

Rapid-response e-mails and phone calls can backfire

By Maria Rodgers O'Rourke

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Contrary to conventional adult sentiments, I love snow days as much as my kids. I delight in a snowstorm's ability to slow down our life, giving us quality time with each other and blanketing our world in brilliant white silence.

So a recent Washington Post headline, "Va. Student's Snow Day Plea Triggers an Online Storm," caught my eye. In mid-January, Dave Kori, a senior at a Fairfax, Virginia high school telephoned the home of the school district's chief operating officer, Dean Tistadt, to ask why schools had not been ordered closed, given the three inches of snow in the forecast. Kori left his name and number, and sometime later he received a voice message from a return call from Tistadt's wife.

"How dare you call us at home! If you have a problem with going to school, you do not call somebody's house and complain about it,' Candy Tistadt's minute-long message began," the Washington Post reported. "At one point, she uttered the phrase 'snotty-nosed little brats', and near the end, she said, 'Get over it, kid, and go to school!'"

In response, Kori posted an audio link to the voice message on a Facebook.com page, along with Dean Tistadt's work and home telephone numbers. This led to flurries of calls. Eventually, the message migrated to YouTube and a local TV station's newscast.

What amazes me — in addition to the actions of everyone directly involved — is how rapidly thousands of other people learned of the exchange and were drawn into the incident, turning what might have been a minor dusting into a blizzard.

It touched off what the Washington Post called an "online storm," with students, parents and teachers engaged in the discussion. The debate hinged on the question of polite behavior in the digital age.

For example, student Kori saw no problem in calling Tistadt at home, while school district spokesman Paul Regnier called it "harassment." Kori stated: "People in my generation view privacy differently. We are the cell-phone generation. We are used to being reached at all times." Regnier called it a "civility gap . . . an issue of kids learning what is acceptable and not."

Our social mores and legal systems have yet to catch up with the rapid evolution of the communications media. We saw that in the tragic case of the St. Charles County girl who took her own life after having become the target of online abuse. Local police and prosecutors found no basis in law or precedents for addressing such conduct. In Virginia, Kori discussed the matter with his principal but was not punished. Authorities in these kinds of circumstances seem stumped.

In the meantime, some self-policing is in order. New forms of electronic communication — whether e-mail, Web postings, text messaging, even voicemail — can create distance and isolation between sender and receiver, instead of closeness. It's a lot easier to insult and criticize when you don't have to do it face to face.

So people might consider (before sending or leaving an electronic message): "Would I write/say the exact same thing to this person if I were speaking to him in person? Would I send/leave this message exactly as it is if I knew that thousands of people would see/hear/read it?"

When we're angry, upset or hurt, the ability to communicate instantly can be a curse, not a blessing. We should slow down, take a moment — or a night's sleep — and consider the potential impact of our words. In the process, we may spare someone's feelings or reputation from needless, senseless damage.

Even in the cell-phone, computer, podcast, text-messaged era, we can be thoughtful in our exchanges. Maybe we could use a few snow days in cyberspace.

Maria Rodgers O'Rourke of Creve Coeur has worked in the advertising and not-for-profit fields and now juggles marriage, raising two daughters and creative pursuits that include music, theater and writing.

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