

# Why I still use email

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How and why I keep using email.

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aaronpk's [Why I Live in IRC<sup>\[^1\]</sup>](#) is one of the best articles I've read in a long time. For most of the new kids on the block it's probably an insanely hardcore and nerd way of doing things, especially since IRC is considered to be old, arcane and thus, something that needs reinventing. *It's not, and it doesn't need fixing.*

So I started thinking if it would make sense for me to do something similar, since IRC is easy to deal with - and I came to realize that I use mostly email, and that I like it that way.

## The main why-s for keeping email

It's lightweight. It has to be, it's roots are dating back to the 70s (60s?) when computing power wasn't really a thing yet. For the same reason, it uses a very different communication structure than the ones we're used to, but hey, I could send an email from an Arduino, using tty only. In case you want the simplest solution - just want to send things to yourself and not communicate with others - all you need is an SMTP server and a local user. If you want remote access, you probably need an IMAP server, but syncing the plain text files would be just as fine. *(If you insist on receiving from the world, then spam, SPF, DKIM, DMARC and all those fancy things, but you'd have to do similar steps to protect IRC for anything if facing the cruel world lurking behind your NAT.)*

It's mature, stable, and - if configured properly - extremely reliable. It's pretty hard to lose an email even in between machines.

It is one of the most pluggable systems. End-to-end encryption? Server side filters? Different authentication method? TLS or STARTTLS communication between server and client? All doable; all done.

It's pretty low on bandwidth use - with options to restrict it to ridiculous level and still keep it working - and it also doesn't require a constant connection, so regular drops *(hi there, London Tube!)* are not an issue.

IMAP is probably the one and only protocol for accessing mail nowadays. It has a feature, called IDLE<sup>[2]</sup> which was Push notifications before it was cool. Also: in case of IMAP lots of things can access a single source simultaneously.

And one more important aspect: it can easily be backed up. From copying the Maildir<sup>[3]</sup> folder to syncing with offlineimap<sup>[4]</sup> there are plenty of tools to do this.

## The downsides

Email has a pretty unpredictable delay if it involves 2 or more SMTP servers. It was never intended to be a real-time communication method, but potential of a severe delay can be an issue in some situations, especially in alerting. In the past 10 years it's been extremely rare to see delays over a few minutes though.

Both sending and receiving are centralized, so if you can't access the server, you can't access your mail. But with most things accessed by many, this is the usual layout.

*(This is also the official reason why Skype was moved from p2p to a centralized architecture: to be able to log in from more than one device.)*

## Some of my use cases

### My Reader

When I first came across RSS I used Thunderbird as a reader, and I got pretty used to having my news in my mail client. *By the way, News in a mail client is NNTP and is an entirely different thing.*

So when I moved from using a single computer to using X computers, including webmail, I needed something that gives me RSS as mail. For years, it was rss2email<sup>[^5]</sup> v2.70, but it developed some strange issues, like forgetting about some URLs. So I added a WordPress plugin (think of WordPress as a horrible storage framework in my case), called blogroll2email<sup>[^6]</sup>, doing the same for me, but now it can also parse microformats2 powered sites.

### generic communication

Instead of relying the all-changing sea of various messenger apps, I'm trying to stick to email. I have it everywhere, the APIs and protocols are not changing every second month and it's working. The problem that it's becoming a little ignored by others, though I'm really not willing to change this in favour of some random newcomer 'free' app wanting to store all my things on their servers.

### reporting

Email is perfect for cron outputs, statuses, various summaries and notifications, that are not urgent and can tolerate a little delay; mostly because it can give for formatting. ( No, not HTML, there are formattings in plain text. )

I've been a long time monit<sup>[^7]</sup> user and by default, monit can communicate via email only. Normally monit would act - as in restart a service or trigger a script, etc. - so instead of alerting it's better to says it's sending reports as well.

## How it's done

My main server has the following mail stack:

- `postfix` as SMTP
- `dovecot` as IMAP and authentication
- `dspam` as spam filtering hook
- `openDKIM` as DKIM signing hook on sending
- `openDMARC` as DMARC verification hook

More details:

- Lightweight, secure, database-free, spamfiltering mail server with Postfix, Dovecot, openDKIM and dspam on Debian 7<sup>[8]</sup>
- Getting DKIM, DMARC and SPF to work with Postfix, OpenDKIM and OpenDMARC<sup>[9]</sup>

I have a few things at home which are also allowed to send email, but those are SMTP only, having the main server as relay host. For a long while I could not get a static IP at home, therefore I had the following ways for letting those addresses send a mail:

- setting up an SSH tunnel from the boxes, connecting local port 25 to remote port 25 on the main server
- auto-whitelisting the dynamic IP addresses based on a dynamic DNS check

## Footnote: Email isn't broken; email providers are

Everyone want to "fix" email, and replace it with some proprietary bullshit. Email isn't broken. - Spooky23<sup>[^10]</sup>

What happened is that email had become strong, strong enough that it became a legal document in some cases. Bookings, flight boarding passes, various, pretty sensitive information are sent via email, therefore it needs to get secured deeper and deeper.

Those who keep saying email is broken usually keep repeating the following: "it's old", "it's complicated", "spam", "not secure" and "no use uses it anymore".

### **old != crap**

Just because it was originally invented 30+ years ago does not make email crap. Age does not make anything crap. Just take a look at what the old mainframe operating systems were capable on security. Or check out Fortran and Lisp.

### **(hard to do || complicated) != broken**

Running a full fledged email stack might be complicated - it's not that hard - but that doesn't mean it's broken. Yes, it takes a little time and a bit of knowledge from various sources - such as knowing what DNS is and being able to make changes to it. It's totally possible to run your own mail services without running into issues with it, but indeed you need to understand what you're doing, even if that means you'll eventually need to learn a few new things which won't work by piping a bash script from curl.

### **secure != anonym**

Many are attacking email that it's insecure - it's not. It is not anonym, but these two things should not be mixed up. Anonymity is important nowadays, but it does not equal security, and things that are not anonym can be pretty tight on security.

## spam != broken

Spam is everywhere. I'm getting pingback and comment spam on my WordPress even if the comment form is not shown. I admit that it used to be a serious issue with email, but with the rise of blacklists, effective and smart spamfilters, it's reduced to a negligible amount.

## no use uses it anymore == bullshit

Can't believe all the hate I see here. I agree with the Verge writers. Email is slowly dying. Slack looks awesome. - vicentedepierola<sup>[11]</sup>

Riiiiight. External, unencrypted, 3rd party, hosted service for the wins. I honestly don't want to see a provider sending boarding cards via Slack.

## The valid problem: too tight security

A few months ago an article emerged: The Hostile Email Landscape<sup>[12]</sup>. Though I haven't experience yet what they are talking about, if this trend continues, email will indeed become an endangered species. Too tight security does exist, and it's never good.

### Links

1. <https://aaronparecki.com/articles/2015/08/29/1/why-i-live-in-irc>
2. <https://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc2177>
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maildir>
4. <http://offlineimap.org/>
5. <http://www.allthingsrss.com/rss2email/>
6. <https://github.com/petermolnar/blogroll2email>
7. <https://mmonit.com/monit/>
8. <https://petermolnar.net/debian-lightweight-mailserver-postfix-dovecot-dspam/>
9. <https://petermolnar.net/howto-spf-dkim-dmarc-postfix/>
10. <https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=10691337>
11. <http://www.theverge.com/2014/8/12/5991005/slack-is-killing-email-yes-really#252288840>
12. <http://liminality.xyz/the-hostile-email-landscape/>

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