

FRIENDS AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Introduction

The last ten years or so have seen a phenomenal increase in the everyday use of electronic media: email, teleconferencing and use of the world wide web. This has happened everywhere and under the most ordinary circumstances. Friends are no different. Some of the advantages are obvious: reduced cost and speed of communication, a lighter footprint on the environment. But the disadvantages are also worrisome. Recently there has been a flurry of activity among Friends discussing, questioning, experimenting and often lamenting over how the use of these media is developing among us. Representative Meeting has had two intense discussions of the topic, some Monthly Meetings have also begun to engage in debate about it, and the Consultation and Renewal Group has canvassed Yearly Meeting clerks on its use, heard suggestions from individuals, written about it in its reports and hosted an interest group at Yearly Meeting. For various reasons, I have been in the middle of much of the debate. This article is intended to provide a brief overview of where we are today with the use of electronic media, identify a number of salient issues, and make some suggestions about where we go from here.

Current Use

There is almost universal use of email on the part of those Friends serving Yearly Meeting as clerks, as members of our various committees, and as representatives of Canadian Friends to outside organizations, both Quaker and otherwise. I say “almost,” because in most committees there are still those who do not use or have access to the internet or the web. But whether we like it or not, we have reached a stage where it would be impossible to clerk Yearly Meeting or one of its committees without being “online.” Those Friends engaged at an international level use email and conference calls of necessity and some of the wider Quaker and other bodies no longer send communications and materials by post.

There are some obvious limits to the use of email. From an administrative perspective, the Consultation and Renewal Group found unanimity among our clerks that email is effective for sharing information and preparing for meetings, but clearly ineffective for making all but the most routine decisions. We have had a tendency in recent times to establish ad hoc committees with the expectation that they will conduct all their business by email and perhaps phone. My own experience with this has been decidedly mixed, finding it works for small groups who know each other well and have a straight forward task, in contrast to the total disaster of trying to handle highly complicated matters in this manner. On the whole, email does not work and is not used for decision-making.

When decisions are required, and a face to face meeting is not possible in the time required, there is extensive use by committees of teleconference. This has the advantage of being able to share information simultaneously as a group, is obviously less expensive than meeting together, and avoids the pitfalls of leaving important matters to an individual clerk or staff person. Like email, this too has its limits and those who use this medium agree that conference calls are supplementary to face to face meetings either before or after the meeting, or both.

Some Monthly Meetings are also making extensive use of email. Information sharing, agenda preparation for Meeting for Worship for Business, minutes, newsletters, and simple logistical arrangements are all done this way. For those individuals who are not “online” these meetings arrange for “email buddies” to make sure no one is left out. Some of the larger Monthly Meetings also have their own website, something that has been useful as an outreach tool.

The use of email is most obvious in our many widely scattered Monthly Meetings where members and attenders are many miles apart. A few years ago, I sent out a query as clerk of Victoria Monthly Meeting to clerks of other scattered Meetings, asking about their use of email. The responses were revealing. All were struggling with the inability to travel to meet together on a regular basis and were experimenting with email as a means of fostering community and even in some cases, making decisions. None were finding it entirely satisfactory, but all found it necessary in some way.

I have also observed over the years that Isolated Friends and isolated worship groups see the internet as a life line – the only way they can successfully keep in contact and feel part of the wider Society of Friends. As far back as 1997 when I travelled among Friends across Canada, I found individuals in isolated situations who had found us by way of the world wide web.

Which brings me to the use of “the web.” Canadian Yearly Meeting has had a website for a considerable length of time. When the Consultation and Renewal Group asked those they interviewed about it use, the response was evenly divided between those who used it for information dissemination and gathering and saw its use being expanded in the future, and those who did not use it at all and saw no likelihood of greater use in future. The unease about the use of electronic media really comes to light here. My own sense of it is that there may be a generational factor operating. Young people generally and Young Friends in particular use it as second nature; some of us older folks who have used it through employed work also use it regularly and enthusiastically; and those older folks who have not used it are uncomfortable and sometimes hostile to its presence. The reality is it isn't going to go away. Rather it is going to explode with the coming of newer and more sophisticated technology that will support video conferencing, virtual meetings of people stretching over many miles, and provide for use as a comprehensive source of information sharing. An example of its use for finding information occurred recently in my own worship group. We decided to study Quaker history, presenting various topics researched individually. Our Monthly Meeting library is over an hour away so the web has proved to be an amazing alternative. It has a wealth of information on Quaker history!

Problems and Concerns

Probably the single most widespread concern among Friends is the potential for exclusion of those individuals who are not “online.” There are some who do not use the internet or the world wide web because of a concern for what its implications are for the spiritual health of our communities, both Friendly and otherwise. Some do not use it for economic reasons. Computer equipment and the software needed are expensive. And there are some who do not use it because it does indeed require a learning exercise of rather daunting proportions.

Related to this is a concern about experimentation on the part of some with using electronic media for spiritual discernment. Friends' beliefs in corporate discernment seem antithetical to any notion of electronic worship. Most, but not all, believe that the gathered meeting requires face to face participation. There is a continuum of values regarding the possibility of corporate worship in the context of electronic communication. I sit at one of the extreme ends of this debate, being uncomfortable even when it is suggested we use periods of silence during a telephone conference. Despite these differences of opinion, I think it is safe to say that there is a concern, perhaps even a fear, that the use of electronic media might displace our practices of meeting together in worship to conduct the affairs of our Meetings or ultimately, to seek God's guidance.

Less visible, but nevertheless a problem is the need for many of us to find ways to learn how to best use these various media. Much of my own learning took place when I was employed and could simply call for help from our technical support staff. Now that I am retired and facing all the new technologies that are streaming out, I struggle. There are also techniques that clerks and others need to acquire to make effective use of media -- such things as how to organize a meeting by teleconference or how to establish an email address for sending information to everyone on a committee simultaneously. Who teaches and where do we go to learn these things?

There have been many technical problems raised by those who do use these media. Email can be overwhelming and demanding. Expectations have become widespread that clerks and others will respond instantly to emailed enquiries. Dozens of emails can flood into a busy clerk's inbox every day when some matter is under discussion. Individuals sending private emails have suddenly found their correspondence has become public when a recipient without asking has shared it with others. Electronic communication is devoid of our usual ways of sensing emotion: no body language, no smiling or frowning, no quizzical looks. An email can sound unduly critical and a quickly fired off response may convey unintended anger. Many Friends are using older versions of both hardware and software making opening files and transferring data difficult if not impossible. Individuals with hearing or vision impairments cannot participate without costly supportive tools. And so on.

Then there is the issue of privacy. This has exercised Representative Meeting in recent months. The more benevolent problem is the amount of unwanted emails (spam) received by those of us whose addresses appear on the Yearly Meeting website. But we have also had experience of mailing lists and lists of those serving Yearly Meeting being used by outside individuals or groups for unwanted purposes. There is potential for exploitation and invasion of personal privacy. This needs to be addressed.

And finally, I have heard concern for the pollution created by lack of ways to dispose of obsolete hardware. Our computers have toxins and metals that wind up in our landfill sites and damage our environment. There are isolated examples of recycling programs for old computers, but they can be hard to find and difficult to access.

Considerations for the Future Use of Electronic Media

I want to begin by stating the assumptions that I adhere to. We cannot go back to sole use of pen and paper (or typewriters) plus postage stamps, individual telephone calls, even the sole use of books and periodicals. I am aware that this assumption makes many of you uncomfortable, but I see it as reality for better or for worse. Our Yearly Meeting stretched across thousands of miles could not function in the 21st Century without electronic communication. Nor could we if we split into several parts. Even my Monthly Meeting now relies on email to help stitch together four widely scattered worshipping groups. Without it, we were four isolated groups, three of whom were more or less alienated from the Monthly Meeting. Furthermore, I know from experience that some of our clerking positions require that the person in that role be willing and able to make use of elementary email and telephone conference calls at the very least. It is a prerequisite for some forms of service (and fortunately not for all).

This leads me to my primary premise in looking ahead.. It is imperative that we, as a faith community, learn how to use the technology of electronic media effectively where it makes sense and enhances our being together, and that we learn to recognize its limitations and how to avoid its pitfalls. I suggest we begin through sharing our experiences and concerns and worshipping together to discern the right way

forward. How else can Friends ever deal with the societal change that we are now experiencing through the fast changing technology of cyberspace?

The most difficult question to face is how to address the concerns about potential exclusion. The practice of having email buddies could be expanded to include an email buddy for a committee member not “online” – perhaps someone in the same Meeting who could receive and share all email communications as well as take dictation for a response. We could find ways to share the cost of the technical devices that make it possible for hearing or vision impaired people to participate electronically. We could begin to advocate for better re-cycling programs for obsolete electronic equipment. Like much recycling, the barrier is not proper disposal or use of recycled waste, it is political will. There are courses available to help the computer illiterate find their way. Could we help fund some of these for our Meeting members? There also may be ways of sharing our collective expertise. I was truly grateful when a Friend helped me find the free software that allowed me to open attachments that previously were nothing but garble on my screen.

These correctives may go a long way, but they do not address the concerns that are a matter of belief and conscience. One way of approaching this is to see it in the same light as those whose conscience leads them to avoid all air travel. Except for the occasional individual who has the time and physical resources to bus or bike to meetings at some distance, it means accepting the fact that the choice not to fly includes leaving participation in some of our Yearly Meeting’s activities to others. Friends have long been accepting that we have differences in the manner and degree to which individuals witness their faith. Perhaps we need to acknowledge that for those who choose not to use electronic media, they have also chosen not to participate in roles that involve administrative work.

Specifically, there have been many suggestions that we need to develop guidelines for the use of email and teleconferencing. The interest group at Yearly Meeting sessions this past August suggested that each committee be asked to develop their own guidelines and then to share their experience. This was based on the assumption that different committees need different guidelines. This makes much sense to me and a request will go forward that this be placed on the agenda for Representative Meeting this fall. However I do think there are some forms of email etiquette that apply across the board and could be communicated to all. Two that come to mind are first, the practice of not sharing an email with anyone not originally listed in a communication without first asking permission; and second, employing a guideline of leaving at least 24 hours before answering or expecting an answer to a message. My suggestion is that those working on guidelines separate the committee specific guidelines from the general etiquette guidelines and when they are shared we can probably come up with a common list for general email etiquette.

I have not touched on all the current issues. Nor have I discussed some of the newer technologies such as webcams and video conferencing, partly because I too am out of the loop on such matters and also because it seems to me we need to get our current use well in hand before we try to address future innovations. Nevertheless, the future is racing into the present and I do suggest that we get a firm hold on where Friends are and where we ought to be with regard to use of electronic media before it overwhelms us.

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October 10, 2006