



SKIP NOVAK

COMMUNICATION WITH SHORE USED TO BE A HIT-AND-MISS AFFAIR, BUT NOW IT'S ALL AT THE TOUCH OF A BUTTON ARE WE ACTUALLY OVER-CONNECTED?

I often wax lyrical to my two teenage children about how the ease of communication has changed the entire fabric of our lives, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse.

You would have thought that my stories of how exciting it was anticipating and then receiving letters and postcards from a variety of lovers via *poste restante* (those under 40, Google it) in all those exotic port cities would really get them going – but no, their eyes glaze over and stay glazed over as I go through the evolution, from airmail letters to how a telex machine works.

But it was that telex system by which the owner of the Swan 65 *Independent Endeavour* found me stranded in the tropical hellhole of Manila in 1979 and offered me the skipper's job for the *Parmelia Race*. After that came the fax machines. A hand-drawn picture of a clew patch reinforcement was sent from Hood Sails in Lymington to our Portacabin in the Hamble during the *Drum* campaign in 1985. We stared at this conjuring trick for some minutes

in awe. But for children today even email is consigned to their pre-history – it is all about thumbs-down tap-tapping for them.

At sea we did have the pleasure of being

totally out of touch often as the standard HF radio was frequently on the blink. Back during my first Whitbread Race in 1977 we took Morse code and drew weather maps from the dots and dashes – a labour of patience. By the time you finished this job the weather had changed. And the irony was that when the HF radio was working we were better informed about current events by routinely listening to the BBC World Service than I am today while at sea. In spite of being able to get the news online, I now rarely bother.

Having filed several articles for this magazine via email from the Far South, I am reminded about the trials of doing my weekly *Daily Telegraph* column from *Fazisi* in the 1989/90 Whitbread Race. You could say my

contribution was a precursor to the blog. Inmarsat C was fully capable of sending a telex message to a fax machine back then, but the *Daily Telegraph* was having none of this as copytakers were still employed. That was before Rupert Murdoch changed the face of the print industry with the controversial union-busting News International titles.

I was obliged to call a copytaker on a phone line patched through the HF radio while deep in the Southern Ocean, bombing along at speed, usually on the edge of control. This was a real game. First you had to connect to Portishead Radio bouncing a longwave signal off the ionosphere and, when connected, most likely you would have to queue for your turn to patch into the telephone system.

This was not always wasted time. We would hear entertaining 'boiler burst,' and 'car died' stories from wives ashore talking to their merchant seaman husbands, and they would often demand their hubbies to tell them "that you love me." Sometimes, though, these conversations would be tragic: a wife announced she had left this poor bloke for his best friend. That took us all aback, feeling like voyeurs.

The time of day and night was critical as these signals came and went with the rotation of the planet. Once patched through to a sleepy copytaker in London, one who possibly had never been in a boat, let alone at sea, I had to dictate an 800-word article word for word, often having to spell phonetically letter by letter what could have been for him obscure terms such as storm spinnaker, Chinese gybe and mainsail leech.

In the middle of the article, two things could also happen. The frequency could go down, forcing to you to start from scratch and re-connect. In the meantime, the copytaker could be in the loo, having a cuppa or he might have ended his shift and a new guy came in cold to the story. Or, after that over-enthusiastic set of the storm spinnaker and subsequent Chinese gybe laying waste to the leech of the mainsail, the column deadline was firmly put on the back burner as we set about salvaging the carnage on deck.

Are we over-connected now? This past January I was on a superyacht in Antarctica with connectivity better than I have at home in Cape Town. Sadly, I spent far too much time on my emails because of it. ■

'WE HAD THE PLEASURE OF BEING TOTALLY OUT OF TOUCH'