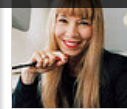
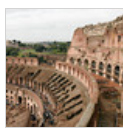


TOP STORIES IN LIFE & CULTURE



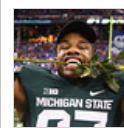
The Force Behind Dior's Jewels



Diego Della Valle Gives Back to His Cou...



Inside Hemingway's Havana Retreat



Spartans Upset Buckeye Title B...

ESSAY

Bring on the Holiday Letters

Holiday letters may be annoying, but they beat the constant deluge of social media

Email Print Save Comments f t g+ in A A

ARTICLE FREE PASS
Enjoy your free sample of exclusive subscriber content.

ONLY \$1 A WEEK FOR 12 WEEKS
SUBSCRIBE NOW >>



By PEGGY DREXLER

Dec. 6, 2013 5:54 p.m. ET

Over the next few weeks, we'll all start to receive those traditional end-of-year letters, with their family updates on promotions, acceptances, trips and tonsillectomies. They're part of the holiday territory, like fruitcake and putting reindeer hats on dogs. Yes, there's often a subtext of social competition. As a friend said, "I just got one describing a family ski trip to Aspen. All I have is: 'None of the kids threw up in school this year.' "

But there's also a seasonal warmth to these letters—and a true holiday blessing in the fact that they are seasonal. They don't demand your attention every single day, year round.

As social media has mutated into a ravenous, many-tentacled time-eater, news from our friends about their families' triumphs and trials has become omnipresent, unrelenting—a never ending vacation slide show from hell.

The Web and babies are an especially dangerous combination. A study by the Internet security firm [AVG Technologies](#) (AVG -1.26%) found that 92% of U.S. children under the age of 2 have some kind of digital profile, with images of them posted online. The same research found that 34% of children begin their digital life journey before they actually arrive on the planet, with parents posting their sonograms.

Infants, it seems, trigger a chemical response that generates weekly updates. That's particularly true for first-time parents, who (in a demonstration of nature's genius) believe they're experiencing feelings no one else has ever felt and must share every one of them. In simpler times, sharing that adorable smile would have required taking the picture, having the roll developed, picking the one where the baby's face didn't look like dried fruit, and then putting it in the mail.

Popular Now

What's This?

ARTICLES

1 Millennial Craft-Makers Embrace Arm Knitting



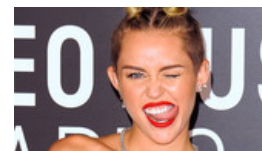
t f e c

2 Why Canada and U.S. Should Merge, Eh?



t f e c

3 America the Vulgar



t f e c

4 Opinion: The ObamaCare Buck Finally Stops

t f e c

5 My Interview With Madoff



t f e c

VIDEO

Arm Knitting: A



Enlarge Image

Francesco Bongiorno

Today, it's just way too easy. A click of the button on a digital camera, a quick download, and the picture or video clip is flying to my [Facebook](#) (FB -0.83%) feed.

One school of thought holds that obsessive posting is a form of addiction, working directly on the pleasure centers of the brain. I finally asked a friend who was sending several baby updates a week if her bulletins might (maybe, possibly) have become a bit of an obsession. She herself was worried about that. "You get hooked on the 'likes,'" she said. "It's the same feeling as when someone stops you on a walk and tells you that your baby is beautiful. Only you get it by the dozens. I know it's crazy," she said, "but I kind of live for 'likes.' If one picture gets less than another, I feel like I let her down."

I couldn't break it to her, but a backlash may be brewing. Last year saw the introduction of a Web tool called unbaby.me (since renamed Rather, presumably to take the heat off infants). It scans the captions of photos for giveaway words and replaces them in your Facebook and [Twitter](#) feeds with pictures of things you'd prefer to see.

And it isn't just babies. The irritation threat level is especially elevated for those who insist on oversharing "selfies" (self-portraits). A paper by researchers at Birmingham Business School in the U.K. shows that, with the exception of family and friends, the more that acquaintances post pictures of themselves—"here I am making a face!" "here I am making a different one!"—the less we like them.

The study also found that older friends care less about your photos than do younger ones; female friends care more than male friends; and the only people likely to care at all are those closest to you (think: shared DNA). Even then, too many photos can cause burnout. Some simple advice: Post unto others as you would have others post unto you.

So pause for a moment before you roll your eyes at the arrival of this season's batch of holiday letters. They bring us together in a way that our relentless digital connections cannot. They represent tradition in a world that discards traditions too quickly. And they require real effort and thought: Somebody took the time to write them.

Best of all, they only come once a year.

—Dr. Drexler is an assistant professor of psychology in psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College and the author, most recently, of "Our Fathers, Ourselves: Daughters, Fathers and the Changing American Family."

- Email Print Save Comments Order Reprints Facebook Twitter LinkedIn

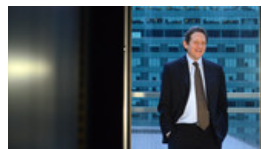
WSJ In-Depth



Greece Struggles to Outlaw Fascists



Fall of King Coal Hits Hard in Kentucky



Inside the Breakup of the Pritzker Empire

1 Scarf in 30 Minutes?



2 Opinion: The Surprising Surge in Catholic Priests



3 Tech Nerd Tries for Olympic Greatness



4 AT&T Slashes Smartphone Plan Costs



5 When Obscenity Meant Something



Content From Sponsors

What's This?

Rush Limbaugh to Oprah: If blacks are 'so mistreated' how did you 'happen'?

theGrio



Senkaku showdown: US to send in drones

Nikkei Asian Review



Zero Waste to Landfill: Meet Boeing South Carolina

The Boeing Company



8 Security Habits Putting Businesses at Risk

Fox Business



SPONSORED LINKS

Edmunds.com

2013 Car Research & Reviews. Edmunds Empowers The Auto Consumer! www.Edmunds.com

2014 Dogs of the Dow

Get a quick list of the high dividend 2014 Dogs of the Dow right now. dogsofthedow.com/2014DogsOfTheDow

Free US stock quotes

Get the latest stock prices from the NYSE and LSE free. www.ADVFN.com/Quote