F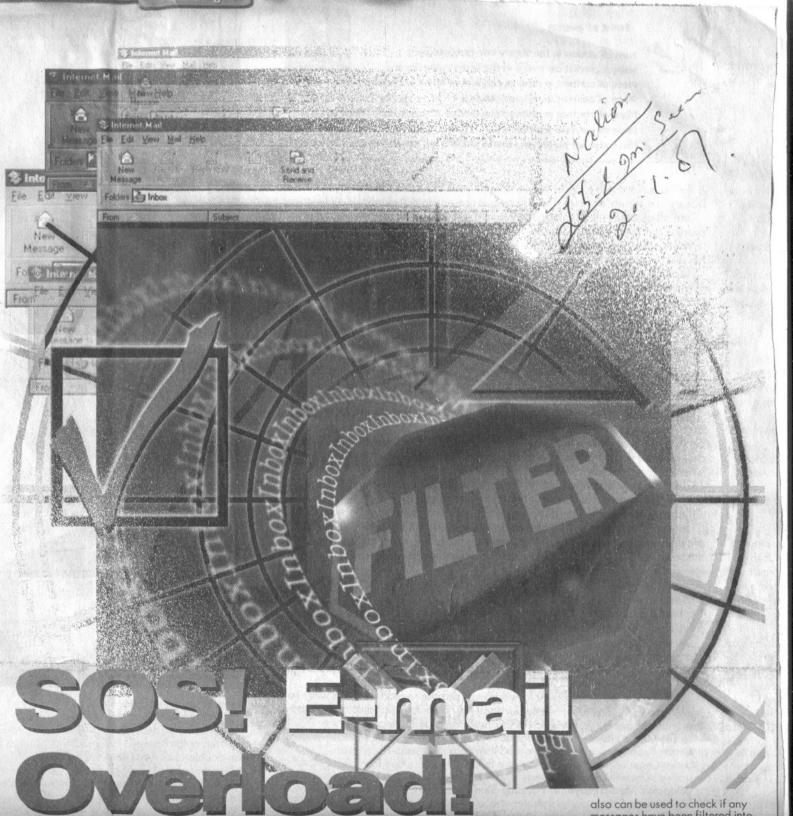or all of the attention given to the Web, search engines, and browsers, e-mail remains the connection to the Internet that is used most frequently. The ability to communicate between two individuals without having to resort to phone tags or the more formal approaches of postal mail, faxes or telegraphs, e-mail has become the perfect medium for sending informal, brief messages to colleagues, friends, and family. Not only can few people work effectively without it, keeping up with information, be it from discussion groups or news updates was never more convenient. In addition to the many communication capabilities of e-mail lists, the lack of excessive user-costs for the sending and receiving of messages, is reason enough of e-mail's popularity as a communication medium.

But, having sent and received e-mail over the Internet now for some five years, one trend that is alarming is the explosion in the volume of messages that are sent to your Inbox every time you log on. Unless the local system has set a maximum size on your Inbox, there is no real limit to how many daily messages you can receive. The more e-mail you use, the more lists you join, the more widely your e-mail address is advertised, and thus the more the messages that flow in.

Of course, it wasn't always this way. In the early days of the Net, or for that matter in the early days of a newbie's association with e-mail, you might be lucky to get four, maybe five new messages in a day. After all, how many other people were out there to send them then? And there were not so many services sending information by e-mail, either. Needless to say, however many messages you receive by e-mail today, in a year's time this will have probably doubled.

An immediate question here is: how many e-mail messages in a day are too many to comfortably cope

SOS! E-mail Overload!

also can be used to check if any

Overload!

HASSAN SARFRAZ gives suggestions to people who are on the receiving end of ever-increasing e-mails

however, many messages you receive by e-mail today, in a year's time this will have probably doubled.

An immediate question here is: how many e-mail messages in a day are too many to comfortably cope with? This is not an easy question to answer. For it depends on the quality of the messages, and also on the significance and length. If today you are getting one or two of those junk mail items (the ones which say "make $1000 in an hour"), you might have already reached the early stages of e-mail overload. And, if this is already a problem, it will get worse as more and more of your friends, colleagues and business contacts get on to e-mail themselves and begin sending you messages.

With this in mind, here are a few suggestions on coping with e-mail: Access your e-mail frequently, ideally at least twice a day. Apart from enabling a prompt reply where one is required, this ensures that the volume of messages each time you connect to your mail server (at your Internet service provider) is kept to a minimum. Those who have access to their e-mail through a corporate network should try to check their mailbox frequently. This means that if you will be away from home base for a while, you should try to arrange to access your e-mail while travelling — such as through a roaming agreement that most major ISPs have with each other.

Be careful of offers to receive information or "updates" by e-mail, work, news, hobby-related messages — and file messages there after reading. Delete junk mail and keep your in-box clear of all but new messages or those that require imminent action.

If you get a chain letter or a message that exhorts you to pass this along to all your friends, don't. There are numerous hoaxes and myths circulating in E-mail form, and forwarding any of these to others will not be appreciated by the recipients and will certainly brand you as gullible or possibly a "newbie" to E-mail.

Another reason why we receive more email is because we send out a lot as well. Try reducing sending mails that are forwards. Try to type e-mail messages in the body of a text or cut and paste text from your word processor. Do not use a word processor such as word to create a file and then attach this to a message. Not everyone uses Word, which has a propriety format and uses a lot of space in your Inbox as well memory. Similarly by sparing people by sending them file attachments you can reduce the load on their Inbox. If you send an attachment make sure its in text format, which takes the least amount os space. As for graphics, if you really do have to send one, send one in .jpg format. Always remember that ISPs impose a limit on the size of a mailbox and you do not win friends by busting their quota.

By far the easiest as well as most convenient way of dealing with e-mail overload is by using filters. The filter concept developed from postal mail, where we develop visual clues to identify and separate bills from checks, junk mail from personal letters. With e-mail, it is different folders. Most e-mail readers utilise the basics of an Inbox, an Outbox, and a Trash folder. Other folders can be established and provide a convenient way to separate family messages from high priority assignments or from listserve mail. Most people use these folders to save e-mail that they expect will have some lasting value or that they will want to read again.

A simple filter is already built in to most programs. When copies of sent mail messages are automatically saved in an Outbox or Sent Mail folder, the program is using an outgoing mail filter to accomplish the task. Filters for incoming mail can sift through new e-mail and sort the mail into folders established for specific senders, subjects, or priorities. Establishing a filter that identifies all messages from parents@home.org can be used to put all such messages into a Family folder. E-mail from announcements@publisher.com can be filtered to show up in a New Books folder. Messages from a client or boss can be sent directly to a Read Me First folder (or a Trash folder, depending on your mood).

Using filters judiciously can make the morning e-mail check much more efficient. Rather than starting with a list of a few hundred messages that are sorted only by time of receipt, filtered e-mail makes it easy to read the important messages in the Read Me First folder before getting to the New Books. For excess junk mail, clever filter use can send many of the messages straight to the Trash folder or to a special Junk Mail folder. Because so many people do exactly that, the most aggressive junk e-mailers try to make their messages defeat the filters and end up in the Inbox. Do not expect to be extremely literal and will only do exactly what it has been programmed to do. If a filter trashes all messages with the subject of Make Money Fast and your broker sends a hot stock tip with the unfortunate heading of Make Money Fast, that message gets sent to the trash as well. Sorting list mail is one of the most reliable filters, since it can be based on the list's address. Any filters that sort by body content or subject words are really a guessing game, where the person setting up the filter tries to guess what words future messages will or will not have.

A related consideration is junk mail management. Filters can certainly be used in an attempt to get rid of junk mail. Unfortunately, identifying junk e-mail is not always an easy task. Junk e-mail from just one source can appear with different From lines, contain varying subjects, and the content of advertisements for the same product may be worded completely differently. If a large number do come from the same company or address, a filter can be used for that particular address. Then there is the question of what to do with the suspected junk mail. Sending it directly to Trash runs the risk of deleting important messages, but it may be worth the risk especially if it can be tied to addresses or a specific, unique phrase. An alternate strategy is to simply send all suspected junk mail to a special Junk folder. Just check in the Junk folder occasionally to see if any of its contents could possibly contain an important message. Then delete the rest. Any attempt to filter out all junk mail can become a lengthy process with frequent updates. Another danger of using filters is caused by what happens to that filtered e-mail.

If you have been used to reading all the messages in your Inbox and then sorting them into different folders, the use of filters necessitates the development of new habits. Filters that sort incoming mail into different folders make it essential to check in each of those folders for new messages. Typically, the e-mail program identifies folders with new messages by highlighting folder names or flagging them in some other manner. Be sure to remember to read the messages in those folders and not just the leftovers in the Inbox. This method also can be used to check if any messages have been filtered into the Trash folder. If Trash is also flagged, it contains new messages. After first setting up a filter, be sure to check the various mailboxes with new messages to make sure that the filter is working properly. People with multiple e-mail addresses can forward all the messages to one main address. Then, they can use filters to divide the messages into folders based on the address to which the message was originally sent. This can also be useful for family members who have several individual accounts but use the same ISP account to check their mail. Look carefully at the full headers of the forwarded messages to see which field to use for this function.

How about all those file copies of outgoing messages? If you send e-mail regularly and save copies of messages sent, the outbox could be quite full. Instead of saving all messages, use a filter to send copies of messages that do not need saving straight into the Trash folder. For example, messages that are forwarded to others might be good candidates for not saving yet another copy of the same message in the Outbox. Messages sent to personal friends or family might be another group. Be sure to use an outgoing filter to stop saving file copies of these kinds of e-mail.

Filtering is an under-utilised yet extremely useful technology. It takes a while at first to learn the possibilities with your specific e-mail software, but it can make for much more efficient e-mail reading. Take a little time to explore the capabilities and set up some filters, and each morning's e-mail may become much more manageable. ●