ETIQUETTE ONLINE:  
From NICE to NECESSARY

In the early days of the Internet, an occasional sarcastic or confrontational remark was considered part of its “charm.” Times have changed.

By Jenny Preece

Exasperated, Mary shrieked:

“... I’m tired of these [nasty] comments. Why can’t people be more civil?”

Tom, a member of another community, reported:

“... it took only one aggressive, insulting person to ruin the whole community for everyone else.”

As Internet settlers form cyber communities, the importance of etiquette grows. Indeed, the lack of it is weakening sociability and even destroying online communities. Etiquette online is not just nice to have, it is necessary.

Like the pioneers of the Wild West, early Internet adopters were a rough and tumble gang. An occasional sarcastic comment, expletive, or confrontational challenge was part of the fun. But times have changed. Today’s settlers flock online in the millions. A single word aptly summarizes these settlers: “diverse.” These Internet users come from many cultures and walks of life. They arrive with a mix of expectations using a variety of technologies, which they access in different ways.

The new settlers include children and adults, healthy and infirm, eager and reluctant. English speakers dominate but other languages and cultures are gaining prominence. The number of women matches the number of men. Even, low-income families and those with limited education are beginning to appear [6]. This diversity can have its charm, but also can lead to unpredictable encounters, misunderstandings, and frustrated expectations. One person’s clever joke is another person’s offensive insult.

Connecting with others tops the “to-do” lists for new settlers. Internet shopping, gaming, and searching for information, particularly health information, are also near the top. The
new settlers are a social bunch compared with the early pioneers, who focused on programming and information-oriented tasks.

Different types of technology require different forms of etiquette [4]. Textmessaging via a mobile phone is different from instant messaging and worlds apart from the asynchronous experience of email. A short abrupt comment that is acceptable in instant messaging may not be in email where some people expect to be addressed by name. Emotional affordances, syntax, and semantics vary across technology, too. Furthermore, new technologies may challenge previously accepted norms. Who would have guessed that having a stranger edit one’s fastidiously composed prose without first asking permission would be acceptable? Yet this is exactly what happens in Wikis, designed for developing collaborative Web pages. Therefore, rules of etiquette are needed to preserve this spirit of flexibility while supporting reasonable behavior and good will. With such a wide range of communications software now available to users, etiquette is challenged when users move from one type to another. It’s particularly easy to forget more subtle differences between the technologies.

Access conditions may also cause poor etiquette. Hundreds of miles and many time zones separate some participants; most cannot rely on face-to-face meetings to learn each other’s norms. In addition, access to and experience with technology differs. Unwanted messages and large attachments that slightly annoy high-bandwidth users can be distressing for users with unreliable, expensive, dial-up facilities in remote locations.

The complexity of this rich mélange of users, goals, technology, and access conditions presents new challenges to etiquette online, particularly for the growing number of support communities where kindness, help, and empathy is anticipated. Good approaches for fostering etiquette online are therefore needed.
How Does Etiquette Develop?
Widely accepted ways of behaving reflect the attitudes and values of a community or society at large; indeed, they are its norms [5]. Social norms are people’s beliefs about behaviors that are normal, acceptable, or even expected in a particular social context [7].

Norms, including rules of etiquette, are learned through experience in a community. For example, children observe how adults and other children behave, absorb these norms, and learn their community’s etiquette at an early age. This role-modeling process continues throughout life. Other community members correct those who do not conform to expectations. Problems arise when people go into other cultures with different norms, particularly when the differences are subtle.

Gift giving provides a good example of an etiquette norm. If I receive a gift from American friends, I open it, thank them, and comment enthusiastically to show my pleasure. In Japan, I would instead thank the person and carefully put my gift aside to be opened later; opening the gift there and then would not be polite. My behavior would contravene the norm in Japanese society and be interpreted as poor etiquette.

In each culture, norms preserve or enforce comfort and empathy in the community. Consequently, when norms of etiquette are broken, discomfort, confusion, annoyance, embarrassment, and even fear may ensue.

What Problems Occur Online?
To understand how to create and support etiquette norms online, we must first understand what challenges them. Ask Internet users what online practice offends them most and you will get a slew of comments. For example, two friends offered the following:

“Receiving notes with inappropriate automated signatures or not addressing me by my name and ending without a farewell greeting and the sender’s name—that’s rude and unfriendly.”

Another said: “One-word answers and comments that don’t refer to our conversation. How am I supposed to remember what ‘Yes’ refers to when I get 70–100 emails a day?”

“Attaching large files that take a long time to download is thoughtless.”

Surveys also provide examples of annoying behavior. A recent Internet survey used convenience sampling to collect opinions from 4,155 participants ([istudio.vantagenet.com/cgi-bin/pollresults/002]). The survey asked: “Which Netiquette issues aggravate you most?” The following problems were identified and listed in order of most to least mentioned: sending spam, forwarding bogus virus warnings; sending dumb jokes; typing in all caps or all lower case; lack of basic grammar and punctuation; including my email address in the CC: or TO: with a list of other email addresses; not editing email; including no hello or thank you; and poor use of formatting styles.

These responses suggest different reasons for the underlying behavior: unintentionally annoying behavior due either to poorly developed skills (for example, not mixing caps and lower case, not editing email, poor grammar) or failing to appreciate what others care about (for example, wasting time by sending dumb jokes); potentially malicious behavior (for example, sending spam); and absence of courtesy (not including hello and thank you). Surprisingly, aggressive comments—or flames—are not mentioned. Flames are comparatively infrequent but when they do occur, they can be devastating to an individual or community.

What are the Solutions?
Many researchers have reported breakdowns in etiquette online over the years (for example, [10]). We also know much about the causes of poor etiquette in textual communication; for example, absence of non-verbal feedback and reduced sense of responsibility between people who may never have to address each other face-to-face (for example, [2]). This knowledge has given rise to new interfaces that support identity and social interaction online (for example, [8]).

Two well-known approaches that specifically address etiquette solutions are setting rules (often called Netiquette) and moderating discussions. These can be effective but often prove inadequate. New approaches are called for that combine human judgment with technical efficiency. The following discussion reviews current processes and suggests some other approaches.

Netiquette. The usual approach is to develop written lists of rules for online behavior. Typing “Netiquette” in Google produces a stream of links to rules for online etiquette. Recent examples like Nokia’s “Don’t b a txt msg abuser” offer the following guidance for text-messaging with cell phones (www.technovation.com):

- Common courtesy still rules. Contrary to popular belief, composing a SMS while you’re in a face-to-face conversation is just about as rude as ...
- Leave the slang to the kids. Don’t expect your stodgy superiors at work to be hip to the lingo of the SMS streets. And don’t expect to win points with your kids by trying to be cool.
- Remember your phone has an off button!
These basic, commonsense rules can be effective, but they are often read and forgotten. When upheld by moderators, community leaders, and participants they are more likely to be successful; particularly for setting standards in the early days of technology adoption or early in a community’s life.

Moderators. Although a well-known practice for preventing impolite behavior online, moderating can be demanding and time-consuming, particularly in active communities. Knowing when to control groups, when to let go, and how to bring in those who do not participate is not as easy as it might seem.

Role models. It seems obvious that role models could be used more online. After all, it’s the way children learn etiquette [5]. Online moderators and early adopters tend to be role models for those that follow. By greeting, acknowledging and praising participants they encourage a climate of appreciation and respect that fosters etiquette.

Watching what others do is also a common strategy for newcomers to an online community. It enables them to judge the tone of the community before launching in, and so avoid causing offense, being ridiculed or putdown [9]. Even established community participants adopt this wise strategy when joining new communities because each community has its own standards and ways of behaving. What is acceptable in one may not be in another.

Evidence of constructive discussions, information exchanges, and empathic support are the trademarks of most successful communities. But there are other models for community. Some, like the Wild West saloons, are places that thrive on sarcasm, bawdry, and punchy comments. Problems only arise when expectations are not met, especially in communities that are normally helpful and supportive.

Mentors. Mentoring could be helpful in technical, specialist, and cross-cultural communities. This approach has been used successfully in education environments. Based on principles advocated by the well-known psychotherapist Carl Rogers, students were given templates to teach them polite critiquing skills [12]. These templates promote addressing a person politely by name and being careful to check that you understand what she is trying to say before jumping in with questions, suggestions, or criticism; for example:

“[Name] What I think you mean is ... My own experience differs in this way ...”
“[Name] Please tell me what you want to do here, so that I can understand your point of view.”

This approach encourages empathy and shared understanding, which is important online where non-verbal cues are reduced or missing.

Citizen regulation. Communities in which home-grown etiquette norms develop with little outside influence tend to be particularly successful. These citizen-regulated communities moderate their own behavior. If someone steps out of line, community members remind the offender about what is expected in a gentle or stern manner, as the situation warrants. This behavior is particularly noticeable in patient support communities. For example, in a health support community one participant told another who was miserable and in pain to “tough it out” and not be a wimp [3]. Fellow supporters quickly came to the rescue with comments like:

“Nonsense! A macho approach ... cannot avoid all problems, you were just lucky.”

How does a community become self-regulating? Participants who take on specific roles in the community help to establish the community’s norms and express its values [7]. Good community management and skillful moderating can help to make this happen by ensuring people treat each other politely and with respect. Even communities with a high turnover can develop strong etiquette norms and become self-regulating. Mary, a member of a vibrant patient support community that has existed for eight years, describes how this happens:

“Folks with different values eventually weed themselves out or are invited to leave. There is definitely respect granted to members of the [discussion] board. I am constantly amazed at how well members of the [discussion] board get on on a day-to-day basis.”

Technically oriented processes. Some tools exist

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to support etiquette online but more are needed.

**Filters.** Obvious obscenities and unwanted spam messages can be detected and eliminated using filters. Email systems enable users to set their own filters. Spam-detecting software like SpamKiller and SpamAssassin offer increasingly sophisticated filtering capabilities. The software comes with a large list of preset filters that check a sender’s email address, subject line, message body, and embedded URLs for unwanted material. These lists are updated regularly with revised ones downloadable free of charge. In addition, users can set their own word lists, email addresses, and URLs for filtering. For example, ePrism (www.stbernard.com/products/eprism/products_eprism-spam.asp) provides a checkbox interface so that users can specify which filters they want in operation (Figure 1). Some text filters also substitute URLs, obscenities, and other unwanted words with a message such as “Hi there!,” “Cool it!,” or nonsense words like “Hubbub!”

**Community tools.** Many community-building software applications provide tools for moderators to identify, approve, reject, delete, and edit messages, or to request the sender to edit his or her messages. Moderators can also delete whole threads or lock a topic so that no further discussion can occur and send automatic replies. Some systems also make it easy for participants to request help directly from a moderator.

**Search and visualization tools.** Tools are available for identifying, rating, and rewarding contributors to online discussions. Some offer data mining and visualization, such as Microsoft’s Netscan (netscan.research.microsoft.com) where users can search for the most active UseNet Newsgroups, or the most active contributors within a group or groups, and the most valued members [11]. Results for different types of searches can be displayed in ranked tabular form (see Figure 2), graphically as a treemap for showing hierarchical relationships (see Figure 3), or in clusters, as appropriate. A similar approach could be adopted for etiquette if dictionaries of good and bad etiquette were added.

**Rating and reward schemes.** Led by Amazon and eBay, several e-commerce sites have rating schemes for customers to evaluate their products and services. Often a five-point scale is used in which “1” represents “poor” and “5” represents “excellent.” Individual and average scores are then displayed for future customers to see.

Slashdot.org, a large, technical discussion community that receives several thousand messages per day, has a more sophisticated scheme known as “karma” for evaluating participants’ contributions. Moderators award karma points to each contributor for the messages and stories they submit to the board. Karma can be rated as: “Terrible,” “Bad,” “Neutral,” “Positive,” “Good,” and “Excellent.” Karma ratings are also influenced by meta-moderating in which one moderator evaluates the ratings of another moderator ensuring that moderation is done fairly and can adjust karma points if it is not. This clever scheme therefore also checks moderator performance and enables moderation to be an open process involving community members. Schemes like this provide a basis for self-government in which communities determine and maintain their own etiquette standards. They encourage commitment and community service. Becoming a moderator is an honor.

**What is the Way Forward?**
Just as today’s Internet settlers have different needs from the early pioneers, tomorrow’s settlers will be different, too. More people from different cultures will come online. Ensuring good etiquette online will challenge moderators and community leaders unless better processes and tools for supporting good
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etiquette are developed. This should be a welcome challenge for researchers and developers. It is an opportunity to build bridges between people from different cultures, religions, genders, ages, and educational achievements.

The way forward is to develop processes that bring breaches of etiquette, processes are needed for dealing with subtle etiquette problems such as clever pranks designed to incite reactions and inadvertent impoliteness due to cultural misunderstandings. A deeper knowledge of semiotics is needed to build these kinds of applications [1].

As the Internet population continues to grow and diversify, etiquette will become increasingly important. Strong etiquette online is no longer just nice to have, it is necessary.

References

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