

“The only thing I can do is to be available”¹: Intergenerational use of e-mail

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Abstract

This paper analyses the use of e-mail as a method to increase the interaction between the generations. The analysis is based on the e-mail interactions for a small group of three elderly women and their grandchildren, grand nieces and in one case the child of a family friend. The data includes 46 e-mail messages as well as the text from a group interview with the women. The data shows that the high tempo and the large volume of the messages dropped off as time wore on. The data also indicates that the age of the younger correspondent as well as the expectations of the elderly correspondent were integral in the form and content of the message exchange. Finally, the analysis points to the ambiguous role of the elderly in today's society.

1 Introduction

On the 4th of December 1998 one of the informants in the study, Grete, wrote to her American grand niece Catherine, whom she had never met, “I get to know you a little more with each paragraph.” In a way, this is the hope of the Presence project; i.e. the use of e-mail will increase the interaction between the generations.

The Presence project has the subtitle “enhancing activity and presence of older people in local communities.” It has the goal of developing design ideas for the elderly that are 1) pleasurable to use, 2) offer new modes of interaction and 3) should transcend traditional input/output devices such as the PC keyboard and screen. It is noted in literature from the project that the developers need “to make sure that they meet the needs of users.”

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The trial examined here is an activity within the larger project. This activity, which lasted about two months, was an examination of the first two points noted above. The specific “assignment” to the elderly participants was to correspond for a certain period with their grandchildren. This paper examines the interaction and tries to place it into a broader social context. The nature of e-mail vs. traditional letters, the telephone and face-to-face interaction are considered. In addition, the more general social context in which the communication takes place is brought into focus.

The data used to investigate this question was 46 e-mail messages between three elderly women and five younger relatives and in one case a younger friend. In addition, the text from a group interview was also included in the analysis.

The data shows that in two cases the e-mail contributed to interaction between the elderly women and their chosen correspondents. It lowered the threshold for communication and thus gave the individuals easier access. On the other hand, the data shows that after a flourish of exchanges early in the trial period the exchanges became shorter and less regular.

The material from the e-mail archives and the group interview illuminates how the actors are enmeshed in a web of relationships, expectations and schedules. This context, in some cases, allowed only marginal opportunities to use the new possibilities. This is not to say that it won't develop, only that the simple introduction of technology is not enough. The time has to be made, access (both temporal and social) has to be granted and the web of interactions between the individuals has to be developed such that they can play on each other's range of knowledge, interests and needs in the interactions. The simple “how is the weather” type of interaction will collapse of its own weight. Many a high school reunion has foundered on this point, i.e. the notion that simply allowing people to talk will result in new understandings without the realization that different agendas, different interests, the development of individual lives etc. can and do block the communication.

In the next section I will discuss the method use in the analysis along with a short discussion of the role of e-mail vis-à-vis other forms of communication. This will be followed by the examination of the three women's correspondence. Finally, the data from the group interview is used to examine the social situation of the women and to provide insight into the potentials and limitations of electronically mediated text communication.

2 Method and background considerations

2.1 Method of the study

As noted in the introduction, this analysis is based in the e-mail archives of three women and their interactions with five children. In one case the elderly correspondent has only one younger counterpart. In the other two cases there are two younger correspondents writing to each of the elderly women. The total archive contains 46 messages containing about 900 sentences, the sentence being the smallest unit of analysis considered here. The e-mail exchanges started around the beginning of December 1998 and the last messages were exchanged on the 1st of February 1999.

The message exchanges were “an assignment” given to the women as a part of their participation in the EU Presence project. Thus, the correspondence is not natural communication. Rather, it has been staged in order to give the individuals experience with the use of e-mail, PCs and on-line communication systems. This, may

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mean that there was a certain degree of contrivance in the writing of the material. The text, however indicates that in spite of this the correspondents engaged each other in openly.

Previous to the use of e-mail the three women participated in a group interview where they were asked about the individuals with whom they intended to correspond, their expectations regarding the use of e-mail, current communication patterns with their intended correspondents, etc. The fact that the group interview took place before their active use of e-mail had begun meant that the talk was not an evaluation of their experiences with the technology but rather a discussion of their role in society. In the group interview there were slightly more than 600 speech acts.

The small number of informants and the moderate amount of material has meant that a case study approach has been used in approaching the data. Rather than approaching the data as a single corpus in order to extract major themes, the research strategy has been to follow the individual sets of correspondence. This has been supplemented by the women's commentaries in the focus group. Again, this is a weakness in the data material. Unfortunately, that was the nature of the material that was made available for analysis. Like the anthropologist who is has to make the best of the cultural fragments he or she comes across, I was forced to make do in this situation. While this limits insight, it does not mean that the material is not of interest.

This text was entered into a flat database program that allowed the coding and sorting of the material. The database was examined for significant concepts and themes, the regularity of exchanges and the tenor of the writing.

2.2 Special aspects of e-mail

E-mail, along with the Internet has changed the form of communication in many areas. E-mail has been examined in relation to office communication, (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 1999; Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1996; Jakobsen 1994; Marcus et al. 1992, Romm and Pliskin 1999; Vallee 1984, 21-37), military communication (Ender and Segal 1996) education and teaching (Folaron, 1995) labor organization (Pliskin and Romm 1997), academic and professional communication (Carley and Wendt 1988; Van Meter 1998; Beels, Kogan and Gale 1997) communication within the church (Plude 1999) various forms of social interaction (Romm and Pliskin 1997; Redd and Massey, 1997) and organizational democracy (Mantovani 1994). In this current case I will examine e-mail use largely in an intrafamilial context. This illuminates various dimension and dynamics of the family.

When examining e-mail messages there are several points that mark them as different from natural speech. E-mail lies somewhere between voice telephony and letter writing (Trevino, Daft and Lengel 1990, 77-78). Like voice telephony the activity can usually be carried out inside the home and there is no need to organize the posting of the letter etc.² The other point is that e-mail is asynchronous. Thus, the receiver does not need to interrupt activities in order to respond the sender (DeWitt et.al, 1988).

E-mail is similar to traditional letter writing in that, like traditional letters, e-mail messages are written. The individual needs to organize their thoughts and commit

² This was not necessarily the case in terms of the correspondents examined here. Several of them had no PC and thus needed to go to a nearby library in order to send and read their e-mail.

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them to the PC in order to create the communication. The style of communication is thus different from natural speech in that oral grammar is replaced by the more formal standards of written grammar (Redeker 1984 see also Heim 1990). This is not to say that the formal rules of grammar, syntax and orthography were always followed. In reading the archives of messages in this analysis one finds quite wide variations in all of these three areas. In this way, the e-mail is perhaps different from the traditional letter. In the case of e-mail the flexibility of the writing situation, i.e. the ability to edit and revise the text dynamically, along with the fast transport of the message without the bother of postage stamps, addresses, etc. seem to reduce the demands for grammar, syntax and orthography that the writers place on themselves. In this connection it has been noted that e-mail is more “oral” than traditional letter writing (Folaron, 1995; Jakobsen 1994).

A final point is that while letters produce a physical artifact, that can have qualities of its own, i.e. the quality of the paper, the personal nature of the handwriting, the perfume one sprays on the letter etc., e-mail is usually only text. While e-mail may be printed onto paper, there is not the same intimacy of a shared physical object. This has led some to comment that e-mail is less suited to, for example love letters (Jakobsen 1994; Short Williams and Christie 1976).

When considering the material for this analysis, the preponderance of the text was in Norwegian. Thus, it was necessary to translate it for inclusion in this paper. When translating the material I took pains to keep the grammar, the punctuation and in one case the orthography true to the original. Thus, one can see the offhand nature of the communication in that sentences run-on and syntax is rough. None-the-less, the meaning is there.

As with other letter archives, the e-mail messages considered here are not complete. With archives of traditional letters, it is often difficult to collect the documents from both correspondents and individual letters are lost. In the case of e-mail the complete archive is theoretically easier to accumulate. None-the-less, glitches in the PC and unfamiliarity with the software on the part of the users mean that messages get lost.

Finally, it is important to consider the intended audience of the letters. In contemporary society letters have been considered a form of private communication between individuals. Historically, however, letters have also been more collective documents. Krogh describes how letters from Norwegian immigrants in the U.S. to their native homes have been seen as a type of common property (1990). Coming to the current case, these messages were sent and received with the knowledge that they would be analyzed as part of the women’s participation in the Presence project. Thus, the exchanges are perhaps more guarded than otherwise.

3 Correspondence of the three women

The three messages are presented below. The three women who participated in the e-mail exchanges examined here and, in addition in the group interview are Emma, Anita and Grete. The various themes brought out in the exchanges are described and amplified through the use of citations from the message sets and, in some cases, from the focus group material.

Analysis of the data shows that the age of the child in the correspondence is of importance. As the child matures and enters the mid-teen years the writing becomes more engaging and a broader range of topics are taken up. Due to this consideration I have chosen to present the correspondence involving youngest child – that between

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Emma and Vilde (9) – first. This is followed by the correspondence between Anita and her two granddaughters Jeanne (13) and Marta (15). Finally, I will present the communications between Grete and her American niece Catherine (17) and her Norwegian friend David (14).

3.1 Emma – Vilde

The first set of messages to be examined is Emma’s correspondence with her granddaughter Vilde. Between the 12th of December and the 1st of February, Emma exchanged seven messages, containing a total of 64 sentences, with her granddaughter Vilde. This is the smallest of the three message sets. In addition, the frequency of the exchanges was quite low. After the first three messages there is a full month’s pause in the correspondence. This is followed by a 22-day pause before the final two messages at the very end of the sampling period.

Another issue limiting the number of exchanges is Vilde’s lack of access to a PC. In the message from the 1st of February Emma commented on the fact that Vilde needed to use a PC in the local library.

You had a lot to do after school on Thursday: first the library to send e-mail, and then home where you were outside over an hour when it was –18 degrees because the key was in the bag that was forgotten in your mother’s car! After you had eaten there was training. I can imagine that you were pretty tired that night.

Another limitation in the correspondence seems to be Vilde’s age, and by extension her competence as a writer. In the material from the focus group one reads that Vilde has just begun to read. Thus, as one can see in the following message, her mastery of writing, let alone her mastery of engaging comment is still somewhat in the future.

hi mimmi
i have not changed ice skates be cause there were not any skates left in my size. today in class we had a horribly long assignment. when is opera that you wil see? today i had to be insid because it was so cold out.
love, vilde³

The text record also shows that Emma engaged in relatively simple constructions when writing to Vilde. On the 14th of December Emma wrote:

Hi Vilde,
Yes, I am fine. It is good that you are also fine. I would like to come to your end of school gathering if I can. Which day is it on?
You told me a lot of riddles one-day when we walked home from the bus.
Have you heard this one? What has twelve legs and says “Ruff, ruff, ruff”? It is “Sgod eerht” The answer is written backwards.

³ This message was particularly difficult to translate while retaining the orthography and grammar of the original. In the translation several misspellings and the lack of capitalization were intentionally included to retain the tone of the original. The Norwegian version is presented below.

hei mimmi
jeg har ikke bytet skøyten for di det var ikke flere skøyter i min størelse i jen. idag fikk klasen en for ferdeli lang lekse. når operan skal vere vil du se på da? i dag mote jeg nesten vere ine for det var så kalt ute.
hilsen vilde.

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Take care, Mimmi

It seems as though the child is a little too young for the engaged type of interaction often implied in written correspondence. There is not the discussion of feelings or deeper emotional reflections, nor is there the use of irony in the interactions, i.e. linguistic interactions that stray from the strict and factual. Rather one reads a more superficial type of contact, i.e. descriptions of the weather and reference to concrete events in the recent past without the embroideries of feelings and after thoughts.

The second point here is the structure of Vilde's family. Reading in the material from the focus group we find that Vilde's parents are divorced. Vilde lives with her mother and visits her father on a regular semi-weekly basis. Since Emma is Vilde's paternal grandmother, this means that Emma only rarely sees her granddaughter. Here the structure of the family is such that the normal contact is more than halved because of divorce. The divorce makes it more complex to arrange visits as there are two sets of grandparents that must be kept separate where, in an intact family, there could be more overlap.

One can perhaps see this in relation to the school party mentioned here. It seems that Vilde has proffered an invitation to a school party in an earlier e-mail. In the message from Emma we read that she would like to attend the party at Vilde's school. It is not clear, however, if she attended. While it was suggested that she come, there is no confirmation in the message archive. The concrete confirmation may have taken place through other channels, but there is not a record of it here. Looking further through the interactions, there is no recognition that she attended the party. Thus, the question as to the grand mother's attendance seems to be some type of empty interaction. Because of the divorce between the parents there may be unstated difficulties in attending common events and there may be uncertainties vis-à-vis how welcome children or grandparents are at various "common" events. Thus, there are many complexities here. Coming back again to the quasi-invitation and acceptance it seems to be more the form than the actual function that is at play here.

In the group interview Emma noted that she had hopes that “this [e-mail] can be something different in some way than otherwise. That we can talk about things that we have not talked about before. That we can find things that are of interest to her.” It seems however, that the realization of these hopes was hindered by the difficult familial situation and by the complexity of written communication for such a young child.

3.2 Anita – Marta and Anita – Jeanne

Starting on 12.12 98 the second woman, Anita, wrote to two nieces, Marta (15) and Jeanne (13), who were living in the US for the year. The data includes 19 messages including a total of about 250 sentences. The last message was sent on the 1st of February 1999. Anita is a very active elderly person. She seems to have a lot going on. During the time of the experiment she traveled to Italy, planned a trip to Iraq and attended several family gatherings. Before her trip to Italy she wrote approximately once every three days. After her two-week trip, the rate of interaction dropped to communications every six days. About two thirds of the text in Anita's portion of the database came from the exchanges before her trip and one third came after the trip.

At the outset she seems to be interested in organizing the “assignment”, then the discussion can begin. In some respects it seems as though there is a reactivity in her

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communication, i.e. she is in the search for topics with which to communicate in order to fulfill the assignment from the Presence project to use e-mail. In the beginning exchanges, at least, there is not a natural rapport in the text

I will write a letter to you every day for a week, and I hope that you answer them, such that I also get a letter every day for a week, then I will be done before you go to Las Vegas.

The search for a theme was obvious in the first messages. Best friends are a common theme with the younger girl, Jeanne “Tell me about your best friend.” (12.12.). Four days later on the 16th Anita wrote, “Can you tell me more about your international friends? Is it different than with Norwegian friends, and what do you think the differences are?” (16.12.). Again on the 18th she wrote “I am glad that you are so satisfied with being in California, is it difficult to only have foreign friends or perhaps it is both exciting and challenging.” There is a searching tone to the comments, and perhaps a bit of patronization, not the engagement of an equal.

The interaction with Marta, the older child, was perhaps more mature. The older child was more politically active. The text of the messages reflects this. In an undated message from the middle of December Anita wrote:

I was at the cinema today and saw *Saving private Ryan*, a film from Spielberg about the invasion in Normandy in 1944, it was so awful to see, I was more and more convinced that war is worse than everything, if we used all the money that is used for the military in another way, be used to peace work all over the world, I believe that all after awhile will see that war is really primitive etc. etc.

In a subsequent message on the 21st of December Anita takes another line. She has obviously received a message from Marta criticizing Bill Clinton’s bombing of Iraq.

In principle I am against bombing but now it seems as though there is no choice. And it is NOT (Sic.) a massive bombing, up to now there are only five lives that have been lost, and I will have hesitated to travel to Iraq rather than Bill Clinton. Now the US and the UN have tried for may years to come to a peaceful solution to remove the chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, but Saddam Hussein has broken all his promises, sent out all the weapons inspectors, and tortures all who contradict him. USA bombs ONLY (Sic.) suspected weapons caches and those few that died were in the immediate vicinity of them. . .

The tenor of this interaction is quite different from that of the interaction between Emma and Vilde. Here the two are making intense exchanges. Anita’s “intonation via the use of all capital letters and the vilification of Hussein are indications of intense feelings (Short, Williams and Christie 1976, 84). One almost has the feeling that Marta has begun her mid-teen emancipation from her home of orientation (Ling 1999). Where the exchanges between Emma and Vilde were lacking engagement, these may be tipping towards an over engagement.

Turning now to another theme in the message archive, in the message from 28 December to Jeanne we read “Many thanks for the very funny calendar, now we look forward to begin using it, the package came in time.” (*Tusen takk for kjempemorsom kalender, nå gleder vi oss til å ta den i bruk, pakken kom frem i god tid.*) The message is interesting at two levels. At the first level the sentence is a poorly constructed run-on sentence. In the same breath we find a thank you, a description of the gift and

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evaluation of the postal system. Since this is the opening sentence in the communication the writer likely had several thoughts in mind all competing to get out. However, the complexity of this communication also underscores that this is, after all, an interaction between two quasi intimates.

At a second level a thank you note the classic motivation, or perhaps excuses for writing. Gifting is a way of crystallizing relationships (Malinowski 1984). It is the recognition of a relationship through the exchange of physical totems. While the gifts may have a functional use, their meta message is the marking of a relationship. The thanking the giver, in effect, closes the loop. It, along with a counter gift, is a part of the reciprocation. To not give a gift in return, or to not thank the giver is a negation of the relationship. In the case here, the physical distance between the giver and the receiver meant that it was necessary to use an indirect medium to communicate the thank you. In this case e-mail was chosen.

The thank you also served as an opening for the description of the family’s Christmas gathering. Anita described who was there, how long the gathering took and some of the more significant gifts. In addition, Anita describes various traditions, and in particular the failure of a tradition. A typical feature of a Norwegian Christmas dinner is the serving of rice porridge in which an almond has been hidden. The person recovering the almond receives a small marzipan pig figure. In her thank you e-mail to Marta, Anita writes

This year it went crazy with the porridge, Barbara’s children got to decide the desert and that was not rice porridge, but it [the almond] was placed in a mediocre orange tart, but nobody knows who got it. But Anne had peeled two almonds, so when I saw the extra almond I put it in my cake, but the one who actually had gotten the almond must have eaten it up without thinking that it was the “pig” almond, and so I was the one who got the pig but that is not what I had thought, but I thought that I could create some fun confusion if two people had found the almond.

Again, we see the use of run-on sentences to communicate a complex chain of events. This is not a hindrance to the narration as both parties have such a clear understanding of the practice. That it was included in the e-mail points to the fact that the activity was already a well-known portion of the family’s tradition. In addition, the narration adds a new chapter to the tradition that is available for subsequent adoption in to the lore of the family.

In a message in early February the theme of gifting and the description of a family get-together are taken up again in an e-mail to Jeanne. In this case, turning the calendar Anita received as a Christmas present from January to February was mentioned. A second “thank-you” was sent to Jeanne and again a family party was described in the e-mail. Thus, the same general formula was used two times in the correspondence. The second message was shorter.

3.3 Grete – Catherine and Grete – David

The final correspondence set included in the database is that of Grete and her two correspondents Catherine (17), an American grand niece, and David (14), the child of a former working colleague with whom she has struck up a friendship. All told, this is the largest set of messages in the analysis. It includes 19 messages and a total of almost 600 sentences. The messages also cover a very short period of time. The first

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exchanges were done on the 1st of December and the last message is on the 15th of the same month.

Considering first the messages from and to Catherine, the girl is Grete’s grand niece who lives in the US. The two had only met when Catherine was an infant. So aside from common family background, the two had no previous history of interaction. The correspondence included 10 messages that had a total of 360 sentences. There was almost daily correspondence between the two from the 1st until the 8th. These messages were quite long, usually containing about 30 – 35 sentences. At the end of the period there was a bit longer pause between messages and the length had dropped to 15 – 20 sentences.

The messages – that are written in English – seem to contain the exchange of information associated with the early portion of an acquaintanceship. On the part of Grete this meant filling in Catherine about Norway – where Catherine had never been – as well as filling in the family history. In a message of 2 December 1998, Catherine invites Grete to tell her about her past:

I was wondering, (if you wanted to) if you could tell me the story behind you and Grandma. I am really interested. I'm sure Grandma told me once before but I can't remember everything. I like hearing stories about Grandma's life and Norway and stuff.

Grete responded with a set of messages describing her youth. There is a tone of interest/reminiscence in the e-mails. It was a safe place for Grete to bring up old memories and to reminisce about her past life. There is a nice literary quality to her comments. She is a good writer and a good storyteller. She seems to like having the opportunity to share her past. For example in her message from the 4th of December Grete reminisces about time she and her sister, who is also Catherine’s grandmother, spent in New York as young girls:

We used to take the subway to NYC on Sundays, go to the museums and eat at Horn & Hardart's (the automat). We were often together with Doris, who was in Marsha's class at Bay Ridge. (Doris, you must have heard, married a boy from my school, and eventually ended up in Tucson, Arizona. We usually have a fairly long telephone conversation with her every time I am at Marsha's.) When we got together ("When shall we three meet again," etc.), we sat in the kitchen drinking tea (we were old cronies even in those days) and sang songs at the piano, with Doris and her ukulele keeping the beat. We went to the roller rink, and learned to dance on skates. Or we walked and talked, and talked and walked. No TV in those days, which might have been a good thing, I'm beginning to think. Our pleasures were simple in the olden days!

We did invite some boys to a party once. Good food, soda, and all that. This was at Doris' - her WAC aunt lived upstairs, and was probably keeping an eye on us (we were about your age). Not one of the boys showed up! The next morning we found a comic strip in the mailbox - a group of Disney characters were throwing a party, but at about 10 P.M. they voted to call their Valentine's party a "hen party." We didn't think it was very funny.

The beauty of being old is being able to laugh at situations like that.

Themes in the messages include Grete’s memories about Scouts, music and singing, crushes on boys, parties, roller-skating, family relations, scrabble and sweaters. The narration is complete and engrossing.

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As for Catherine the messages provided her with a place to describe her ambitions and to present herself. Like Grete, Catherine feels comfortable with writing.

I am going to SUNY Stonybrook next year and I will be a biology major/chemistry minor. I am also taking a pre-med. program and I hope to go to medical school when I graduate from Stonybrook.

In later messages there are other, perhaps more quasi-comical qualities that come out as seen in this message from 6 December:

It hit 72 degrees on Friday and today we put up our Christmas tree in 65-degree weather. I hate it! I want it to snow. Winter is no fun without snow. I'm dreaming of a white Christmas... That's me alright.

My parents are in the Christmas mood today, blasting one of our CD's from an extensive collection of Christmas music that we have acquired over the years. Don't get me wrong, I love Christmas just as much as the next guy, but where's the COLD WEATHER AND SNOW.

I want to wear my sweaters!!! WAHHHHH!!! I own approximately 25 sweaters and it stinks because now I have nothing to wear.

Despite the clownish tone of these messages, they are, from a literary perspective, far more complex than the exchanges between Emma and Vilde seen above. There is not the political engagement seen in the exchanges between Anita and Marta, but rather the simple exchange of information. At the same time, there is not the intimacy of detail as seen in Anita's story of the rice porridge. This is only natural since Grete and Catherine do not have the same history of interaction and thus they do not have the same repertoire of common experiences.

After the novelty of the initial exchanges, other factors start to impinge on the time for writing e-mail. Towards the end of the archive the intensity of the communication seemed to wain to a certain degree. On the 12th of December, five days after the previous message from Grete, Catherine wrote apologetically:

I am very, very, very, very, very sorry that I have not written in so long. The only word that comes to mind that tells why is HECTIC. I have been extremely busy and I haven't had time to sleep more than 5 hours a night let alone write an e-mail. I have about 3 minutes to write, then I have to baby-sit.

A few lines later Catherine closes her messages by saying:

Love your bad adopted grandchild

Catherine

In addition to the overdrawn sense of responsibility there is a two-sided message. On the one hand there is the recognition of the growing relationship between the two. In previous messages they had discussed an as yet unplanned meeting. It is clear that the e-mail correspondence has become a common point of reference, and perhaps responsibility. At their eventual meeting they will be informed about each other via the e-mail contact. In addition, the fact that they both use e-mail may be considered as a type of bond between the two.

The second point is that like all responsibilities, the correspondence needs to find an acceptable level of commitment. We read in the message that Catherine is very busy and that all her responsibilities mean that she needs to prioritize. The text tells Grete that in spite of a whole set of activities Catherine is almost stealing a few minutes

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from her babysitting to write a few lines. Thus, in spite of the fact that one may have a PC and Internet connection in the home, correspondence via e-mail takes place in a context of other everyday activities each of which demands its own time.

Now turning to the correspondence with David, this was almost as frequent as Grete's correspondence with Catherine. There were a total of nine messages in the database and contained about 145 sentences. The first message was sent on the 1st of December and the last was sent on the 15th. There was daily correspondence between the 7th and the 11th. The messages were somewhat shorter than those to Catherine with the length usually being about 15 – 20 lines.

There is a witty nature to the writing, which was in Norwegian. There is a lot of humor and self-irony in her communications. While this is difficult appreciate in translation, there is a jocular nature in the use of the language.

I am happy to my soul for every day (yes for that also) that there is not ice on the ground. If one feels too energetic or too big in their head one is setting themselves up for a fall.

The communications to Catherine in English, while covering a lot of topics and being quite polished, do not play with the language as much as the messages in Norwegian to David.

After the first few exchanges, the two seem to settle into a type of chatting. There are the quick quips, the reporting from everyday life and the generally short form. There is not the long story telling as seen in the messages to the America grandniece.

The big event here is that a new window has been installed in the kitchen today complete with a cold, during this part of the year. Lars drove up to Lillehammer today so that he can find his own (cold) up there (it is certainly cold and snowy so that should be easy enough).

Unlike the correspondence of Emma, Grete writes to her correspondents generally as equals. This, of course, is possible, as the two correspondents are more comfortable with the use of language than is Vilde. Also, in contrast to the correspondence of Anita, there is a light literary quality to the interaction.

4 E-mail and the role of the elderly in today's society

Finally, I come back to the question posed at the outset of this analysis, i.e. can e-mail increase intergeneration contact. As noted above, the answer seems to be both yes and no. In discussing this I want to consider three areas. These include first, the general tendency in the correspondence between the women and their correspondents. The second point is the possibilities and the barriers in the technical mediation of the communication. Finally, the analysis here points to several issues with regard to the status of the elderly women in society.

4.1 The general tendency in e-mail interaction

Taking the first point, I was interested in tracking both the tempo of the exchanges between the various correspondents as well as the absolute length of the messages. While the archives of messages covered only a short period of time, this type of

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analysis provides some insight into the role of the correspondence in the lives of the individuals.⁴

When looking at this data one can see that the messages became shorter as the enthusiasm of the first round of exchanges wore off. In each case the high tempo and the large volume of the early messages dropped off as time wore on. In a sense the latter exchanges were perhaps more mundane. The novelty medium had begun to recede and the motivation to continue the exchange began to rest on the content of the messages.

As noted above in the exchanges between Grete and Catherine, Catherine wrote that she had been unable to correspond for several days because of an extremely heavy schedule. Time was a scarce commodity for her and the pressures of everyday life have begun to impinge on the writing. One sees in this interaction the negotiation of e-mail's place in the correspondents' everyday life. The responsibility of writing, even as it brings in an interesting twist to one's daily activities, is left to compete with other demands. This seems to be a particular issue for the younger correspondents.

4.2 The possibilities and barriers in the use of e-mail

Another issue in the exchange of e-mail considered here is nature of the medium, that is the location of the PC as well as the software and hardware that made up the e-mail system. Generally, it seems that the women were comfortable with the system. They were able to type out messages, address them, copy material etc. As one of them noted: “I think that it is fine with this e-mail, actually easy, I don't really know why.”

However there were several minor issues mentioned in the messages and in the group interview. The writing in the letters can present challenges in that the Norwegian letters “ø” “æ” and “å” are often translated into other symbols such as “o”, “A” and “-”. While not being a major problem, it was mentioned as a nuisance on several occasions. In addition, machine crashes were often a theme reported as a part of the communications. In a message to her niece on the 8th of December Grete noted

I've been having trouble with my computer. I tried printing out some of my mail, but suddenly the machine said I didn't have enough memory to write out one page. Then it forgot what printer I have - it took me close to an hour to get that one page, and by that time I was hopping. So I won't try for a while. I think my Mac isn't too happy these days – it needs another Norton boot in the HD.

On another occasion, referring to problems with addressing e-mail, Anita wrote to Jeanne:

If Marta does not get a letter from me now, a copy of letter to me she must say so, I have received several messages back, they were not satisfied with the way to write Marta's address.

⁴ It needs to be stated that the exact dates of some messages were lost in the archival process. In addition, the ability to “cut and paste” from earlier letters and communications may give a false picture in some instances.

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Thus, the instability of the PC system was sometimes seen as an issue and a frustration. In the final analysis, however, the women were able to master the technology and to come into contact with their interlocutors.

Finally, the concrete location of the PC was an issue for some of the correspondents. Most of the participants either had a PC in their homes or the time to use one in another setting. Again, if the time was available, this did not represent a problem, but rather may have added a bit of structure to an otherwise open day.

On the other hand, if one did not have the time then this was a very real barrier. Emma expresses this type of concern for Vilde. In her message from the 1st of February cited above we read “You had a lot to do after school on Thursday: first the library to send e-mail, and then home . . . I can imagine that you were pretty tired that night.” Obviously if the location of the PC means an extra trip then the advantages of the system in comparison to traditional messages is reduced or even eliminated.

4.3 Status and status ambiguities for elderly women in contemporary society

Finally, I turn to the status of elderly women in society. As with other technologies their adoption or rejection sets the social situation into relief. The acquisition of a mobile telephone, for example, is a step in the maturation, as the gender identification process for Norwegian adolescents (Ling 1999). In a similar way, the adoption and use of e-mail provides insight into the situation of these elderly women.

The material indicates that they see themselves as a type of reserve caregiver and an empathetic listener. At the same time, the women are aware of the relative isolation imposed on the elderly in modern industrial society. These two themes will be discussed below.

4.3.1 Status assertion

In the group interview a theme discussed by the women was their status vis-à-vis the children with whom they communicated. The women discussed their status as care givers, as sources of empathy and as “kin keepers” in the family network.

The role of care giver and empathetic listener comes through when Grete comments on her hopes for the e-mail system “Perhaps I can talk a little with them, answer questions that that they wonder about. Perhaps I can supplement a little. The parents give time to their children, but it is always good to have one more.”

Emma also brings up the same theme. As the reader will recall, she has a somewhat removed relationship to her granddaughter, Vilde, due to the divorce of Vilde’s parents. This is often a loaded situation that plays on many scales in the emotional register of all concerned (Castelan-Meunier 1997). One can see in Emma’s comments that she has a great deal of empathy for her granddaughter.

She had trouble because she had a friend that was quite dominating. Suddenly she could tell me about that. Or when it was a little difficult with the father, she is so loyal, but suddenly she could tell a little bit about what had happened when she was there.

Emma also recounts another episode wherein Vilde seemed to seek after a friend.

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One time she was so interested in having a friend. I think it was something she had seen on TV. She had drawn a picture about that. And you know what I think, that as a matter of fact she needs a friend, because there are none in the area that she lives in.

Emma summarizes by saying, “The only thing I can do is to be available.” Herein is the implicit recognition that Vilde has needs but also that Emma has limited access to her granddaughter. Emma had hoped that via the use of e-mail she would be able to bridge some of these gaps. In the group interview she noted her frustrations with use of the telephone and her hopes for the new communication possibility.

[The] telephone is so artificial in some way, and she just answers “Thanks, I am ok.” So it mostly when she is home and is about to go to bed that it is a little quiet. Then she can begin to ask me things. So I am very excited to know if this e-mail will be like a telephone conversation or if it will be a little more, a little more personal.

The material from the messages between Emma and Vilde indicated that e-mail did not seem to increase the communication between the two. Vilde was too young and the PC was too inaccessible. In contrast, however, e-mail provided Anita and Grete with the opportunity to interact with their various younger correspondents

In addition to the role as an empathetic ear, elderly women often take on the role of kin-keeper. It is often women who take responsibility for the organization of holiday celebrations remembering of birthdays, calling sick family members, relating the family history (Di Leonardo 1987, 442, 447; see also Parson and Bales 1955; Ross and Holmberg 1990; Wellman 1992). It is through this activity that family solidarity is constructed and reinforced.

The material discussed here indicates that e-mail supported this activity in at least two of the cases. We saw a concrete example of this in the correspondence between Anita and Marta. The episode with the almond and the marzipan pig is a small brick in the edifice of the family history. In addition, the correspondence of Grete and Catherine allowed Grete the chance to note down here memories. Again we see here the development and elaboration of the family history.

4.3.2 The status ambiguities and quasi isolation of elderly women

While these women have an undeniable role in the family network, there are also ambiguities in their status. One of the major contemporary facts in industrial society is the neo-localization and semi-privatization of the family (Bellah et al. 1985, 87-88; King 1991; Mason 1989; Matthews 1987; Prost, 1991; Tinker 1991). Within this context the parents, and of course the school system, are given a large role in the socialization of the children (Goffman 1997, 216). In addition, career mobility, divorce, and geographical dispersion enforce the barrier between the family of procreation and other persons on the social landscape (Rosenthal 1985). These same trends also isolate the elderly.

In terms of the three women in this trial, they seemed to recognize their ambiguity of their situation. Anita, for example, noted in the group interview:

I think that they. . . have certainly developed an image of me a an *old lady*.
Yeah, even though I am relatively active, and that is the parent’s image also.

She also comments on the social distance that seems to be implicit in the life of an elderly woman when she says:

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It is clear that there will be periods when they think that it is not so much fun with these old aunts.

The same theme of isolation came out when considering their understanding of the situation in other cultures. Anita noted:

The Muslims I know, you know that the Muslim daily life has lived with a simpler technology everyday. I think that it means that the elderlys' experience means more in their everyday life. But in our culture, I don't understand all of that technology such that my experience does not mean that much. And it happens too fast so that my experiences mean less and less.

Emma also noted the relative isolation and distancing of the elderly when she said, “there is a lot there that you don't know about” when it comes to grandchildren. Here she comments on the barrier surrounding the family of orientation. At the same time she is interested in increased contact.

Interviewer: Do you want to see her [Vilde] more often

Emma: Yes I would, because there is something with the regular [contact], then one has more points in common. But now, yeah, there is not so much of it now.

It is clear that these women want to be actively involved in the lives of their young relatives and friends. It is just as clear in their comments that this is not always possible.

The difficulty of establishing communication is also seen in the discussion of how and when to call. In other work I have come across grandparents who, for example, never call during children's TV. In addition, there was the sense among the informants in this study that one must have a good reason to call. Grete notes:

I am the one that calls because I am the one who has a reason to call. So we don't call just to communicate but because there is a reason. But we talk and occasionally I visit and they like that. . . . I believe in this e-mail because then he (David) can take more initiative if he wants to and I can address them more directly

The asynchronicity of the e-mail communication means that one is not interrupting but that the communication can be carried out when the time allows. They are not butting in nor do they need a pressing excuse to initiate the interaction. Thus, the sense that access will be more direct is seen as a way to reduce the barriers. The archive of messages seems to show that, at least in the correspondence between Grete and David that this was the case.

Looking further into the social life of the elderly, Wellman and Hall have noted the well-developed social network for the elderly. In their analysis they find that the elderly often have a rich social life with a broad network of individuals (Wellman and Hall 1986; Wellman and Wortley 1989). It may be that e-mail is better suited as a way of maintaining contact with same-age friends and adult children. Here one does not face the same language related issues.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that two of the women were able to gain pleasurable use of the new technology. The data shows that e-mail has given them faster access and it

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has also given them broader geographic access. In the case of the third woman, the outcome was not as clear.

It is too much to hope that e-mail could change their interactions at a more abstract level. It has not changed their role in society nor has it changed the structure of interaction. Thus when broader issues impinge on the use of e-mail, there is no real advantage. This is most obvious in the case of Emma who had the smallest archive of messages. This was largely due to the fact that her correspondent, Vilde (9), was still too young to master extensive writing skills. Obviously these skills will develop as time goes by. Thus, at some future time, the two might well become enthusiastic writers. However, the distance imposed by the divorce of Vilde's parents' means that it is difficult for Emma and Vilde to develop the well of common experiences that could form the basis of this correspondence.

In general there seem to be two lessons. These are that the age of the child and direct access to the technology is important.

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