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An Infinite Number Of Monkeys Mistype Some of Their E-Mail

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And Sometimes Send Notes
That Are Hardly Shakespeare
To Unintended Recipients

By REBECCA QUICK

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The last thing Herb Jackson expected when he returned from a lunch with one of his employees was a snotty electronic-mail message from her recounting the meal. One juicy part: "I wish I'd just screamed, 'I QUIT!!'"

Then it dawned on Mr. Jackson, former editor of the Web site for the Asbury Park Press in New Jersey: Her e-mail diatribe was aimed at him but not intended for him. When he stuck his head out off his office that afternoon, the sender, Gale Morrison, looked stricken. "Pretty stupid of her," he says. Ms. Morrison subsequently did quit, "not because of Herb's management," she says. And she did it by e-mail.

Casting a Wide Net

Mr. Jackson should talk. Once, when he replied to a party invitation from a friend—and tossed in some gossip about a co-worker he disliked—half a dozen other people responded. Mr. Jackson had accidentally hit "reply to all" instead of just "reply," zapping his snide commentary to more than a dozen people, including a number of the co-worker's friends. Red-faced, he skipped the party.

E-mail can be e-vil.

Lickety-split, a whole new class of digital faux pas is mounting in offices around the country, as more people let their fingers do the talking. The number of e-mails popping up on computer screens in the U.S. surged to nearly four trillion messages last year, dwarfing the 107 billion pieces of first-class mail delivered by the U.S. Postal Service.

Along the way are a lot of mishaps, apologies and backpedaling. In Tobyhanna, Pa., 40-year-old Mark Anthony accidentally added a Nextel director, to whom he had applied for a job, to an e-mail distribution list of friends to whom he sent several raunchy jokes. (After he explained what had happened and pleaded for forgiveness, he got the job.)

For a time, Peapod, an online service for ordering grocery deliveries, was accidentally sending sensitive corporate mail intended for its chief financial officer at the time, John Miller, to a customer with the e-mail address jmiller@peapod.com. The customer was kind enough to alert the company. Peapod returned the favor by removing his e-mail address and turning it over to the CFO.

Indeed, history's first e-mail message was itself a blooper. It was transmitted across the Arpanet, the precursor to the Internet, in October 1969, when researchers at Stanford University and at the University of California at Los Angeles were testing what eventually would become the global computer network.

On that fateful day nearly three decades ago, the pioneering message read, "lo." The senders actually were trying to transmit the word "login," but the connection between the computers crashed after the first two characters.

Passing Fancy

Now, a backlash seems to be building, among e-mail trailblazers and novices alike. Prof. Michael Noll, a telecommunications specialist at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, first began using e-mail about 20 years ago at AT&T Corp. to keep in touch with his girlfriend, a computer researcher in Florida. Now he doesn't even keep an e-mail address.

"I don't want any e-mail from anyone," he says. "People abuse it, and it has turned into a bother."

People who aren't misdirecting e-mail probably just don't have the time; they are too busy trying to dig out from under an electronic avalanche. Maria Eitel, a former executive at Microsoft Corp., once returned from a business trip to find more than 2,000 e-mails waiting for her. "You just can't keep on top of it," she complains. A co-worker saved the day by helping her drag and drop everything into the garbage can except, she says, "really important messages, like from Bill Gates."

It's especially difficult to keep up if you're on the mailing list of someone like Louis Paul Eros, a 29-year-old Web designer in Pittsburgh. He's one of those people who bombards friends and acquaintances with jokes, "top 10" lists and chain letters. His daily greetings fan out to about 80 of his closest friends. "People send me jokes, and I forward them to everyone I know," he says. "It's a way to brighten people's day."

Not to some of the friends on the receiving end. Annoyed at sometimes getting three or four dispatches a day from Mr. Eros, Ken Hall says, "I've been so busy I've deleted more than I've read—but don't tell him that."

Another scene playing out in more offices: the panicky scramble to retrieve a message one regrets sending a moment or two after pushing the button. Jeff Herr still cringes when he thinks of a blistering note he sent last May. As senior producer of Disney's abcnews.com, Mr. Herr berated an engineer for not getting to his request to add an alert in the event of a major computer problem.

"I told him it was unacceptable and unprofessional and would cause harm to his family name," he says. Within 10 minutes, Mr. Herr began second-guessing himself. "I thought 'Oh God, I gotta pull it back.'" Mr. Herr was able to withdraw the e-mail, which certain sophisticated systems will allow. But he wasn't off the hook: The engineer, who had some technical tricks up his sleeve, called it up anyway. He had set up his e-mailbox to retrieve the unsent.

With the country flocking to see "You've Got Mail," the movie romance in which Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan are brought together by e-love letters, it is probably inevitable that someone should have written a book on e-mail etiquette. Released in October, the book warns against the universal aggravations of e-mail, namely the EXCESSIVE USE OF CAPITAL LETTERS and exclamation points!!!!

Titled "Writing Effective E-Mail," the book also recommends putting nothing into a message that couldn't be read by your mother or boss, as e-mail has a tendency to get misdirected. Says Nancy Flynn, who co-authored the book with her brother, Tom, "It's so easy to hit the wrong key."

Josette Lata can attest to that. She and her two sisters—Jennifer and Joann—all have e-mail addresses that begin "jlata," meaning it's easy for their notes to get misdirected. Last year, Josette, a 30-year-old art buyer in Manhattan, composed a snippy note complaining about Joann—but then sent it to Joann mistakenly instead of to Jennifer.

Josette had to do some fast talking. "I told her it was an accident and I meant to send it to a colleague," Josette says. "It was such a mean note." She still hasn't fessed up.