

How would Einstein use e-mail? Letter writers of yore had same correspondence patterns as e-mail users today

September 25 2009

You're not as different from Albert Einstein and Charles Darwin after all, at least when it comes to patterns of correspondence.

A new Northwestern University study of human behavior has determined that those who wrote letters using pen and paper -- long before electronic mail existed -- did so in a pattern similar to the way people use e-mail today.

The study, published today by the journal *Science*, demonstrates the similarity of these two seemingly different activities, with the underlying pattern of human activity linking letters and e-mails.

The researchers examined extensive letter correspondence records of 16 famous writers, performers, politicians and scientists, including Einstein, Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Ernest Hemingway, and found that the 16 individuals sent letters randomly but in cycles.

The same [mathematical model](#) the Northwestern team used in a previous study to explain e-mail behavior now has been shown to apply to the letter writers. This refutes the rational model, which says that people are driven foremost by responding to others.

No matter what their profession, all the letter writers behaved the same way. They adhered to a circadian cycle; they tended to write a number of

letters at one sitting, which is more efficient; and when they wrote had more to do with chance and circumstances than a rational approach of writing the most important letter first.

"We are interested in identifying and understanding patterns of [human behavior](#), in learning how we make choices," said Luís Amaral, professor of chemical and biological engineering in the McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Science. Amaral led the research.

"There are patterns to how we spend our days, and these models of probability, of how people allocate their time to do certain tasks, can be applied to many different areas."

"People are not that rational," added Amaral, who also is an Early Career Scientist with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. "If a doctor, for example, better understands how we make decisions, he or she may be able to get better compliance with a treatment if it is tied to something a person does with regularity."

The researchers studied correspondence that dated as far back as 1574 for philosopher Sir Francis Bacon and as recently, in the case of writer Carl Sandburg, as 1966. The letter data for the 16 individuals included a list of letters sent and, for each [letter](#), the name of the sender, the name of the recipient and the date it was written.

More information: The title of the *Science* paper is "On Universality in Human Correspondence Activity." In addition to Amaral, other authors of the paper are R. Dean Malmgren, Daniel B. Stouffer and Andriana S. L. O. Campanharo.

Source: Northwestern University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: How would Einstein use e-mail? Letter writers of yore had same correspondence patterns as e-mail users today (2009, September 25) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-09-einstein-e-mail-letter-writers-yore.html>

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