on the chain letter things, and I thought, oh, I'll just send it to her, so that would have been a month after we had the fight, and I sent it to her, and um, I got something back



from her, you know, one of those impersonal ones as well, and then the next time we were at a family thing, we didn't actually have much to do with each other, but I think it was a bit more comfortable than it would have been if emails hadn't gone backwards and forwards. So it's a non-confrontational way of still keeping in touch ... We haven't actually exchanged any sort of messages, just been sending on ... [generic messages]. (Zoe)

In this situation the impersonal nature of prefabricated emails, with minimal associated levels of social presence, supports a tenuous connection where all other forms of communication may be untenable for both parties, and at least leaves the door open to a potential future reconciliation. More significantly, without this non-confrontational mechanism there is every chance that the relationship would break down completely.

Similarly, Janette has found prefabricated emails to be a safe way to heal a rift with her cousin, after a break in communication for several years following a family dispute.

she's always sending me these funny little things through. ... And I don't ... she's not someone I would ring regularly ... Yer, she'll send these funny little things through, and then every now and again I'll send one to her, then all of a sudden she'll just write a really great email, and then I'll write one back. You know, a long family one, what the girls are up to. And so we started communicating that way [sending prefabricated emails], without falling all over each other, you know, and so the email was a great icebreaker ... it was a great way to heal a wound, and now they just flow through quite easily ... It was like extending an olive branch. (Janette)

Thus, for both Zoe and Janette, it isn't the content of the messages that is important, but the fact that a line of communication has been extended and, more significantly, that the



communication has been reciprocated by their family members. In forwarding other jokes or anecdotes to Zoe and Janette, their relatives affirmed, albeit in an impersonal way, that they too place value on maintaining these rather shaky relational ties.

Several of the women indicated that prefabricated emails forwarded to them had given them new insights into family members. Diane has a rather difficult relationship with her older sister, eight years her senior. Perhaps partly as a result of the age difference, Diane admits that she's never really been close to her. However, through the kinds of prefabricated messages her sister forwards her, Diane has started to see her sister in a different light. As she describes it, these emails give Diane a clearer insight into her sister's personality, and serve to sustain a difficult, yet significant relationship for both Diane and her sister:

There's been this real divide between myself and my older sister especially, and I guess I didn't really know her at all, but the sorts of things that she finds amusing, or finds meaningful, has really showed me another side of her. And that's been purely through 'forwards'. She's never sat and told me a joke or anything like that, and I don't know that she would. ... And because they're usually forwards of forwards of forwards, as a lot of them are, it's also given me a bit of an insight, cause you know you can look cause she leaves her recipient list, and I think, oh, well I know that was one of her old friends from her teaching days ... So it's given me a little bit of a window into what sorts of things her friends find amusing, or her friends find meaningful, so that's been quite strange ... so it's been quite interesting getting a bit of a glimpse inside her world, I suppose.



Q. Which you probably wouldn't get in general conversation or over the phone?

Definitely not. Not at all. Not over the phone, not in conversation, cause even in face to face communication, our communication is still a bit stilted at times. (Diane)

While Diane uses the recipients lists from forwarded emails to develop insights into her sister's life, several other women used them more actively to establish contact or re-energise a relationship with a third party. For Zoe, recipient lists were a useful source of potential contacts, and an opportunity for her to establish connections with extended family spread throughout the world. As such, she has actively 'mined' recipient lists embedded in prefabricated emails forwarded to her: 'You know how people send group things and they don't take off all the addresses. So I imagine I picked some up from there' (Zoe). Zoe's desire to reconnect with extended family, and the role this form of email message can play in fostering a developing relationship, is also indicated by the following passage:

Well actually I'm thinking of contacting ... my mother's youngest brother and his wife have split up, in their sixties, a year or so ago, and I got her email ... from one of the [forwarded emails] ... my aunt never deletes [recipient lists]. I don't think she knows how to delete. So I've got [aunt by marriage], who I've only met really a couple of times, but as an adult, and so she sometimes sends chain letter things, or I'll send her. So I'm thinking now of just putting at the top of the next one I send, 'how are you? ... and it will be nice to keep in touch' and see if she responds to that.

As Zoe's comments indicate, prefabricated messages forwarded on, even without a personal message included, can nevertheless provide a channel through which more meaningful communication may be fostered at some point in the future. Given the extent to which Zoe



relies upon email in general to manage family and social relationships, it could be argued that not only is her life now more pleasant as a result of the connections email facilitates, but that her future wellbeing is in some ways dependent upon the relationships that are fostered and maintained through her continuing use of this technology— relationships that may, as a single person, be pivotal sources of social support in her later years. The connections she establishes and manages through her strategic use of prefabricated email messages are an integral part of this process.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the somewhat surprising role prefabricated email messages are playing in articulating and sustaining women's support networks, by exploring the diverse ways in which women have co-opted this form of communication in the maintenance of relationships. It has been suggested that prefabricated messages function to maintain weak ties within social networks.¹ Certainly the ease with which an individual can forward these messages on to multiple recipients supports the notion that they may be circulated somewhat indiscriminately through large and diverse networks, and therefore may play a minimal role in enhancing important social ties. However, the findings of this research project indicate that there are times when this most frivolous form of communication may be critical in sustaining connections between close family members— particularly those that are strained and close to breaking point. For some of the women in this project, prefabricated emails, so often dismissed as frivolous, time-consuming and even intensely irritating nonsense, are critical instruments of social inclusion and reconciliation, and perform a crucial role in the serious business of relationship work.

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Note

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