Email: It's so yesterday
More people are turning to social media and texting to communicate quickly, easily

By Alyson Ward
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Anna Julia got tired of her email overflowing with junk mail. Ads, coupons, updates on her airline miles - 50 a day were piling up in her inbox, and deleting them was a chore. So last month she unsubscribed.

And then?

"I realized," she said, "I was getting *no* mail."

No newsy updates from friends. No chatty messages from her sister. Not anymore.

"It used to be that everyone emailed," said Julia, who lives in Houston. But these days, "if I want to talk to any of my friends, we do it on Facebook or we text. And that's it, really."

You might have missed the news - maybe it's buried in your spam file - but email is over. The AOL guy's "You've got mail!" once generated real excitement, but now email is just another joyless task - something to process, sort through, manage. That alert you just got that a message is waiting? It's not a note from your favorite niece. It's your Macy's bill.

"I sort of miss those long letters you would get from friends over email," said Julia, 47. "It was new - you wanted to write a lot. You could send it to them and they'd get it immediately."

But the definition of "immediately" has changed as technology has evolved.

"You know, it's almost the snail mail of the 2000s at this point," said Scott Rothenberg, a Houston attorney.

Rothenberg, 52, his wife, Lisa, and their four sons stay in touch constantly, but they do it through group text messages and a private family Facebook group. His email - like the mailbox in front of the house - has become a place to collect mostly junk mail, bills and business correspondence. He still wades through 200 messages a day. But they're mostly ads, credit card statements and Groupons.

"Honestly, about 160 of them, I'll scan through the title and if it's not something I think is high-priority, I'll delete it without even reading it," he said.

Slipping popularity

"Email is kind of in the doghouse at the moment," said Andrew Ledbetter, an associate professor at Texas Christian University who studies communication technology. "It's still

useful for business purposes, (but) socially, a lot of that interaction has moved to social media and texting."

Slowly, we're all giving in. Julia tried to train her younger work colleagues to email her instead of texting. Finally she gave up and purchased an unlimited texting plan. Her mother, meanwhile, used to be "adamant" about refusing to text. But when Marie Whitfield realized her 17-year-old grandson never answered the phone or responded to emails, the Montgomery woman bought a smartphone, got a texting plan and joined Facebook to keep up with him.

"Email took away letter-writing, and Facebook and texting have taken away email," Julia said.

Ledbetter has seen it happen in his own life. In 2005, he set up an email listserv so he and his college friends could keep in touch. The messages flew back and forth for many years. But now the friends are all connected on Facebook, and the personal emails have dwindled to almost none. He and his students often use Twitter - not email or office hours - to talk outside of class.

"It's an old story," Ledbetter said: New technology comes along to replace the old, and young people embrace it first.

The Rothenbergs' 22-year-old son, Benjamin, said he uses Facebook "on an hourly basis." Even though he has five email accounts, he doesn't use them to keep in touch.

"I don't think I've ever emailed back and forth with a friend," he said.

By the time he got to middle school, Benjamin Rothenberg said, he and his friends had MySpace, instant messaging and - "for those of us who had phones that would do that" - text messaging. They didn't need email to shoot messages back and forth.

"For me," he said, "email has always kind of been an official, on-the-record, formal, professional, adult type of thing." Even at his new job - which involves, of all things, email marketing - he and his colleagues often text each other.

Overload

Joan P. Camenson, who lives in Cypress, doesn't even own a smartphone. But she checks her email first thing in the morning and throughout the day, and that's enough for her. Camenson, 69, receives more than 40 messages daily, but "maybe five or 10 at the most are from a real person."

She doesn't always manage to read the rest. "My husband goes crazy when he sees how many messages I have in my inbox," she said, but it just happens. "The volume is so much. You kind of drown in it."

That's why Google rolled out a new Gmail inbox last year, one that automatically divides incoming mail into three categories: personal email, social media notifications and promotional messages.

"The nature of email has changed quite a bit," Google spokeswoman Andrea Freund said. "We're getting lots of different types of email, and it can be overwhelming." The new inbox, she said, was designed "to help manage that email overload."

The overload extends to other forms of communication. Ben Durosola, a financial analyst who also owns a small business, uses email for work. He stopped using Twitter this fall because the interaction became too time-consuming. But every day, the Houston 23-year-old gets about 200 text messages and 50 Facebook messages from his friends. To keep up, he needs that interaction to be fast, skimmable and to-the-point.

"I almost think we're programmed to view email as an elongated conversation that we don't really want to have," Durosola said. "A text message is direct and to-the-point; I can answer and get back to what I'm doing."

Personal and meaningful

People once debated whether the telephone would destroy relationships, Ledbetter said. "Obviously, I think that didn't happen with the telephone, and I don't think it's happened with email."

He pointed to Facebook and Twitter's private messaging features. If you're sending a private Facebook message, "it's really an email."

"It may morph in the form it takes, but the idea of a textual private message - I don't think that's going to go away," Ledbetter said.

Benjamin Rothenberg agrees. He lives in Austin, but one of his best friends lives across the country. They don't email each other, he said, but they do use Facebook's chat feature.

"If (one of us) had a good date or something funny happened in school or we have a very biased opinion about our sports team, it's not uncommon to type out long paragraphs through instant message," he said. "I think a lot of people kind of look in from the outside and say, 'How can you have a meaningful conversation?' The simple answer is, if it's a meaningful relationship, it will make a meaningful conversation no matter what the medium."

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