HTML IN E-MAIL:
BETWEEN CONSENTING ADULTS ONLY!

by

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Teen boys trying to impress girlfriends often commit risky acts endangering themselves and others, and large firms do the same in the marketplace. HTML-formatted e-mail exemplifies this misbehavior: promoting a high-risk feature with careless disregard for standards. We now suffer the unpleasant consequences of such heedless decisions by Netscape and Microsoft. But each of us can act to protect himself, to uphold standards, and to be courteous to his correspondents. At the least we will set a good example; at best we will better the world.

HTML-CODED E-MAIL

At issue is HTML-coded text messaging, which consumes bandwidth and the addressee's disk space and in addition may not render at all in some readers' mail clients, or may render twice, causing plenty of annoyance. Even worse, since almost all undesirable spam messages contain HTML attachments, many mail clients are configured automatically to filter all such messages to the trash bin. So one should be cautious in using HTML-coded mail, both because of the burden it imposes upon others and because one may end up failing to communicate at all if such mail is auto-trashed by a careful recipient's filtering system.

Understandably many contemporary users are uninformed about the technical issues, so wouldn't know how to disable HTML-coded mail even were they inspired to do so. This article tells how for the motivated, and tries to motivate those not yet in this blessed state.

Some users enjoy and appreciate HTML-coded messages but such usage is controversial. HTML-coded mail is technically possible because there is an RFC-defined standard for mail attachments. However it is inherently inappropriate for mail because HTML is a mark-up language rather than a procedural printer language, so there can not possibly be a comparable standard for outputting HTML-coded files. Messages render differently, and possibly contrary to intention, depending on the reader's mail client, just as web pages render differently depending upon the viewer's browser. A dimly seen and insidious side effect is that mail clients implementing HTML coding stimulate the trend to bloatware which increases costs and reduces performance and reliability.

Even more importantly, HTML coding employs attachments, the use of which was poorly considered in a hasty implementation to gain competitive advantage between Netscape and Microsoft. As a result they render the recipient vulnerable to the disastrous security breaches about which we daily read in the press.

A LIMITED ROLE

HTML-coded messaging has a role, but it should be limited to use between consenting correspondents in a relation of trust and witting of the potential for visual rendering errors. Its use with others is burdensome to them and to society, because of its spendthrift use of resources and the vulnerability to hostile payloads which it stimulates.

Unfortunately default provisions from Microsoft and AOL are almost the worst possible choices for the public: HTML as the default for transmission and dangerously loose security settings for the handling of attachments. Responsible mail users may want to educate themselves on this subject and then configure their systems to respect standards and to respect their correspondents. I often appeal to correspondents to reconfigure their systems and they always agree, usually being unwitting of the troubles they were creating for others. Several have sent me messages of thanks for alerting them to the issues of HTML coding and insecure attachment-handling.

Here are tips to reconfigure your mail client for plain text messaging and for secure attachment-handling.

OUTLOOK EXPRESS

General case Go to the Tools/Options/Send tab and for the Mail Sending Format select plain text. OE automatically switches to the style of the incoming message if you select Forward Message or one of the two Reply buttons. Fine if you have agreed with your correspondent to communicate this way, but if he is clueless in cyberspace, using the default HTML coding only because he knows no better, prevent this by looking in the sending options at the bottom of the same panel and uncheck "Reply to messages using format in which they were sent". If you don't uncheck it, when you reply to a message received in HTML your own message will also go out in HTML.

User-by-user You can selectively enable HTML coding by correspondent. Open the address book (Ctrl+Shift+B), then right click on the target name. Select Properties in the menu, then select the Name tab. At the bottom see the option "Send E-Mail using plain text only". Select it, producing a check mark. Once so selected, you will have an on-screen menu option to send your note to the correspondent in plain text format if you created it as HTML. Click on OK or yes. Your HTML note is converted to plain text resulting in no more HTML to that correspondent. You set this for each e-mail address you have in the Outlook Express address book.

SECURITY IN OUTLOOK EXPRESS

Under Tools/Options/Security, for both Restricted Sites Zone and Internet Zone, choose "Highest Security Level"; this may result in some inconvenience as certain functions are blocked depending on the design of visited websites. However you may modify the security level on the fly should this occur, and it is a small price to pay for the resulting reliability of one's computer because one will not be infected by viruses, worms, and hostile controls and scripts that can be embedded in HTML and sprung upon the hapless victim due to the industry's rushed and poorly-tested designs.

Greater control is possible with the Custom option.

NAVIGATOR

Configuration is similar to Outlook Express. Go to Edit/Preferences/Formatting and select "Use the plain text editor" to eliminate HTML coding globally.

To enable HTML on a per-correspondent basis, go to the Address Book Recipients panel and on the New Card menu check whether the correspondent accepts HTML mail.

EUDORA LIGHT

Click on Tools/Options and select the Styled Text tab; check the box for "Discard styles before sending messages".

EUDORA PRO

Early versions supported Rich Text Format and later versions HTML. For V 4.0.2 and earlier: click on Tools/Options and select Styled Text; check "Discard styles before sending messages". For V 4.2 and later click on Tools/Options and check the box "Send plain text only".

HOTMAIL

Select the option to turn off the misnamed "Rich Text Format".

AOL

The Version 6 mail client defaults to HTML-coded mail. The options:

(1) Use client versions 3, 4 or 5 which provide no setting to change the format but automatically transmit plain text to all non-AOL addresses and HTML to all AOL e-mail addresses. (Version 2.5 knows only plain text.)

(2) If you use Version 6 and don't want to change, you may send e-mail as a plain-text file attachment.

(3) Use AOL Mail via a web-browser.

(4) The following method is extracted from an AOL FAQ cited in the resources paragraph below.

Change global e-mail preferences
(do once only)

a. Go to Keyword: Preferences (or choose Preferences from the Settings menu on the AOL 6.0 toolbar).

b. Click on Font, Text & Graphics Preferences.

c. Click on the Reset button at the bottom of the resulting window. Do not make any changes in the Font Preferences area of the window.

d. Click on the Save button.

Change a specific e-mail to plain text
(do for any desired message):

a. Compose and address the e-mail as desired.

b. Choose Select All from the Edit menu to highlight the entire message.

c. With the mouse arrow somewhere over the highlighted text, click the right mouse button, revealing a contextual menu.

d. Choose Normal from the Text menu.

e. Send it taking care not to make any further changes to the message.

Note that changing the text to normal will eliminate the "blue bar" quoted text indicator, but will not remove some HTML elements of the quoted text. The entire quoted section must be deleted (or simply not quoted in the first place), followed by the re-entry of the text quoted manually, prior to changing the text to normal. Changing the text to normal will also eliminate any styled text that would have been seen by AOL recipients of the message, which cannot be re-added. Testing also suggests that messages with hyperlinks cannot be converted to normal text, requiring the prior removal of the link.

CONCLUSION

Many computer users download their mail over thin pipes and/or pay for each byte received. Some users for various reasons sufficient to themselves use simplified or specialized mail clients or browsers, especially the blind employing text-to-voice conversion. Therefore in our use of e-mail, just as in life, we should be thoughtful of others, especially (as in a newsgroup or mailing list) when we cannot know the identity or special needs of all the members. So use the minimum to communicate clearly, which is plain-text messaging. Defaulting to HTML, like using cellphones in reserved spaces such as libraries and theaters, is rude. Don't do it unless you have a consenting relationship with your partner!

And if you receive an HTML-coded message that you didn't explicitly request in that format, ask the sender to reconfigure his mail client. You will be doing the world a favor, just as you would by politely requesting a litterbug to stop misbehaving. (The URL for a sample request appears in the Resources section below.)

Be safe--be courteous--just say no to HTML!

RESOURCES

For ease of reader reference this article and a sample message <turnoff.txt> are located at <www.camblab.com>. Search for RFCs by subject and download at

<http://www.rfc-editor.org/rfcsearch.html>.

Find the AOL FAQ at

<http://members.aol.com/adamkb/aol/mailfaq/#aol6html>.

An extensive treatment of RTF,HTML, TNEF and quoted-printable coding, and of MIME attachments, is available at

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070323023809/http://www.expita.com/nomime.html>

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