TECHNOLOGY

Is Email Evil?

Overflowing inboxes are wrecking productivity and making people feel guilty. Is the technology to blame, or are we?

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ADRIENNE LAFRANCE
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Sometime in the past 20 years, people soured on email. Culturally, it went from delightful to burdensome, a shift that's reflected in the very language of the inbox. In the 1990s, AOL would gleefully announce, "You've got mail!" Today, Gmail celebrates the opposite: "No new mail!"

So what happened to email? What happened to *us*?

These are some of the questions that come up in the new technology podcast *Codebreaker*, the first season of which is fixated on the question, "Is it evil?"

"In some ways, [email] is like technology that was built when the world was new, yet we still use it all the time," *Codebreaker*'s host, Ben Brock Johnson, told me. "There are some real tensions that come from that, that come from the fact that it's this free thing that anybody can send to anybody… and we can all send as many as we want."

All of that is, theoretically, what makes email great, too. "You can't kill email! It's the cockroach of the Internet," Alexis Madrigal wrote for *The Atlantic* last year, "and I mean that as a compliment. This resilience is a good thing."
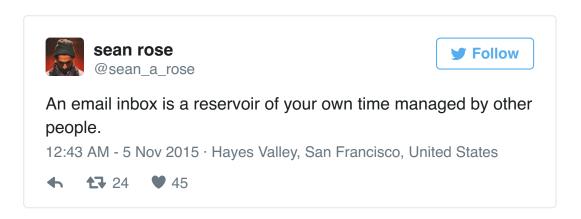
"Email is the last great unowned technology," said the Harvard law professor Jonathan Zittrain in the first episode of *Codebreaker*, "and by unowned I mean there is no CEO of email… it's just a shared hallucination that works."

"Email is not evil. We are evil."

And while email may work, technically, there's a profound sentiment—in tech circles, especially—that there's something deeply wrong with the way people email today. Maybe not surprisingly, most email is "total garbage," Johnson says, and that's the stuff that doesn't even make it to your inbox. Spam filters are actually pretty good, so this virtual garbage-pile isn't the real problem. The thing about email that bogs people down is the sorting, and responding, the unsubscribing, the reaching out, the circling back.

People are, clearly, consumed by their inboxes. On average, people check

their email about 77 times per day, according to Gloria Mark, a professor of informatics at the University of California, Irvine. (On the high end, people checked their inboxes 373 times a day.) "The more email people do, the lower is their assessed productivity," Mark said in the podcast. "[and] the lower is their positive mood at the end of the day."

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Mark also notes a psychological disconnect between the writing of an email and the receiving of one, a paradox that Johnson told me he hasn't been able to stop thinking about since: Reading email is correlated with stress, actually typing and sending email is not.

"That, to me, was a totally eureka moment," Johnson said. "Where Gloria Mark says it feels good to send email, but it feels bad to receive. That has changed my behavior. I have been more thoughtful about how I send email: Why am I sending this email? Is this the most direct way to deal with whatever I am trying to deal with?"

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"I am also really bad at managing my own email," Johnson added. "I am abysmal. I have 12,069 unreads in my gmail right now. People look at that and they get panic attacks on my behalf."

Several studies have found email hurts productivity and makes people feel bad. "I just think we have to rethink email, and even redesign the way email is used," Mark said in *Codebreaker*'s first episode.

She's not alone in that assessment. But what would a reboot of this nature even look like? And what would it mean for email's cultural standing? (These are some of the questions I'm exploring for an upcoming story, and it's clear already that they have fascinating, if incomplete, answers.)

Already there are alternatives, or at least complements, to the inbox-outbox cycle: Various private messengers and chat platforms like Slack have been described as email slayers, or at least means of chipping away at its hold on people. Teenagers barely email one another. Just 6 percent of them reported sending daily emails in a 2011 Pew survey. (A time when, it should be noted, Snapchat was in it infancy and platforms like YikYak and Vine didn't even exist yet.)

"Email is not evil," said Sabri Ben-Achour, a reporter for Marketplace, in the *Codebreaker* debut. "We are evil. Email dismantles the barriers and the filters that we have erected to contain our evil selves."

Even if email's not outright evil, it does seem to be broken in some way.

And if we're the ones who broke it, it will be up to us to fix it, too.

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