Mind Your Manners

maddog reflects on the importance of netiquette in daily communication. *By Jon "maddog" Hall*

Recently, I was involved in a panel discussion about the future of the Internet and the issue of interpersonal relations when you communicate as frequently (or more) with people that you never meet face to face as you do with people that you meet in person.

For some, this type of communication has evolved naturally. At first, people wrote letters, and the travel time gave writers the leeway to take a few days to craft a response. A person could write part of the letter, put it away, and then continue later when they had time to consider the full impact of the response. Sometimes, hastily written responses or even long, thoughtfully written letters were torn up, and the writer started again. Some of the greatest prose (and poetry) in human existence has come from these letters written from one person to another.

Telephones removed a lot of the "delay factor" present with letters, but they replaced it with the tonal quality of the human voice to supplement the words.

Then, with email and the "instant transmission" of information, people often felt that an "instant answer" was required. Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other "instant" messaging systems increased the urge to reply immediately. Electronic bulletin boards and electronic forums all came without the human voice to add expression.

Of course, certain messages like "Where are you?" or "What time do you want dinner?" do deserve a more immediate answer. But complex messages like "Do you love me?" deserve a little more time and expression.

People using the early Internet realized that certain guidelines were needed when communicating online. Various articles were written about it, and even a Request for Comment (RFC) from the Network Working Group was written [1]. Although it's dated 1995, the RFC is still well worth reading and thoughtful consideration.

As more and more electronic communication occurred, people started talking about "netiquette," the network version of "etiquette," and how you should interact with people on the Internet. As in regular etiquette, the rules of netiquette often make a lot of sense and can bring a level of order and civility to interactions.

RFC 1855 discusses several types of network communications and their issues. Pure ASCII transmission of email, for example, did little to help with emphasis and tone. Sometimes, people typed in CAPITAL LETTERS, and others told them to stop "shouting." Smiley faces appeared, and quickly ASCII versions of these were invented to help people add emphasis and "tone" to their communications. As different types of Internet communications emerged, this netiquette was extended over time.

Today, some people who join the Internet community have not had the advantage of this path. They log into a computer or use their cell phone and send messages with neither the practice of netiquette nor (seemingly) the real comprehension of what their messages and words mean at the other side or in other cultures. They create "social networking" accounts with fictitious information, then expect other people to "friend them." I admit to having pseudonyms on the Internet, but they are for my own privacy. I do not use these names to communicate with other people. I am who I am, and although I am known as "maddog," I do not hide the fact that "maddog" and "Jon Hall" are the same person.

Other elements of "netiquette" exist for your own safety. Remember that the laws of many countries do not consider email sent from or received at an employer's site to be yours; instead, it belongs to your employer. Likewise, any email or social site can be captured or hacked. There is no such thing as a secure Internet. Articles about netiquette continually warn you not to put anything on the Internet that you don't want a future employer, spouse, or child of yours to see.

At the end of the panel discussion, a question arose about training. Whose responsibility was it to train new Internet users in the ways of netiquette? This question touched a nerve with me, because many people in my country point to the schools to teach this type of subject. I answered: "It is not the role of the schools to teach netiquette, although they can help. It is the responsibility of the network citizens themselves to learn these rules and teach them to their children or to their parents."

This observation was greeted with loud applause from the audience. ∎∎∎

INFO

[1] RFC 1855: *http://tools.ietf.org/html/rfc1855*