

How Email Took Over the World

You're Wrong About, Sarah Marshall, Anne Helen Petersen

INTRODUCTION

In A Nutshell

In this April 2022 episode of the You're Wrong About podcast, host Sarah Marshall meets with writer and intellectual Anne Helen Petersen to discuss the phenomenon of email.

Favorite Quote

"I think it's more dystopian than we can immediately afford to realize — that our attention is being preyed on in a way that's become so normalized." [Sarah Marshall]

Introduction

In 2022, most people have come to use emails on a daily basis. | But not too long ago, the technology was in its humble beginnings. Limited storage space, service providers, and devices on which we access email have evolved throughout the years. |

The You're Wrong About podcast with journalist Sarah Marshall aims to recontextualize people and events of the past for today's audiences. | In this episode from April 2022, Marshall and writer and intellectual Anne Helen Petersen discuss the secrets behind emails – from anecdotes about their initial purpose to their evolution.

INSIGHTS

Early adopters of email used it in some very specific ways (#email, #tech)

In 1971, networked email was first invented. | Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, email communication was adopted by people generally interested in tech, as well as those working in business, military, governmental agencies, and higher education. | Mass use of personal email didn't really begin until the 1990s. | The 1990s saw a wave of new email users due to America Online, or AOL, a company known for sending trial software to potential home users. | With increasing numbers of personal email users signing up, marketing emails were sent on a massive scale — a precursor to what we know today as spam. |

“People were using email as Listservs, right, as user groups, very early on, especially around fandoms. If you look at the history of any of the long-term fandoms ... they had these really rich listservs and user groups.” [Anne Helen Petersen] |

Email provided users with the ability to send messages easily around the world. | Email became a popular way for people to connect across distances, with content such as chain letters regularly circulating people’s inboxes. | Similarly, fandoms – internet groups of fans – were using Listservs and user groups that connected individuals with shared interests through email. | By the mid-1990s, email had become popular with younger generations who used the technology to connect to fandoms, explore, and embrace the new technology.

A lot of email’s history relates to mass marketing (#email, #advertising, #spam)

“If you want to do direct marketing, your options are small and expensive, but if you figure out how to get people to give their email address ... you can send the same thing you would have printed out and paid postage for to every single person.” [Anne Helen Petersen] |

The reach and relative ease of email made it a natural interest to advertisers who saw it as an opportunity to expand marketing efforts while cutting costs. | Direct mail was traditionally a way to send potentially relevant information to large groups of people whether by neighborhood, zip code, or similar geographic data. | With increasing numbers of people signing up for personal email accounts, companies simply needed to gather these accounts to send information that was otherwise reserved for direct mailings. |

For marketers, even if the open rate on an advertising email is anywhere from five to 10 percent, then that is a decent conversion rate compared to direct mail which does similar numbers, albeit at a much higher cost. |

By the early 2000s email had made its way into cellular phones, with Blackberry users accessing emails on the go. | The iPhone and other smartphones shortly followed — email had become a constant feature of our lives.

Email provided us with constant connectivity leading to changes in the way we communicate (#email, #siliconvalley, #tech)

Email was intended to be a way to stay connected easily at all times from anywhere. The earliest iterations of the messaging format were born of needs in tech and business sectors, that eventually ran off into the public sphere. | The initial spirit of email remains. | In 2022, we can access our email from handheld devices that follow us everywhere. While emails remain strongly tied to workplace messaging, they still incentivize us to remain in communication at all times. | Many workers are now experiencing communication fatigue. |

The introduction of text messaging on mobile devices, for instance, compounded our email fatigue. | There is an expectation that if someone sends us a message, we must respond in due time. This becomes stressful when communicating with many people over different platforms and apps, many of which contain a messaging component. |

Ultimately the connectedness provided by email has engendered rules, social norms, but also effects on users' mental health that shed light on its impact on our daily lives and society in general. |

“When we talk about email, what we're actually talking about is a world of hyper-communication and email is just the tool that we have used to facilitate that strategy towards work and towards productivity.” [Anne Helen Petersen]

CONCLUSION

Email is part of everyday life for almost everyone these days. From its earliest days until now, it has fundamentally shaped the way we communicate. | As many of us experience communication fatigue, finding the time to disconnect and truly rest proves crucial to our health.