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Re-imagining E-mail: Academics in *The Castle*

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Abstract. Starting out from Franz Kafka's novel, *The Castle*, we meander through an exploration of the impact of that seminal socio-digital artefact—e-mail—on the academic lifeworld. In the process, we illustrate not only how e-mail is 'experienced', facilitates instantaneity, deludes us with speed, shapes the working day and accelerates work processing but also the ultimately illusory promise of the 'wired' world to empower us to escape organizational boundaries. Paradoxically, the *Castle* is always one step behind but it never comes second. **Key words.** academic work; digital illusion; Kafka; reflexivity



I am given to exaggeration, but all the same I can be trusted. (Franz Kafka)¹

Our Artefact

Anyone who reads past the abstract above will likely be intimately familiar with our object of *intressement* (Callon, 1986): the impact of electronic mail (e-mail) on the daily work experience of academics and the wider implications this might hold for how digital technologies appear to inform contemporary organizing. These days, for most academics, checking e-mail is the first task of the working day and 'It' has become little more than a



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mundane actant innocuously nested within a much broader range of digital artefacts which are emerging as embodied mediators in the computerization of work (Dourish, 2001; Taylor et al., 2001). *Enrollment* in an e-mail address is now an almost essential tool in contemporary academia: 'It' not only endows us with a passport to a virtual global presence but also permits us to re-locate ourselves effortlessly across alternative spatio-temporal domains (Menziés and Newson, 2008). What ever else it is—and, as we will try to demonstrate, it has multiple identities—e-mail appears to be a quintessential 'network-builder' (which we now take for granted).

The research reported here emerged from qualitative study of academic work in a small number of so-called 'elite' management departments which explored the changing temporalities of the academic lifeworld following the introduction of performance measurement into British universities (Ferlie et al., 1996; Keenoy and Oswick, 2004; Power, 1997, 2001; Reed, 2002). It was accomplished primarily through lengthy co-constructed interviews with 33 academics (Keenoy, 2003, 2005; Keenoy and Reed, 2008). Hence, the analysis developed here is informed by the themes of temporality and performativity. However, we also needed to devise a narrative structure which makes e-mail 'strange' while simultaneously following the social traces which this artefact has left whilst, amongst other things, mediating changes to academic work practices. In short, the question was: how do we narrate—or 'translate' (Latour, 2005)—the effects of this actant in a fashion which makes visible the less obvious consequences of academics embracing e-mail?

The Edge of Words

Epistemologically—apart from an occasional appearance from Deleuze and Guattari (1986, 1988)—the research is informed by social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Gergen, 2000, 2001) and sense-making (Weick, 1995). It draws significantly on the insights of actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005; Law, 1986; Law and Hassard, 1999) and, predictably, is re-constructed and re-presented through the medium of discourse analysis. Thus, while the primary analytic focus is on how academics discursively co-construct their engagement, opinions and experience of e-mail, we locate their views within a wider range of supplementary texts which, in turn, also translate e-mail through a variety of alternative, sometimes contradictory and occasionally disconcerting discourses which offer important clues on how to trace—if not e-mail. The narrative is also informed by an awareness of the potentially myopic 'authorial voice' and the demand for reflexivity in contemporary organizational discourse analysis (Ybema et al., 2009: 314–318). As another Czech author, Milan Kundera (2007: 12), astutely observes: 'By definition, what a narrator recounts is a thing that has happened. But each little event, as it becomes the past, loses its concrete nature and turns into an outline. Narration is recollection, therefore a summary, a simplification,



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an abstraction'. Our accountings are necessarily incomplete for not only is language a cumbersome fixative, but the edge of words are often blunted by the expectation of linear sequence in search of academic certainty.

With respect to the narrative which follows, we have constituted it through a series of 'aspects' which are designed to accommodate the needs of reflexive practice and—we would argue—the creative tension of ambiguity (Oswick et al., 2002). To this end, we display the experience and identities of e-mail through multiple methods (alternative readings, interviews, a survey and auto-ethnography); deploy a variety of disparate voices to articulate our developing argument (e.g. the extensive use of—inevitably selective—quotations from both active and passive participants reflects an attempt to plot the traces of 'the social' as it appears to emerge from various texts); and—in an attempt to contribute in a minor fashion to what Deleuze and Guattari (1986) call 'minor literature'—have, for the most part, sought to pre-empt any monological theoretical reading of the 'evidence' by embodying a variety of plausible theoretical possibilities within the narrative. As Latour, (2005: 138) points out, 'a good account will *perform* the social in the precise sense that some of the participants in the action—through the controversial agency of the author—will be *assembled* in such a way that they can be *collected* together'. Well, that is the ambition. As the initial point of dis-articulation, we start with Franz Kafka.

1st Aspect: A Possible Theory?

Kafka's novel, *The Castle*, has long provided a vivid metaphor for the intricate entanglements engendered by a traditional bureaucratic mode of being (Warner, 2007). Originally published in 1930, his text remains a potent allegory of contemporary organizing and is a graphic re-presentation of the incapacity of both individuals and organizations to resist the tendency to cultural entropy. Throughout *The Castle*, the reader is confronted with layer upon layer of convoluted organizational practices, curious norms and procedural contradictions which seduce, ensnare, bewilder, entertain and subordinate those seeking either contact with or escape from the Castle. Into this presumptively imagined world comes the central actor, K, a stranger, unburdened by organizational acculturation. He has come to take up a post as a land-surveyor but the Castle—which never makes mistakes—has no need for such work and is unprepared for him. Of course, he is then sent a letter of appointment and two assistants. The narrative follows K as he becomes ever-more entrapped in a myriad of impenetrable rules and inexplicable practices which constitute the lifeworld of *The Castle*. Although he appears to understand the Castle's fusty surface bureau-regimen, K never fully penetrates the meaning of the world he has come to. And there is no escape for all paths lead back to where he is—located simultaneously at the centre, the bottom and the periphery of the Castle. He is everywhere and nowhere at once—free but unable to act autonomously



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and, curiously, perpetually threatened by the benign but rigid ambiance that comes with employment by the Castle. Although never excluded, he is forever outside.

With Kafka nothing is ever transparent. Everything meanders purposefully through parallel worlds. But one theme which seems to inform his novels is the idea that, seemingly inevitably, we can become ensnared in any organizational form, however novel, stultifying or apparently liberating (Parker, 2005; Warner, 2007). There are roads and spaces everywhere; but all return us to the same place. Indeed, Kafka leaves the impression that organization is, by its nature, simultaneously controlling and liberating for boundaries emerge in the lifeworld only when we attempt to cross them. He also seems to be indicating that while organizational boundaries may be constantly re-drawn they are always boundaries. We are, it would seem, all 'land-surveyors' measuring and crossing interminable boundaries only to discover that all we ever do is enter another territory inhabited by another set of illusory freedoms. Although apparently from an archaic fictional organizational realm, we want to suggest that Kafka's *Castle* provides us with a disruptive but insightful conceptual-theoretic metaphor though which to re-view the impact of e-mail.

2nd Aspect: The Imagined World

It is written that in 1973 a computer scientist, Len Kleinrock, having left his electric razor in Brighton, UK, 'invented' e-mail, the 'most important two-way communications medium since the telephone' (Hafner and Lyon, 1996). E-mail is merely one element in a complex of mutually implicated digital artefacts which have shaped and continue to inform the computerization of work (Taylor et al., 2001)—if not social life more generally (Fuchs, 2007); and, in his profoundly optimistic seminal essay, Mark Weiser (1991) laid out a vision of the field of 'ubiquitous computing'. Weiser predicted 'a world in which computer interaction casually enhances every room' and facilitates an extremely wide range of social and work activities. In contrast to the many images of virtual realities through which our conception of the future is often projected, Weiser's ideas were firmly grounded in the practicalities of daily routine. Hundreds of computers of all sizes will be deployed throughout all the spaces we inhabit to create an environment he calls 'embodied virtuality'. Importantly, he is concerned to ensure that humans remain in control: his computers do not take us into their world, but enter ours to service our needs; they are ubiquitous, subservient and, like automatons, ever-ready to please. For Weiser, the ultimate goal is 'invisibility' and he draws a parallel between writing—which he regards as the best example we have of a successful, ubiquitous, invisible technology—and our computer regulated future. 'The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it' (Weiser, 1991: 94). As he observes, such a process 'is a fundamental consequence not of technology, but of



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human psychology. Whenever people learn something sufficiently well, they cease to be aware of it ... in this way are we freed to use them without thinking'. Of course, Kafka—who spent most of his life as an insurance administrator (Warner, 2007)—was intimately familiar with the invisible technologies of organizing.

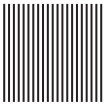
The analytic theme which emerges from Weiser's grounded speculations (see also European IST, 2000; Norman, 1998) is the technocratic utopia which has accompanied the rise of not just e-mail but digital technology more generally. Our seemingly unreflective acceptance of such discourse is marked by our continuing enthusiasm for anything digital—from e-mail to mobile phones to iPods and Blackberries. More recently, Paul Dourish (2001) has developed a more grounded and nuanced concept of 'embodied interaction'—which acknowledges the mediation of the social—to inform the next phase of development in human-computer networks. In short, we now inhabit not just a new Castle but are becoming so familiar with its routines and rituals that, for many, 'being wired' is experienced as normality.

In contrast to *The Castle's* genuflection to Weber's iron cage, e-mail is invariably projected as a source of liberation (see below). It has developed into a medium of global intercourse which appears to be beyond the conventional boundaries of time and space and of course, by implication, beyond 'organizational controls'. Pressing the Send button appears to give us pace, flexibility, instantaneity, freedom and—in the words of one of our respondents—the ability to be 'everywhere and nowhere at once'. We can transcend our organizational contexts, finesse authority structures and communicate at will on a truly global scale from virtually any location across the planet. And all this can be accomplished anonymously and—with a little care—in an untraceable fashion. It appears that we can place ourselves beyond scrutiny. As such, e-mail appears to offer individuals a mechanism of empowerment through which they can escape from the Castle while simultaneously creating new 'extra-organizational' (actor-) networks. Or so it seems.

However, as the semiotic traces of organizational behaviour in a Chat Room (Figure 1) indicate, the progressive inscription (Callon, 1986) of e-mail into daily work routines has animated a wide range of individually tailored coping strategies, classification schemes, discursive styles and emoticons. 'It' has us organizing personalized mini-bureaucracies nestled within PCs innocently storing what might one day emerge as organizational histories (Lilley et al., 2004). 'It' has arrived and—as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) might tell us—is burrowing in every direction connecting, informing, re-connecting, diverting, traducing and, as we shall see, nestling in our consciousness.

3rd Aspect: The Emergent Artefact

The initial conceptual-theoretic idea which informed the research into the rhythms of academic work was that the demand for performativity would



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Figure 1. At home in the Castle?

'I FILE everything, but don't delete it. The senior partner, who gets maybe 300 non-spam messages a day, saves everything. There are 64000+ items in his inbox. He wonders why it loads slowly'.

'I keep everything. It's a habit carried over from real life. :)
If I have an important file that I need to keep where I can find it, I e-mail it to myself. It goes into the folder marked "Stuff I don't want to lose"'.

'I keep my inbox clear; the only things in there are people I haven't set up rules for. I categorize people within the company by where they work ("Accounting", "Administration", "Merchandising"), and automatically route their messages there. Friends and family get their own big folder, with a subfolder for each person, and a rule for each person. If their message is something I can't deal with right away, but need to attend to at some point, I'll drag the message over to "Tasks" and it'll pop up with a new task, which I'll just save and close'.

'When I look at my outlook.pst file and freak out at the size of it, I'll methodically go through all my mail folders, sort by size of message, and either delete the biggest ones or save the attachments to my hard drive and then delete them. Every two or three months, I'll archive my messages older than two years old. Every once in a while, I'll sort my messages within folders by subject, and delete all but the last message, with all the message history stored inside it. And every once in a long while, I'll do a text search for all messages that have the word "Thanks" in it, and do a quick preview of each; if that's all it says, I'll delete it'.

Source: <http://www.eaforums.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-26705.html> (June, 2006).

close off some valued spatio-temporal dimensions of academic 'culture'. Each participant was asked to detail the changing nature of their work and work tasks over the course of their career and it was anticipated that academics would indicate they had less space to 'play' and less time to do anything other than perform to the tune of the audit pipers. While e-mail was not a specific focus of interest it was expected that the wide-ranging effects of computerization would be widely remarked upon. However, echoing the invisibility Weiser (1991) predicted, it was not. Reflecting about 'what people had not mentioned' it soon became clear that only one person had talked *directly* about the transformative impact of the digital revolution and e-mail on 'work' routines in academia.

In answer to the question: '*Is there anything I've not asked you about which you think is important?*', a managerial informant with previous experience in industry, after a long pause, replied:

You might find that some of the differences [among informants responses] are accounted for according to their use of technology ... we've viewed it as an enabler... if they want it, let them have it ... some things are used a lot, some things aren't ... mobile phones, laptops ... [we've] got 'baby' laptops



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for presentations [for women researchers] and integrated e-mail. [All this is] enormously liberating ... and the constraint when you haven't got that ability ... if people are not e-enabled ... that's one of the biggest changes in the way of working ... I am amazed that people still write papers in long-hand and give them to a secretary.

For nearly all the other 32 participants, e-mail was an unremarked office artefact—and this despite about half the sample being individuals who had become academics before e-mail existed. What made this all the more remarkable is that, during the interviews, e-mail was nearly always a constant companion, occasionally beeping in the background. 'It' behaved like a semiotic nudge reminding us that we were not alone and participants would *always* glance across to the computer when this occurred. But, in nearly all the few instances where it was specifically mentioned, e-mail emerged merely as a sometimes irritating medium; an incidental adjunct through which information was transmitted or tasks accomplished. (Of course, much depends on how questions are co-constructed and no one was asked directly about their engagement with e-mail.)

Although there is extensive work on the macro-impact of digital artefacts (Dourish, 2001; Fuchs, 2007; Taylor et al. 2001), the majority of work on e-mail itself is conducted by computer scientists interested in technical developments (e.g. Ducheneaut and Watts, 2005; Waldvogel, 2001) and by communication scholars concerned with writing style and discursive content. Orlikowski (1992, 2000; see also Orlikowski and Yates, 2002) has developed a compelling argument around how we enact these new technologies but, with notable exceptions (Czarniawska and Hernes, 2005; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991), the pervasive inscription of e-mail on work practices and as a device which facilitates the control and direction of behaviour has not attracted extensive interest from organization scientists. Bellotti et al. (2005) show how using e-mail for inappropriate purposes can lead to overload while Friedman and Currell (2003) identified the structural properties of e-mail which lead to disputes; Ducheneaut (2002) has examined 'electronic power games' and, more expansively, Ducheneaut and Bellotti (2001) considered e-mail as a personal habitat within which individuals build their own customized 'information systems'. In a study of professional workers, González and Mark (2001) discovered that—partly as a result of the electronic media in use—their work is highly fragmented: people average about 3 minutes on each task and there is continual switching between (on average) ten 'work spheres' during the day. Such findings are symptomatic of the increased pace and fragmentation of work which appears to have accompanied what our informant called 'e-enabling'. They are echoed in Menzies (2005) survey of 100 academics in six Canadian universities which indicate that academics are distracted, unable to stay focused and appear to be operating continuously in reactive mode to the multiplicity of endless demands on their time. She argues that a key factor contributing to these increasing temporal pressures is the digital restructuring of administration



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and teaching. Paradoxically, digital connectivity seems to be associated with people feeling increasingly *disconnected*. As one of our participants reflected:

When the place was a lot smaller I knew everyone ... these days, there are some [staff] I've not met ... Faculty meetings are not at all often and [are] poorly attended ... I haven't been to a Faculty meeting for 3 years ... The research awayday is the only day on which people get together ... I learn about things by e-mail or memo—mostly by e-mail.

Menzies (2005) also stresses the significance of the increasing resort to centralized 'e-administration' in higher education conducted via e-mail. As another of our participants declared:

At [X] University it was so democratic it drove you insane ... you have about 30 e-mails a day involving you in the management process ... masses and masses of things taking up your time ... involving you in virtually everything.

More generally, the research on e-mail and other digital media and information sources seems to indicate it is not merely the seemingly ever-expanding range of tasks and their associated temporal demands which is the problem but also the unreflective societal expectations about the sheer pace at which 'communication' and 'action' will be now be conducted. Digital means instantly; but, as Kafka warned us, technological change may be accompanied by a miasma of 'hissing and singing':

... you have never yet come properly into contact with our authorities. All these contacts are merely apparent, but you with your ignorance of the circumstances regard them as real. And as for the telephone, look, here—and I certainly do have dealings with the authorities—there is no telephone. In bars and the like it may provide a useful service, much as a musical box does, no more than that. Tell me, have you ever telephoned here? Then you'll perhaps understand what I'm saying. In the Castle the telephone clearly works very well indeed; I'm told that people are constantly telephoning there, which of course greatly speeds up the work. We hear this constant telephoning on our telephones down here as a hissing and singing, you'll have heard it yourself, I'm sure. But, you see, that hissing and that singing are the only real and reliable things that the telephones tell us, everything else is illusory. There is no specific telephone connection with the Castle, no exchange that puts our calls through; when you call someone in the Castle from here, it rings on all the telephones in the lowest departments there, or rather it would ring on all of them were it not for the fact—which I know it for certain—that on nearly all of them the bell is switched off. Every so often, though, an overtired official feels the need for a little distraction—particularly in the evening or at night—and switches the bell on, then we get an answer, except it's just a joke. And that's very understandable, after all. Who has any right to ring in about his private little troubles in the middle of the most important jobs, which are invariably being done in a tearing hurry. Nor do I understand how even an outsider can think that, when he calls Sordini, for instance, it really is Sordini that answers. It's much more likely to be a minor clerk in quite another department. On the other hand, it may happen in a lucky moment



that, when you call the minor clerk, Sordini himself replies. Of course, it's better then to run away from telephone before you hear the first ring. (Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, 1930/1997: 65)

4th Aspect: Academic–E-mail Interaction

The general argument being proposed is that academics are becoming more and more 'entrained' (Ancona and Chong, 1996; Bluedorn, 2002) by the incessant and interminable rhythm of e-mail. Moreover, we tune in not merely because we need to—for many of us, we 'have to'. 'It' hisses and sings constantly; and if we don't hear its rhythm we may even experience withdrawal symptoms. In order to follow the actions of this seemingly liminal object in more detail, a short questionnaire was (of course) e-mailed to all the original participants in the study.² This yielded a 45% return (15 replies). To supplement this, the questionnaire was also sent, opportunistically, to a carefully selected number of other 'high performing' academics to produce a final sample of 53 respondents. Of these, about 50% were located in Britain; 25% were US based and the remaining 25% were Dutch academics. The initial items inquired about their e-mail habits, the amount of linear time it consumed and the number of e-mails received and sent. However, the primary purpose of this exercise was to expand the discursive or qualitative material available for analysis and a further set of open-ended items simply asked respondents to identify the ways in which e-mail helped and hindered their work.

Although the findings are not inconsistent with more extensive studies of e-mail practice (Hair et al., 2006; Jackson et al., 2001; Markus, 1994), the results are best regarded as illustrative and symptomatic of possible behavioural trends. Unsurprisingly, given the temporal pressures experienced by contemporary academics (Keenoy, 2003; Menzies, 2005), on inspecting the individual questionnaire responses, some appeared to be ambiguous and unreflective. Given these caveats, what is it possible to learn from the data? How far have we been colonized by the Castle?

First, with respect to reported interaction with our artefact, *everyone* ($n = 53$) checks in every working day. For 96.2% (51), attending to new e-mail is the first daily task. All check in at least once more during the day; most seem to check between five and ten times; and the majority (39 or 77%) are wired all day long. And, given how respondents discursively enacted their daily engagement with e-mail, it seems that 'It' now articulates the rhythm of work:

All day: morning, noon, afternoon, evening, night, weekends, holidays!

7:45 and then periodically through the day.

All day in effect, but I don't really check my mail as such as my alert tells me when I have new mail.

Too often! About 10 times? (depending whether I am in work and therefore on line all the time and have e-mail notification or at home where I have to dial up).



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One respondent, perhaps more fully enrolled into the meticulously inscribed routines being demanded in the new Castle, elaborated on this latter theme:

I work from home more than at work to avoid interruptions. Because it's a dial-up service at home, checking is done three times a day (first thing and early afternoon and late afternoon) and constantly at work because the connection is permanent and the alerting message for new messages is on.

In addition, some 54% also check in on Saturdays and Sundays; and 55% are unable to forgo the habit even when away from home. One respondent, who answered 'no' to the item about checking on Saturdays and Sundays, added:

... but I would if I could. I don't yet have access to my e-mail at work when I'm not there. On Saturday I only check my private e-mail, at home, as I do every day.

One possible measure of our *enrollment* (Callon, 1986) and dependence is the 67% who have *chosen* to be 'alerted' every time a new message arrives. Such figures seem to add weight to the suggestion (Hair et al., 2006) that, for academics, e-mail is an omnipresent and potentially addictive temporal demand which may be regulating our (work)lives to an unexpected degree in ways of which we are not fully aware. Indeed, given this data, it is difficult *not* to think in terms of addiction and a periodic 'buzz' from the 'alert'. If there were such a thing—and, in the Castle, everything seems possible—e-mail seems to function as a socio-digital circadian rhythm which kick-starts and then refreshes our working day, continually connecting and re-connecting us. Paradoxically, it may also be re-configuring how we enact the 'social' (see also Menzies and Newson, 2008):

I think that it is good to have e-mail in our line of work, where we spend lots of time on our own working away, it makes me feel like I have some contact with other human beings regardless of how limited e-mail contact is. ... Though having said that, I guess people used to use phones more and talk to each other!

Estimates of the number of e-mails received each day varied from four to 150 and the average was 25. These figures should be treated with caution: while some respondents specifically excluded spam mails, others did not and many did not differentiate between genuine and spam mail at all. Estimates of the daily time spent reading and responding to mails may be equally suspect. For example, one respondent, who averaged 30 e-mails per day, added that these were mostly 'admissions inquiries'. This adds up to some 150 such inquiries per week. This might be correct for some weeks of the year but seems unlikely to be sustained over the year. As this indicates, it is almost impossible to 'standardize' the respondents' frame of reference to even the simplest of items. However, the reported time spent dealing with mails ranged from 2 minutes to 4½ hours and the average was 1 hour. For those who also reported on the time spent initiating mails



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($n = 38$), the range was from 5 minutes to 1½ hours with an average of 33 minutes. Extrapolating these potentially deceptive quantities into some equally suspect workload numbers, on average, it emerged that academics now spend a full day each week dealing with—at the extremes—something between 30 and 1,000 e-mail communications (that last number includes an indeterminate number of spam mails). All this takes place in a private space in between teaching, research and administration and, usually, without the aid of a secretary.

The only secure generalization that can be drawn from these various estimates is that it may be unwise to place much trust in such instant evaluations of how we spend our time. Not only—as Weiser (1991) predicted—is e-mail an increasingly invisible taken-for-granted (and, perhaps, quasi-autonomous) artefact, but the sense-making (Weick, 1995) engendered by the open questions—whilst it produced some reflexive insights—was almost exclusively positive in the evaluation of the impact of e-mail. For example, only one respondent clearly identified (and theorized) the potential ambiguities in our relationship to this artefact:

I found it really hard to reflect on my own e-mail behaviour. E-mail (as other technologies) seems to represent an autonomous force in my work that it as much seems to use me as I use it.

And there are good grounds for thinking the questionnaire data underestimate the amount of work-time given over to our e-mail generates. Some clues as to why this might be so come from what respondents added by way of comment and from what emerged when each questionnaire was examined as a whole. For example, in answer to the item about how long it takes to deal with mail, one respondent simply wrote: ***‘3 hours 30 minutes—this is a guess!’***. And another—illustrating the complexities involved—commented:

I usually prioritize those that I want to read and respond to that day. I am very erratic in this regard. Some I will respond immediately. Others I will read and respond maybe 4–5 hours later, or the next day. Some I will wait several days. Sometimes, if the matter requires more thought, I will read it but not respond for 2–3 days.

One approached the difficulties by thoughtfully explaining the process of dissimulation which takes place when filling in questionnaires:

Well the time spent answering your mail tom is a little longer than many! I don't wish to be awkward, but any average figure would be made up arbitrarily, some take as long as half an hour, most take a minute or two, and many take a bit more. What's in an average? If you forced me for a number I'd say, 5 minutes. (For the data analysis, this answer was entered as '5 minutes'.)

Others identified and elaborated the consequential temporal impact of e-mail on their work activities. For example:



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appr. 30 minutes. Note: much of the e-mails I receive contain information I work with—so although I'm only spending half an hour to respond to all this mail, I'm practically working with the information I got in these mails all day.

Nevertheless, however much time e-mail 'really' consumes, its allure—what Callon (1986) might see as the key to e-mail's *interestment* strategy—is that nearly all respondents identified speed as a prime benefit even though, experientially, this is only manifest in the nano-second it takes to press the Send button. For example, the respondent who remarked:

what I love most is to be able to send mail with attachments—a paper to Australia in seconds, a programme to a colleague ... Being able to share information with (limitless) numbers of people simultaneously all without postage!

was also the person who reported spending four and a half hours a day dealing with e-mail. This capacity to dissociate the material effect of e-mail from our idealized conception of the technology was not uncommon: we are convinced it 'saves time'. Indeed, insofar as it is possible to identify a common iconic view about the impact of e-mail on work processing, it is captured succinctly by another respondent who noted how it facilitates:

...quick reactions ...quick answering ... quick information ... quick contacts ...easy consulting with colleagues.

We are, it seems, enamoured by the digital illusion of pace; and the benefit of e-mail was almost unquestioned for even those who acknowledged its double-edged character were forgiving:

I wish we did not have it and thank God we do!

And significant critical comment was rare:

[e-mail] ... takes a huge amount of time ... is addictive because easier than thinking creatively ... creates a low state of awareness ... encourages people to send e-mail questionnaires.

'It' may be fast but, simultaneously, it consumes our linear time; is potentially addictive; endlessly demanding and opens us up to all sorts of uninvited communications. One final quote illustrates precisely what we might call the ubiquitous pressure which may accompany 'ubiquitous computing':

Sometimes, when I'm busy already, I get stressed when I see new mail arrive or know that there are still a dozen mails in my inbox waiting for an answer or to be dealt with in another way. For your information: when I left the office yesterday, my inbox counted 146 mails ... appr. 15 need an answer Monday morning.

Despite appearing to be almost constantly stressed by the demands of e-mail, this respondent still felt compelled to provide an elaborate response on the questionnaire. The perceived pressure to answer every e-mail demand



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might indicate a loss of control over working practices (Hair et al., 2006, differentiate between 'relaxed', 'driven' and 'stressed' e-mailers).

Both the absence of e-mail from the interviews and the ambiguities which emerged during the analysis of the questionnaire raised new issues. Not only has e-mail come to be regarded as an innocuous digital paper-clip coordinating if not directing the course of the working day, but many who employ its services appear unaware of what it is doing and how much time it consumes. 'It' has crept up, colonized us and transformed not only the way we do our work but also how the Castle works on us; and, it would seem, we have barely noticed:

*It doesn't surprise me. A deep respect for authority is something you're all born with here, more of it gets instilled into to you in all sorts of ways and from every direction throughout your lives, you also do your best to help the process along yourselves. Not that I'm saying anything against that basically; if an authority is good, why shouldn't people respect it? (Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, 1930/1997: 164)*

5th Aspect: Auto-Ethnography

What was needed was more accurate detail about how the actant initiated and—perhaps—controlled interaction and task activities over the course of the working day. Curious about his own entrainment and as a means of cross-checking the questionnaire results, one of the authors conducted an auto-ethnography of his own practice (Alvesson, 2003; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; see also van Maanen, 1988 on the potential of 'confessional tales'). Using the Inbox as his impeccable data source, this involved logging all e-mails received over a two-day period—on neither day was there any unusual e-mail traffic—noting how each mail motivated action and how long it took to deal with each one. In part, the objective was to identify an illustrative range of the practical purposes for which e-mail is routinely employed during the course of a working day; in part to estimate the temporal consequences; and in part it was a means of reflecting upon his mundane interaction with e-mail from an empirically informed and more self-conscious perspective. What emerged was mostly tedious but perhaps instructive.

The results (see Table 1) indicate a daily average of 21 e-mails which need attention. Ignoring spam, there are five to ten others (these include personal mails and listserv traffic). Hence, the 21 exemplary e-mails listed serve as a proxy for an average routine 'day'. Mostly, they are dealt with as they come in; some—which require additional work prior to answering—are left until later (not necessarily the same day). On this particular proxy day, it took 3 hours and 39 minutes to deal with 21 e-mail messages (c.f. the questionnaire findings above in which 53 academics who average 25 e-mails a day *estimated* they spent an average of 1 hour a day on e-mail). He checks e-mail first thing in the morning and then four or five times

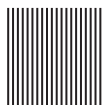


Table 1. K's 3 hours 39 minutes inside the Castle?

Content	Response	Received at	Origin	Time taken
1. Conference—call for papers	Read and forward to colleagues	03.04	Not known ?Australia/Egypt	5 mins
2. Two-page news article	Read: interesting —now forgotten!	06.05	Listserv, Australia	10 mins
3. Abstract of research seminar	Read it—decide not for me	14.50	KCL ('home' university)	5 mins
4. Info on new book	Skim and check on-line—no good	17.01	Publisher	10 mins
5. Advice request on conference organization	Write detailed reply on what to do.	14.37	Conference Administrator, Amsterdam	20 mins
6. Response to 5—details modified solution	Read and reply to say OK	18.29	Conference Administrator, Amsterdam	3 mins
7. Request to forward an e-mail	Comply	16.17	Cardiff and Berlin	2 mins
8. Infoand instructions for new PhD applications	Skim and copy to disc for future reference	18.38	KCL	5 mins
9. Information about new on-line library resources	Add to my file on 'where to find things'	18.41	KCL	5 mins
10. Request to print an attached file for someone whose printer has broken	Comply—will take document to meeting tomorrow	23.49	London	10 mins
11. Info request re: hotels in Amsterdam	Write detailed reply (includes on-line research)	23.55	Washington, USA	20 mins
12. Info request re: refereeing process	Write detailed reply	03.39	Australia	15 mins
13. Agenda for research meeting	Print agenda and file for reference	15.12	Another GB University	5 mins
14. Conference call	Skim and delete; not of interest	14.45	Discourse Listserv	2 mins
15. Journal contents 'alert'	Read and download 1 abstract	18.10	Sage	10 mins
16. Info request re: job applications from PhD student	Read—write detailed reply 2 days later	23.28	KCL	20 mins
17. Information re: free journal downloads	Skim and download 4 articles	13.48	Journal Editor, Washington, USA	40 mins
18. Conference—call for papers	Read, forward and think about it	20.54	Another GB University	10 mins
19. Information re: HE stats	Read—wonder if of use/relevant to my research?	16.47	KCL	5 mins
20. Spreadsheet re: dissertation supervision	Read and add to files	13.33	KCL	5 mins
21. Virus warning from IT Department	Read and wonder if it's got me	13.11	KCL	2 mins
Total				3 hours and 39 mins



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during the day. Invariably—just in case—he also checks in last thing at night. His research diary around the time he was constructing Table 1 includes the following remarks:

- *I was both shocked and not surprised by these numbers. Am trying to persuade myself this is above average for my usual daily fix. My guess is the average is around 2 hours + (but I know I'm kidding myself?) My next guess is that I'm more dependent than most colleagues—you can tell from the pattern of their responses: some never reply and others take weeks to get back. No wonder I frequently end the day wondering: 'what have I done today?'. However, substantively, there is little that surprises in the table—all the usual traffic for this time of year.*
- *e-mail arrives relentlessly 24 hours a day; it never rests; work is continuously and autonomically stored for me. The obvious point here is that, because e-mail makes us publicly and directly (if not instantly) 'available', anyone can e-mail a request for action of any kind at any time of the day or night. (Maybe that is what the 'Alert' is for—the nightshift?) Even when I sleep or am away at a conference or on holiday it has no mercy. It knows only one thing: 'deliver the message'. This is not mere hissing and singing. (Or is it?) And every morning my first action is to invite 'it' to remind me of what's not yet done, who's still awaiting a response, of another reference which needs to be checked or another event I ought to think about going to. But, that's how it is with junkies, isn't it? The never-ending ache for action (and, perhaps, 'identity')? It's not just 'where would I be without it' but 'who would I be without it?'. Is this why we are enamoured of it?*
- *It provides almost instantaneous contact with any e-address in the world; is multi-tasking and phenomenally flexible; and I remain convinced it saves me time. It sucked up nearly 4 hours of my day—but it is time-efficient?*
- *It provides a vast range of relevant work-related information and resources (numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21) which—provided I can remember where they are stored—are permanently and instantly available should the need arise; it permits me to organize-at-a-distance (numbers 5, 6, 7, 10, 11 and 13); deal very quickly with relatively complex inquiries (numbers 5, 11, 12 and 16) and, on occasion, take 20 minutes out to skim and store four articles, a task which—had I gone to the library—would have taken me half a day (number 17). But note, there are no requests to referee (usually attached) papers—I get about one a month; no proofs to read through (I wish!); and no papers-in-progress from colleagues I collaborate with (for me, a major benefit of e-mail technology). But also none of those mails which send me into a private rage for no discernible reason and leave me mumbling obscenities for the rest of the day. (For advice on such matters, see Shapiro and Anderson, 1985, a piece which, for reasons which escape me, is called a 'Rand Classic'.)*



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- *It eats into the time available for 'my' work. However, re-reading the list, Sordini should be pleased. In less than 4 hours I have: stored considerable useful information about teaching and research for future use; continued to perform my part in organizing an international conference which will bring in money and, perhaps, international status points; assisted one colleague in Cardiff to send an important document to another in Berlin, and another to print a document needed for a meeting the next day; prepared some work for a different meeting the next day; perhaps helped a doctoral student to find a job; and, with luck, avoided infecting colleagues' computers with a virus (again). But why does none of this make me feel 'I've done a good day's work'? It matters little for, of course, the boss would never read my e-mail; they never do things like that, do they? Nor will he know that those unnoticed 3 hours and 39 minutes of frenzied productive activity were spread out across the day disrupting all the other linear tasks I intended to complete—and didn't. (Only later did I learn that the estimated average response time to e-mails is 1 minute 44 seconds and that it takes an average of 64 seconds to return to what one has been doing prior to the interruption—see Jackson et al., 2001).*
- *It's likely that many if not most academics now routinely spend a significant part of their working time performing similar 'productive' tasks to those listed in Table 1. Such productivity goes unrecorded and, in all likelihood, unacknowledged. We all do it now? E-mail may be time-efficient but, simultaneously, we have permitted this unctuous omnipresence to become a voracious time thief. It's there. It's fast. It beeps. It cajoles—'oh, please, Big Boy, this will only take a minute'. We are seduced and traduced.*
- *At my age, seduction takes many forms. My 'work' seems to involve inhabiting and juggling an experientially indeterminate range of temporal locations and rhythms within the 24/7 time frame. Indeed, there are no boundaries between anything any more. During the course of the day, I have been communicated with 'instantly' by persons (known and unknown) from across the UK, mainland Europe, Australia, the United States and (maybe) Egypt. I work in 'my time'; my respondents in theirs. Some are behind me; some ahead—we circulate unimpeded through the burrows of e-Time. I've sent a draft chapter at 12 midnight to an Australian colleague who amended it over breakfast. E-mail compresses time and space. Inhabiting a 'timeless' or elastic space, we can convince ourselves we are stealing back time. Like Davros, I travel the universe, stopping where I like and speaking with whomever I choose. I love the sense of international connectedness all this gives me. But, of course, I have no time to stand and stare. What was it Kafka said? "All these contacts are merely apparent, but you with your ignorance of the circumstances regard them as real". (Source: K. Research Diary, June 2004)*



6th Aspect: Beyond Hissing and Singing?

Over a period of about 20 years e-mail has totally transformed academic work. 'It' is now a taken-for-granted accoutrement of work-life which has been seamlessly embedded into daily routines. For younger academics, socialized into digital ubiquity, this is merely 'normality'; it is their world. Once acculturated, older academics saw little threat and, according to taste, gradually incorporated it almost unreflectively into their working practices. In both groups, many have progressively deployed e-mail to relocate themselves temporally and spatially in ever-widening networks of salient actors. Many seem both dazzled by what we might call 'e-Time' and trapped within it; some appear to be fully entrained:

Hi Tom, Here I am again—I don't have the alert turned on—well, not electronically. The one in my head is much more effective.

E-mail emerges as an invaluable and seemingly innocent presence: an anonymous socio-digital office assistant. The over-whelming majority of academics (who agreed to participate in the research) display fulsome praise for its undoubted benefits while remaining singularly tolerant of its seemingly less desirable effects. However, it also seems clear that, despite the welcome dissolution of conventional spatio-temporal organizational boundaries, e-mail has facilitated a vastly more 'productive' transmission and dispersal of work for it increases both the rate at which work circulates and the pace at which it arrives to be (re-)processed. This almost exponential growth in traffic has been supplemented by the ever-watchful Sordini's of this world: e-mail is now at the hub of virtually all intra- and inter-organizational university communication and occupies a central role in organizational control processes (Menziés, 2005). Contemporary academic work is almost impossible without e-mail but may, simultaneously, be mutating within it. Not unlike the processual innards of *The Castle*, the tireless perambulations of this digital artefact are holographic (Keenoy, 1999). As we have tried to demonstrate, each aspect is implicated in every other and e-mail presents us with a series of experiential and conceptual-theoretic paradoxes. Almost unnoticed, a mere digital artefact has come to articulate our (working) days: 'it' communicates in seconds but consumes our linear time; 'it' puts us in contact with anyone almost anywhere but, socially, we appear to be becoming more isolated; 'it' gives us access to a vast reservoir of information but we 'attend to' less and less; we are freer but have to run faster and faster to occupy any space. More precisely, the space for reflection seems to have been ever-more squeezed by the demand for ever-more instant communication and (re-)action.

This suggests that any attempt to appreciate the phenomena of e-mail at the level of experience requires us to address the themes of velocity, acceleration and dislocation—all of which inform Paul Virilio's (1977) disconcerting and seemingly eccentric science of speed, dromology. And his



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reflections seem apposite: he insists that as objects and processes move faster we not only approach gridlock but the possibility of an accident increases.

Every technology carries its own negativity, which is invented at the same time as technical progress ... With the current world-wide revolution in communication and telematics, acceleration has reached its physical limit, the speed of electromagnetic waves. So there is the risk not of a local accident in a particular location, but rather of a global accident that would affect if not the entire planet, then at least the majority of people concerned by these technologies. (Virilio, 1977: 89; 92–93)

And—in sharp contrast to Weiser's (1991) utopian vision—with respect to our digital future, he warns:

The future lies in cosmic solitude. I picture a weightless individual in a little ergonomic armchair, suspended outside a space capsule, with the earth below and the interstellar void above. A man with his own gravity, who no longer needs a relationship to society, to those around him, and least of all to a family. (Virilio, 2005; see also Virilio, 2000)

Although Virilio seems concerned with the extremes of possibility, such remarks not only echo Weiser's 'embodied virtuality' but also resonate with the more mundane reported experiences with e-mail. The unremitting pace and scope of the multiple 'communications' we routinely deal with are always under threat from viruses or system breakdown and there are also indications that the potential for social exchange to become more and more virtual is not without foundation (even though there may be a lot of steps between where we are now and 'cosmic solitude').

However, Virilio's imagination must be tempered with Kafka's more grounded organizational analyses. One reason for employing *The Castle* as the conceptual-theoretic metaphor informing this analysis is to underline the continuities which accompany technological change. When Kafka was writing, telephone technology was just beginning to colonize society. Its potential ambiguities confronted us then the way e-mail confronts us now. And what Kafka reminds us is that the imagined possibilities of technological innovation are always conditioned by the frequently banal purposes to which they are put; we do things differently, but not that differently—Sordini always needs the contact-comfort of files (virtual or otherwise)? More precisely, Kafka might well insist that despite the promise of the 'networked organization'—and *The Castle* was superbly 'networked'—organizational demands for control means we seem destined to remain ensnared in some iteration of the bureaucratic mode of being. For Kafka, control is ever problematic. His prescience about the bureaucratic regimen came from his organizational experience and, unsurprisingly, *The Castle* is littered with examples of what was later to emerge as 'bureaucratic dysfunctions' in the 1950s and 1960s.³ The core analytic point of this literature is that, in practice, the model is prone to produce logical contradictions—bureaupathologies such as departmentalism or endless 'red tape'. Hence, the putative pace and supreme efficiency



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of bureaucracy can be deeply compromised by zealous conformity to bureaucratic rationales (Ritzer, 1998; Weber, 1968). And, in this respect, despite e-enabling, contemporary organizing remains subject to similar 'dysfunction' and stasis for an over-reliance upon any aspect of the model risks what Virilio calls 'an accident': ubiquitous computing may ineluctably promote digital gridlock.

Of course, Weber was fully aware of the limits of his 'ideal type' and his 'iron cage' has long provided the metaphor for the alienating potential of bureaucracy. However, the seemingly contradictory insight which emerges from looking at bureaucracy through the apparently stultifying ambiance of *The Castle* is that, simultaneously, it is also a means of creating a sense of being and identity, of producing some measure of continuity and of constructing and re-constructing a semblance of a legitimate—if not also a just—social order. So too with e-mail: it seems to be implicated in constructing and re-constructing identities; it certainly contributes to promoting a particular mode of 'performativity' and—according to some commentators—the informal mode of being it promotes is leading to less hierarchical organizational relationships. But, somehow, these appear to be *ersatz* achievements?

Classic literature and archaic functionalist organization science may appear to be curious and unpromising texts from which to theorize contemporary academics' experience of e-mail and the 'wired world' of contemporary organizing. However, as we have attempted to demonstrate, although e-mail has revolutionized how academics accomplish work, it remains subject to the self-same contradictions which have long characterized 'organization'. Can 'e-enabling' ever take us beyond the ubiquity of organizational 'hissing and singing'?

Notes

- 1 Letter to Milena Jesenská, cited in Introduction to Kafka (1930/1997).
- 2 We want to express our sincere gratitude to all those academics who—both as participants and/or questionnaire respondents—permitted us some insight into their/our complex lifeworld. Although sharing a very similar institutional space, we have been continuously intrigued and occasionally astonished by the variations not only in how we configure that space but also in how we experience and engage in that space. Nearly all gave at least 2 hours of their time.
- 3 The key texts on bureaucratic dysfunctions are Merton (1940), Selznick (1949) and Gouldner (1954). Their work provided the basis of March and Simon's (1965) classic analysis of bounded rationality. In this context it is notable that Kafka's *The Trial* (1925/2000) also provides a textbook account of such dysfunctions.

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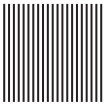
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