



Play nice or not at all

The Need for Netiquette

The Chinese or the NSA may be watching everything you post; Facebook and Google are adding each click you make online to their secret dossiers about you; and who knows who is tracking your comments?

There can be a *lot* of strange people watching your every word online these days, and not much can be done to prevent it. Anonymity and privacy have become more ideal than real, so what is a person to do? You can't stop them staring over your shoulder, so maybe the best thing to do is put on a good face.

That means "**netiquette**", or online etiquette, is more important than ever before. Courtesy is the grease for all human interactions that makes society work just a little more smoothly by taking others' feelings into account. Politeness applies to the Internet as much as at the grocery store; more, perhaps, because online many of the subtle, unconscious signals that indicate our true meanings are not available.

Therefore, jokes are not so simple, irony can feel like a frontal attack, and even plain statements can be insulting. This article will lay out basic principles you can use online to avoid confusion, make your time there more pleasant and avoid getting hurt.

Anonymity is relative

In the beginning, the online community of researchers was so small that everybody knew who everybody else was. **Usernames** were to identify, not conceal, and so when somebody said or did something objectionable they could be directly addressed.

The situation didn't last. As soon as the Internet was opened up to the world, it quickly became impossible to know just who everyone was. Moreover, it was easy to call yourself almost anything you wanted.

Bulletin boards, and later **Usenet**, fed this feeling of anonymity. Visitors could read what they pleased without worries of being identified, because such capabilities were deliberately not built into the protocols, and posting anonymously was almost as easy.

This gave early adopters a giddy sense of power and freedom that could be abused. Many had hidden lives online, some in fantasies and others as spammers, hackers, trolls, and cyberbullies – or on the other side as vigilantes or "white hat" hackers. But all felt free, empowered like players in the most amoral, violent computer games possible – and invisible, too.

In such "unreal" situations, one's true character is revealed. In the right environment – such as a game – bad behavior can be liberating. But if the environment is in any way "real", it could prove devastating.

Invisibility still exists to a large degree. People can snark freely behind their Twitter accounts. But anonymity is increasingly just a social convention, a technical obstacle that can be overcome as necessary.

Words have consequences

For the online world is not all fantasy, and often creates real-world results. **Cyberbullying** hurts to the point where young people have taken their own lives. Reputations have been ruined, careers destroyed, and vicious rumors spread. Yet ever more often, bad actors get bitten by their own nastiness.

The reason why is simple. On the Internet, it may be easy to pretend to be someone else, but almost impossible to completely cover one's tracks. Yet laws against libel, slander, threats, and blackmail still apply – along with intellectual property regulations.

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It's not just local law enforcement watching either. The federal government has various task forces monitoring the Net. Moreover, recent NSA leaks indicate that the feds may pass on evidence uncovered of serious online crime to other departments, even if the source must be obscured because of jurisdiction.

Everything posted endures

Once something is posted, the sender usually has no further control over it. In cyberspace, messages can be copied, forwarded, altered, and saved. They may be forgotten but rarely do they altogether vanish.

Even if deleted somewhere, messages may still exist elsewhere. Memory is getting cheaper all the time, so *think first* before you post, especially when angry.

Know where you are

The Internet is a big place, and many parts have been around long enough to have evolved their own traditions and ways of doing things. It pays to learn native manners to fit in more easily; by observation, reading FAQs, or even politely asking questions.

In some forums, for instance, replies should be written above quotes of the previous post, in others, below. Some require extensive citations of previous messages, others do not. Many places are very strict about staying on-topic; others let threads weave wherever they will. Some will let users add photos and formatting, others insist on plain text only.

The point is, *each site is different*. Their rules may be arbitrary, based on outmoded conditions, or be really necessary. In any case, ignore them at your own risk.

The local culture may extend to language. **Texting** uses a lot of abbreviations, many derived from email or Usenet shorthands. But much of it is surprisingly culturally defined. Researchers are already defining texting language areas. Just as some regions of the country call all carbonated beverages "*coke*s" and others call the same drinks "*soda*s", so it is online.

Use appropriate aids and formats

Some things are fairly universal. TYPING IN ALL CAPS is like shouting, as are multiple exclamation points!!! They look childish, so don't do either save for humor.

Since sarcasm and irony are impossible to detect in plain text, typographic and other visual aids have been created. While these, too, can be taken to ridiculous extremes, they still provide a handy means to demonstrate humorous intentions and defuse anger.

Emoticons originated in Victorian typography, The first modern emoticon, a colon, hyphen, and closing parentheses forming a sideways smiley face :-)) was

proposed by university researcher Scott Fahlman in 1982. Since then, hundreds of variations have been made, and there are now graphic, sometimes-animated faces, called **emoji**, that do the same thing. 😊

Staying safe behind the screen

Even if you're not living out a rich fantasy life online, it is essential to remember the differences between Net life and real life in order to stay safe in both. Just as children must be taught to be cautious around strangers and not to reveal private information, so too with users on the Internet.

This is not just paranoia of people on the other end, either. Because email is like a postcard, *no* personal information should *ever* be sent unless **encrypted**.

But remember that text is a very limited form of communication; the receiver only sees a small aspect of the sender. Do not assume you really know them; **face-to-face** meetings can go wrong. Precautions, such as vetting the other online and meeting in a public place, possibly with a friend, should be taken.

Don't feed the trolls

Most folks met online are decent, but there are also mischievous and downright mean people out there, too, not to mention criminals and psychopaths. But far more often you may encounter **trolls**.

Like their mythological namesakes hiding under bridges to assault travelers, online trolls delight in causing trouble. Often they will post stupid questions or insults just to get reactions or pick fights.

The best tactic is not to engage with them at all. These are battles that cannot be won, for trolls have no intention of fighting fair. Worse: trolls have a tendency to gang up, like hyenas on a wounded zebra.

Still, you may find yourself engaged in a heated online controversy. **Flame wars** are common on the Web, consisting of barrages of insults. They rarely solve anything, and they often escalate to hurtful extremes. Sometimes the best solution is to know when *not* to play and to just walk away. 



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