

In praise of slowness

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True to form, Google pulled off not just one, but two hoaxes last Sunday on April Fool's Day. One involved a wireless broadband service which would operate via sewerage lines and could be accessed by flushing a fibre optic cable down the loo. The other promised an upgrade on their famous email product Gmail, called Gmail Paper. Users could add their emails to a Paper Archive which would print out their emails on "96% post-consumer organic soybean sputum" and then send them by traditional post.

One of Google's sales lines for Gmail Paper reads: "Everyone loves Gmail. But not everyone loves email, or the digital era. What ever happened to stamps, filing cabinets, and the mailman?" The likely answer is that traditional mail will probably vanish altogether.

But, there is a way of turning email into the reflective, meaningful and considered art form that snail mail once was. It's called SLOWmail.

SLOWmail deliberately retards the process of electronic messaging by forcing users to think about what they are writing. Users "tag" their messages with words to describe their relationship to the sendee, their respective geographic locations, as well as the emotion or mood of the mail. Once the mail is sent it is filtered through the SLOWmail environment where its semantics are interpreted and assessed to determine how soon it will be delivered. After dispatch, the email's progress through the network can be observed on the SLOWmail website accompanied by graphic "visualisations" of the correspondence process.

Creators of the product, slowLab, stress that they are not aiming at reviving the missal of yesteryear. Rather, they want to explore how new media and the online environment can be used to stretch the capabilities of digital communication so that it can evolve into a more pleasurable and artful experience. As a bonus it encourages interaction between its users. According to the website, SLOWmail should be available sometime this year. No pressure! SlowLab is an offshoot of the Slow movement.

One of its supporters, Carl Honore, who wrote the book, In Praise of Slowness says that there is a global shift towards Slowness that signals a "new approach to time and space" in the areas that have long since been taken over by a need for speed and instantaneity (is that a real word?) — food, art, sex, exercise and even...email.

He cites the example of one senior manager at IBM who ends every email he sends with the plea: "Read your mail just twice each day. Recapture your life's time and relearn to dream. Join the slow email movement!" Honore assures us that the Slow movement is not a Luddite plot to bring down the wheels of progress. Slow offers us an alternative to the adrenalin-fuelled, deadline-driven state that so many of us are trapped in, without the prerequisite of relocating to a desert island or denouncing the flush toilet.

Slow claims that the impact of slowing down will be felt on a global as well as a personal level. For example, Slow Food's mission is to create awareness not only of the way food tastes but also of where it comes from, how much fuel and water was used to get it from production to consumption and how this data effects the rest of the world. Slowing down will benefit our ailing planet as well our beseiged souls.

We are not the first to be so utterly compelled by fight-or-flight atavism. Or the first to recognise the need for a considered response.

During the Russian Revolution when someone told him that quick reaction was the only way to guarantee survival, Boris Pasternak replied: "In an epoch of speed one must think slowly."