

Getting the message, at last

A parable of manners from Victorian dentists to modern airlines



ON A May evening in 1864, several British politicians were disturbed by a knock at the door and the

delivery of a telegram—a most unusual occurrence at such a late hour. Had war broken out? Had the queen been taken ill? They ripped open the envelopes and were surprised to find a message relating not to some national calamity, but to dentistry. Messrs Gabriel, of 27 Harley Street, advised that their dental practice would be open from 10am to 5pm until October. Infuriated, some of the recipients of this 6 message wrote to the *Times*. “I have never had any dealings with Messrs Gabriel,” thundered one of them, “and beg to know by what right do they disturb me by a telegram which is simply the medium of advertisement?” The *Times* helpfully reprinted the offending telegram, providing its senders with 7.

This was, notes Matthew Sweet, a historian, the first example of what is known today as “spam”. It shows that new communications technologies have been prompting questions about 8 ever since the advent of the telegraph in the 19th century. The pattern is always the same: a new technology emerges on the scene, and nobody can be quite sure how it will be employed, or what the appropriate guidelines are. So users have to make up the rules as they go along.

When the telephone appeared in the 1870s, people worried about receiving calls from people to whom they had not been properly introduced. And what

should one say when picking up the receiver? Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, suggested “Ahoy, ahoy”. But as in many other respects, his ideas lost out to those of Thomas Edison, who preferred “Hello”, an expression that was rarely used before the telephone but is now ubiquitous. Further 9 awaited. In 1903 the trade journal *Telephony* reported an elderly woman’s complaints about her niece, who received a phone call from a male friend while dressing. “The two of them stood talking to one another just as if they were entirely dressed and had stopped for a little chat on the street! I tell you this generation is too much for me,” she grumbled.

Subsequent inventions have posed further tricky questions. Is it appropriate to dump your boyfriend by fax? When sending a message to several friends by e-mail, should you put all of their addresses in the “To” field, and so reveal them to all the recipients? Or should you send the message to yourself and “BCC” everyone else? (Answer: b.) How should you respond if your boss “friends” you on Facebook? Does a thank-you letter count if it is sent electronically?

The technology that has done most to 10, of course, is the mobile phone. Because it can be used almost anywhere, and is used by almost everyone (in the rich world at least), it has the greatest potential for social disruption: bleeping inappropriately in theatres, churches and concert halls, subjecting bystanders to tedious diatribes on trains and buses, and distracting people in restaurants. No

public event is now complete without a request that phones be switched off.

Given the industry's long history of introducing new gizmos without much thought for their social knock-on effects, the extension of mobile phone coverage to aircraft, now under way, represents a striking and welcome change. It is 11, for three reasons. Planes are one of the few remaining places where mobile phones do not work; they bring together people from different cultures; and airlines are in a position to enforce whatever in-flight rules they decide upon.

They are treading carefully. Over the next few months they will allow passengers to use their phones on a handful of aircraft, limiting access in some cases to data (i.e., text messages and e-mail), and asking for comments in order to choose the appropriate etiquette. No doubt there will still be unexpected social consequences, and some people will object to the outcome. Determining the right etiquette in advance will not be easy. But airlines should be applauded for trying. ▪

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Tekst 4 Getting the message, at last

Kies bij iedere open plek in de tekst het juiste antwoord uit de gegeven mogelijkheden.

1p **6**

- A confusing
- B poorly timed
- C rather obscure
- D unsolicited

1p **7**

- A a cause for complaint
- B further free publicity
- C proof of their success

1p **8**

- A etiquette
- B sincerity
- C the impact of advertising

1p **9**

- A adversity
- B deceptions
- C miscommunication
- D social minefields

1p **10**

- A complicate matters
- B make guidelines pointless
- C promote communication
- D solve these problems

1p **11**

- A an admirable attempt
- B a near impossible task
- C an unusual situation
- D an urgent matter

Bronvermelding

Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift, dat na afloop van het examen wordt gepubliceerd.