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Editing Bill Gates's E-Mail

Beth Luey

Although there has been a great deal of discussion about preserving electronic documents, editors have given little thought to how these would be edited once preserved, and no one has yet proposed an edition of electronic correspondence. Many argue that "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," but I think we need to get our collective head out of the sand and grapple with the relevant issues. Toward that end, I offer a plan for an edition of the e-mail of Bill Gates. It is, at the moment, purely hypothetical, but that could change at any moment.

We begin with the question of copyright. It's pretty clear that U.S. courts regard e-mail and other internet communications in the same light as ink-on-paper letters: the copyright belongs to the writer. This would be a problem, except that we are undertaking this project with the blessing of the Gates family and their foundation, so we don't have to worry about it. Much of the incoming correspondence is from Microsoft employees, and that is covered as works for hire. As for the rest of the incoming correspondence, well, who's going to argue with Bill? If we really did have to worry about it, it would be a horrendous task, because e-mail addresses change, and many people use screen names. Identifying them, locating them, and securing permission would be very difficult, and we would undoubtedly end up simply summarizing the contents of many incoming messages.

Searching for e-mail is different from searching for regular correspondence. The search is not in space but in time and technology. An ordinary person's e-mail, like yours or mine, periodically vanishes because our computers and servers crash, the little man in the server tells us we have used up our space, we get new hardware, or we get new software, we change jobs or internet providers, and even if the mail is out there somewhere, we can't find it. Fortunately, Mr. Gates has always had access to the latest technology and has been acutely aware of his importance and his likely place in history, so he has not only saved all his e-mail but periodically migrated the files so that they are all available to us.

This providence on his part, however, creates new difficulties. First, how should we present the material? Obviously, this will be an electronic edition. The idea of a *Selected Edition of the E-mail of Bill Gates* in a multivolume, casebound letterpress edition is ludicrous. But if we reproduce the e-mail in its present format, it will be misrepresentation. Early e-mail, even that of the founder of Microsoft, looked dif-



Beth Luey at the 2003 Chicago ADE Meeting

Photograph Courtesy of Sharon Ritenour Stevens

ferent. It appeared on itty-bitty screens, in green or amber and black, in a clunky font. Should we present it that way? Certainly it is technologically possible, and historically accurate. But it is also less readable. I'm inclined to go with the green on black, but I will consult my editorial committee.

The other problem, of course, is selection. We have a lot of e-mail. We also have, in a sense, infinite space. But even infinite space shouldn't be wasted, and I don't really think this should be a multigenerational project. Bill Gates is not, after all, Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin. He certainly isn't Emma Goldman or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. So we need to look at what we can leave out. The first question is whether to include only business correspondence or to include the personal as well. For most workaholics, it's hard to make the distinction: life equals work. But Bill Gates makes the distinction himself, by having several different e-mail accounts. I have decided that we should include them all. The address will indicate to readers which account the message belongs to. Readers can thus see for themselves not only the whole person, but how he categorizes various activities.

So what *can* we leave out? Well, certainly the duplicate concierge responses—Mr. Gates is out of the office until Monday—can go. We will also exclude the duplication of previous messages in current messages. Because we are including both outgoing and incoming messages, this sort of repetition is unnecessary. What about the incoming mail that Gates didn't answer? I think at least some of that needs to stay, because it tells us whom and what he felt free to ignore. Like the Justice Department. I have tentatively decided to add to the headings those cute little envelope icons from Outlook to indicate that a message was received but not opened, opened but not answered, or opened and answered.

What about spam? My first inclination was to leave it out. After all, we all get the same offers of psychic readings, mortgage refinancing, enhancement of various body parts, and Nigerian investment opportunities. We could take that as read. Or received but not read. But a brief exploration of the files showed me that Bill Gates sometimes responded to spam. Surely future generations will want to know which of these strange appeals appealed to him. So the spam that he investigated has to stay. But perhaps the other spam is important, too. Do we care, for example, that Bill Gates was interested in refinancing his mortgage, which is larger than the GNP of most sub-Saharan nations, while he ignored offers to expand his bust and biceps? Quite possibly. In the end, we decided that the spam to which he did not respond could be calendared.

Bill Gates subscribes to a number of discussion lists, although he mostly lurks. His subscriptions are significant, and so are the messages that he presumably read, but do we need to include them all? We decided to provide links to the lists, most of which

are archived, so that people could consult them if they wished to do so.

Many of Mr. Gates's e-mail messages, both incoming and outgoing, include links to websites. This was a difficult problem. We finally decided not to keep these as hot links. For one thing, most of them won't work any more, and nothing makes readers madder than a link that doesn't work. Even if it does work, in all likelihood it won't be the same page that Mr. Gates actually saw. If the original material still exists or was preserved in Mr. Gates's files, we can summarize it in a note. Otherwise, I'm afraid it's lost.

Mr. Gates often sends e-mail messages to large groups of people. Rather than list all recipients—which is really annoying even in ordinary people's e-mail—we will allow readers to click on a symbol—a little group of torsos, I think—to disclose the recipients.

We must also decide how to incorporate ink-on-paper materials. Even Bill Gates uses nonelectronic media from time to time. Discussions of charitable donations, legal matters, and some social correspondence are done the old-fashioned way. Mr. Gates's choice of medium undoubtedly reflects his view of the urgency and formality of the correspondence, the technological state of the correspondents, and in some cases legal requirements. The electronic record is incomplete without the nonelectronic records. This is an electronic edition, so the ink-on-paper documents will have to be transcribed and reproduced in a way that shows they were not e-mail. We might want to get fancy and use a background that looks like paper, but that might raise compatibility problems for some users. We'll probably just use a headnote.

With the basic selection decisions made, we moved on to questions of organization. This collection of documents arrives with a built-in organization. As you might guess, Mr. Gates files his e-mail systematically, using the handy folders feature available in Outlook. Should we allow his system to dictate our presentation? We would prefer a chronological arrangement. This will require a disruption of the archival record, but I think it is worth it. We will preserve the original organization for archival purposes but copy the messages into our edition chronologically. We can, of course come up with a search system that allows readers to call up all the e-mails on a given subject, using key words. We are keeping that under consideration. If we want to be really elaborate, we can allow users to arrange the correspondence in a variety of ways: chronologically, by correspondent, by subject, and so forth. The choice really depends on the degree of control we wish to exert over how readers view the material.

On to transcription. With e-mail, the whole notion of transcription is problematic. We are not really transcribing, after all. We are simply accessing existing files. Although e-mail does not convey the immediacy of handwriting, it is in fact barely

removed from the author's keystrokes. For that reason alone, we should alter as little as possible. But should we simply reproduce what is already there? Mr. Gates has the annoying habit common to many techies of not using the shift key when composing e-mail. I have decided not to add initial caps to the first words of sentences, proper names, or the like. He is also guilty of the occasional comma splice, which I will not correct. He does not always use the spelling checker, and I won't correct that. However, I plan to expand abbreviations by allowing people to click on them. Most of the usual chatroom abbreviations do not appear in Mr. Gates's correspondence. LOL, for example, is absent. Mr. Gates does not laugh out loud, and people don't laugh out loud at him. However, we have the idiosyncratic WOTC—Wiped Out the Competition—that cries out for explanation.

I have decided to expand emoticons. Again, the common ones do not appear, because Mr. Gates doesn't do smiley faces. But there's one I had never seen. It consists of a hyphen, a lowercase ell, and two more hyphens. I finally figured out that it's a graphic representation of a hand signal commonly used on freeways by the uncouth. I haven't worked out the wording for that one.

Annotation will be presented by allowing readers to click on the word or phrase. We will not highlight the words that are annotated, because that is too distracting. However, as the reader moves the cursor over a word, an arrow will appear if a note is available. There is much to annotate—people, places, technical terms, corporations, government agencies here and abroad—just about everything you'd expect to find in any edition. The sources for annotation, too, are similar. We have the correspondence itself, Mr. Gates's online journal, his online calendar, corporate minutes, newspaper reports, online news services, the websites of fan clubs and whatever you call the opposite of fan clubs, corporate archives, legal records, financial records, and of course Mr. Gates, his family, and his employees. We have been promised access to everything we need. We are skeptical. But the public record is extensive, and we will do our best.

We can also annotate with photographs and voice recordings, as well as the occasional video. There is news footage of Mr. Gates making extremely large gifts to extremely worthy causes, and some of that should be included. In addition, Mr. Gates has digitized all his home movies, and there are also fun videos of Microsoft parties and reunions. These put faces, and even physiques, to the names. An embarrassment of riches, perhaps. We will have to curb our enthusiasm and be highly selective.

We will add some other valuable apparatus. A chronology of Mr. Gates's life and one of Microsoft will be useful. Maps can illustrate the conquest of world computer systems, much like the old maps of the spreading Roman and British empires, or the incursions of Attila or the Mongol Horde. These will be designed so that when read-

ers click on a date, they can see just how far expansion had gone at that point. This will be a model for future editions, such as the papers of the founders of MacDonald's, Walmart, and Starbucks.

The edition will be thoroughly indexed. When the cursor is on a term, a left mouseclick will provide the annotation, if any, while a right mouse click will take the reader to other appearances of the term. It will also be possible to type a term into a search box and call up all the references. As in any edition, this will require marking up the text so that concepts, misspellings, alternative words, and the like are not missed.

Finally, funding. Well, we can't expect any help from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, because Mr. Gates is still alive. The National Endowment for the Humanities, quite properly, does not consider Microsoft to be a humanistic enterprise. Private foundations did not respond to our letters, or our e-mail, for that matter. Fortunately, Bill Gates is willing and able to fund this project on his own. We have been offered space in the Seattle headquarters, with the Microsoft technical staff at our disposal. Our salaries are not quite as high as those of the topflight programmers, but they're better than anything the nonprofit sector can offer. The only problem is that we have to work in cubicles, wear clothes that allow us to blend in, including pocket protectors, and work odd hours. We get free soft drinks and coffee, though. We'll be accepting applications soon, and we'll post the jobs on Sedit-I. If you want to join us, just check your e-mail.