Table of Contents

Webmaster's Note: Welcome to the WWW version of the book *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea, published by Albion Books. This online edition contains all the text and graphics from the bound book — you can use the Next Page / Previous Page links to navigate each and every page. Please let us know what you think — we welcome feedback at the email address webmaster2004@albion.com.

Social Netiquette

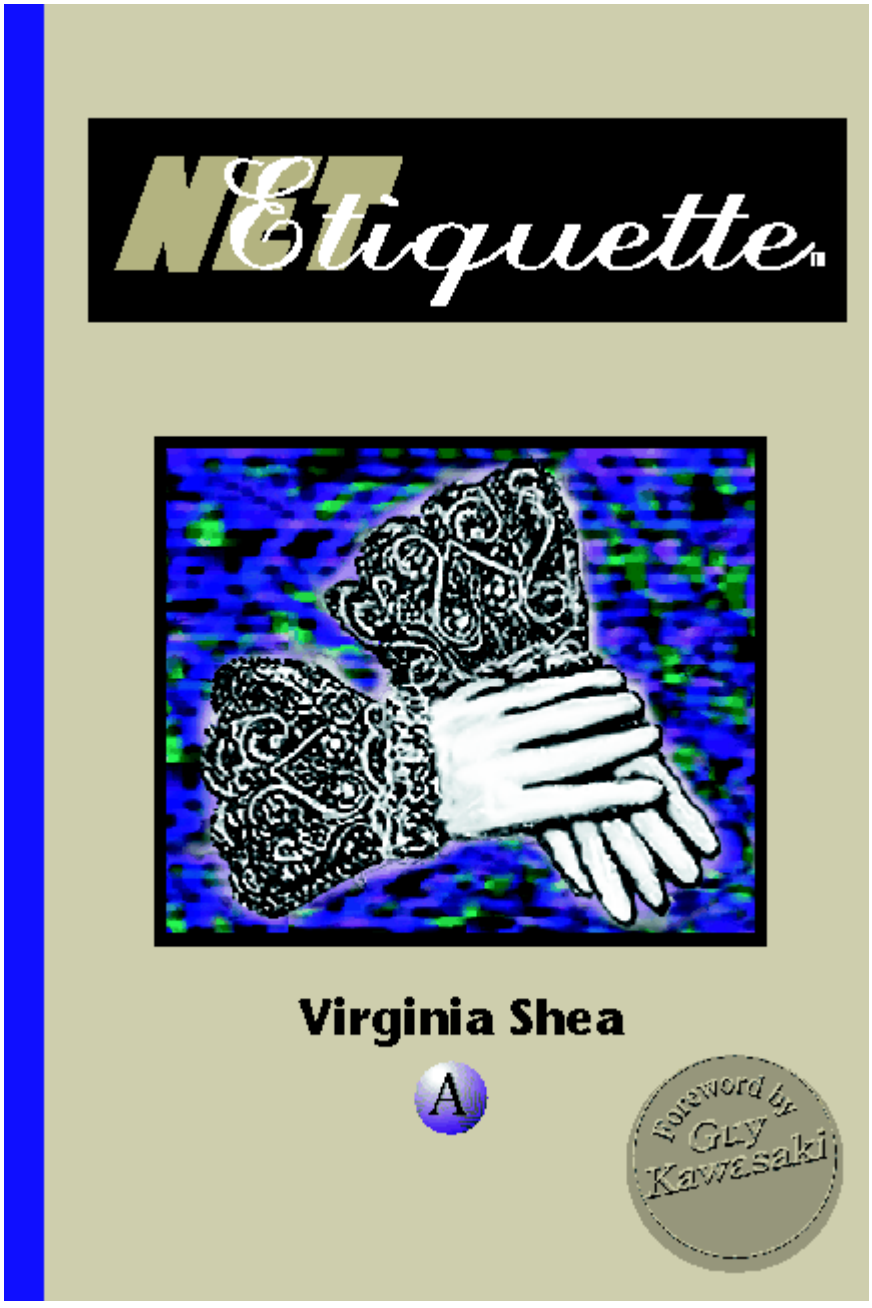
Part V
Legal & Philosophical Issues in Netiquette

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

NEtiquette™

Front Cover

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books



Next Page ... Back Cover
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Title Page

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

Netiquette

by Virginia Shea

Foreword by Guy Kawasaki

Albion Books **San Francisco**

Bookport Online Edition

Next Page ... Front Cover
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Copyright Page

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

Albion Books
4547 California St.
San Francisco CA 94118
+1 415-752-7666
fax +1 415-752-5417
info@albion.com

Online Edition 1.1, Revised December 7, 1997
Based on Bookport Online Edition 1.0B

ISBN 0-9637025-1-3

Bound edition printed in the United States of America

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Author's Dedication

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

To my grandmothers
Helen King Ensinger and Doris Luetkemeyer Shea
and my aunts
Juli Towell and Charlotte Everts

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

NEtiquette™

Table of Contents

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Foreword

When I die, I am going to have a handful of books placed in my coffin. I need them to ensure for eternity that my grammar is correct, that I'm entertained, and that I'm inspired. The books are:

- *The Chicago Manual of Style*
- *The Elements of Style* (William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White)
- *Writers on Writing* (Jon Winokur)
- *If You Want to Write* (Brenda Ueland)

Now whoever buries me will have to squeeze one more book into my coffin: *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea. Where I'm going, there will be electronic mail (and it won't be owned by Microsoft). For all eternity, I want to observe the rules that Shea has established for network etiquette.

You're probably standing in the computer section of a bookstore surrounded by too many books about the Internet and the information superhighway. You're confused: Which book do I really need about all this email stuff?

It doesn't matter which of the technical books you buy because they all contain the same *downloaded* files. However, if you want to read a book that was *written* and that teaches you principles that you will use for a long, long time, this is it.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Acknowledgments

Before anyone else, I would like to thank Catherine Hubbard for recognizing that a book on Netiquette needed to be written. Next, I thank my editor and publisher, Seth Ross. Seth asked me to write *Netiquette,* kept after me when I wasn't sure I could do it, discussed Netiquette issues with me, and provided me with tons of source material. He also edited and designed the book and wrote the sections "The Many Domains of Cyberspace" and "The Varieties of Flaming Experience." Seth may well be the first of a new professional breed -- the Renaissance publisher.

Many thanks go to my former colleagues at the Electric Power Research Institute, particularly Marie Bergstrom, Renée Morell, and my other friends in the publications department. Our great years working together provided the foundation for the "Business Netiquette" section of this book. And their support and encouragement when I decided to write *Netiquette* were a tremendous inspiration.

I would also like to thank Rich Amlin and the students in his Internet class at Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, particularly Joseph Fieger, Libby Handelsmann, Randy Ksar, Ryan Kubica, Ethan Kuniyoshi, and Michael Nguyen. These students, who know their way around the Internet far better than I do, approach electronic communication with a combination of enjoyment and matter-of-factness that I

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

A Note on Terminology

A few terms that might be confusing to some readers are tossed around rather casually in this book. For anyone who's interested, here are explanations of the most important ones:

The Internet, the Matrix, Cyberspace, the net

"The Internet" refers to a worldwide network connecting thousands of university, government, and corporate networks that have all agreed to use a common protocol to communicate with each other.

"The Matrix" refers to all the computers in the world that can exchange electronic mail. It includes the computers on the Internet as well as commercial online services like CompuServe. "Cyberspace" means almost the same thing. It's sort of a psychic superset of the Matrix -- it's the psychic space in which people interact when they communicate via computers. "Cyberspace" and "the net" are used synonymously in this book.

Electronic mail, email

Electronic mail, or email, is any message that's directed from one individual to another and is sent from one computer to another. I've spoken to some people who thought it only counted as email if a little flashing icon appeared on your screen when you got mail. Others think of email

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 1
When in Cyberspace...

The word "etiquette" means "the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be required in social or official life." Etymologically, it comes from the French word for "ticket." If you know the etiquette for a particular group or society, you have a ticket for entry into it.

To get along in any given society, we're told, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." But what do you do when Rome is both invisible and divided into dozens of different ethnic neighborhoods, each with its own customs? This Rome, of course, is cyberspace -- the mass consensual hallucination in which humans all over the planet meet, converse, and exchange information. *(Endnote #1)*

When you send email to your boss, you're in cyberspace. You're in cyberspace when you log into CompuServe or Prodigy, or when you post an article to USENET news. You're in cyberspace when you download a nifty utility or an addictive game from a public server or bulletin board.

In some ways, "cyberspace" is a bad term, because it sounds so mysterious. You're probably not hallucinating when you send an email note

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 2
The Many Domains of Cyberspace

Most of the netiquette rules you'll find in this book apply to most areas of cyberspace. Nevertheless, remember that cyberspace is composed of various network domains and services, each with its own character and rules. Currently, cyberspace can be divided into two major domains: the Internet and the commercial online services.

The Internet

Many people have heard of the Internet, but confusion about what it actually is remains. There is a technical definition:

> *The Internet is a network of networks all running the TCP/IP protocol suite, connected through gateways, and sharing common name and address spaces.* (Endnote #6)

Don't worry about the "TCP/IP protocol suite" and the rest of the jargon. The key here is the concept of "network of networks." The Internet is not a service per se, like CompuServe or cable TV. Started by the U.S. military in the 1960s, it's evolved into a cooperative arrangement among thousands of university, government, and corporate networks

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

of running discussions called "newsgroups," which are sent to thousands of computers around the world each day. References to "discussion groups" in this book include USENET newsgroups as well as electronic mailing lists and discussion forums on commercial services.

Commercial online services

Several large online services have staked out claims to cyberspace over the past several years. Unlike the Internet, these systems are under corporate control, and their rules are usually quite specific.

CompuServe

CompuServe claims to be "the world's largest commercial computer network." With over 1.5 million subscribers, CompuServe probably offers the best low-cost tech support in the world. If you have a computer question, you post it in the appropriate forum, and within hours you have dozens of answers, many of them correct. There are forums on practically every computer software package ever sold. CompuServe forums are among the best places to get expert information on almost any topic from gardening to copyright law.

CompuServe also gives you email, of course, with an Internet gateway. However, you're charged for messages and files you receive as well as those you send. In fact, you'll find that CompuServe access charges can quickly break a family networking budget, leading to the service's net nickname: Compu$erve.

America Online

America Online was the first specifically Mac-oriented network, though it is now used by hundreds of thousands of PC folk as well. The service comes with its own software, with an easy-to-use graphical user interface. Its other major characteristic is its extreme niceness. The introductory material describes it as an "online community," and most of the people who participate are so darn friendly that it sometimes gets hard to take.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

The Core Rules of Netiquette — Summary

Rule 1. **Remember the human.**

Never forget that the person reading your mail or posting is, indeed, a person, with feelings that can be hurt.

Corollary 1 to Rule #1: It's not nice to hurt other people's feelings.

Corollary 2: Never mail or post anything you wouldn't say to your reader's face.

Corollary 3: Notify your readers when flaming.

Rule 2. **Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life.**

Corollary 1: Be ethical.

Corollary 2: Breaking the law is bad Netiquette.

Rule 3. **Know where you are in cyberspace.**

Corollary 1: Netiquette varies from domain to domain.

Corollary 2: Lurk before you leap.

Rule 4. **Respect other people's time and bandwidth.**

Corollary 1: It's OK to think that what you're doing at the moment is the most important thing in the universe, but don't expect anyone else to agree with you.

Corollary 2: Post messages to the appropriate discussion group.

Corollary 3: Try not to ask stupid questions on discussion groups.

Corollary 4: Read the FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) document.

Corollary 5: When appropriate, use private email instead of posting to the group.

Corollary 6: Don't post subscribe, unsubscribe, or FAQ requests.

Corollary 7: Don't waste expert readers' time by posting basic information.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 3
The Core Rules of Netiquette

So you got a modem and a network subscription for your birthday and you want to make some new online friends. Where do you start?

Rule 1: Remember the human

The golden rule your parents and your kindergarten teacher taught you was pretty simple: Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you. Imagine how you'd feel if you were in the other person's shoes. Stand up for yourself, but try not to hurt people's feelings.

In cyberspace, we state this in an even more basic manner:

Remember the human.

When you communicate electronically, all you see is a computer screen. You don't have the opportunity to use facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice to communicate your meaning; words -- lonely written words -- are all you've got. And that goes for your correspondent as well.

When you're holding a conversation online -- whether it's an email exchange or a response to a discussion group posting -- it's easy to misinterpret your correspondent's meaning. And it's frighteningly easy to forget that your correspondent is a person with feelings more or less like your own.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Another reason not to be offensive online

When you communicate through cyberspace -- via email or on discussion groups -- your words are written. And chances are they're stored somewhere where you have no control over them. In other words, there's a good chance they can come back to haunt you.

Never forget the story of famous email user Oliver North. Ollie, you'll remember, was a great devotee of the White House email system, PROFS. He diligently deleted all incriminating notes he sent or received. What he didn't realize was that, somewhere else in the White House, computer room staff were equally diligently backing up the mainframe where his messages were stored. When he went on trial, all those handy backup tapes were readily available as evidence against him.

You don't have to be engaged in criminal activity to want to be careful. Any message you send could be saved or forwarded by its recipient. You have no control over where it goes.

Rule 2: Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life

In real life, most people are fairly law-abiding, either by disposition or because we're afraid of getting caught. In cyberspace, the chances of getting caught sometimes seem slim. And, perhaps because people sometimes forget that there's a human being on the other side of the computer, some people think that a lower standard of ethics or personal behavior is acceptable in cyberspace.

The confusion may be understandable, but these people are mistaken. Standards of behavior may be *different* in some areas of cyberspace, but they are not lower than in real life.

Be ethical

Don't believe anyone who says, "The only ethics out there are what you can get away with." This is a book about manners, not about ethics. But if you encounter an ethical dilemma in cyberspace, consult the code you follow in real life. Chances are good you'll find the answer.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

One more point on Netiquette ethics: If you use shareware, pay for it. Paying for shareware encourages more people to write shareware. The few dollars probably won't mean much to you, and they benefit all of cyberspace in the long run.

Breaking the law is bad Netiquette

If you're tempted to do something that's illegal in cyberspace, chances are it's also bad Netiquette.

Some laws are obscure or complicated enough that it's hard to know how to follow them. And in some cases, we're still establishing how the law applies to cyberspace. Two examples are the laws on privacy (see Rule 8 and "Email Privacy -- a Grand Illusion" on page 125) and copyright (see "Copyright in Cyberspace" on page 133).

Again, this is a book on manners, not a legal manual. But Netiquette mandates that you do your best to act within the laws of society and cyberspace.

Rule 3: Know where you are in cyberspace

Netiquette varies from domain to domain

What's perfectly acceptable in one area may be dreadfully rude in another. For example, in most TV discussion groups, passing on idle gossip is perfectly permissible. But throwing around unsubstantiated rumors in a journalists' mailing list will make you very unpopular there.

And because Netiquette is different in different places, it's important to know where you are. Thus the next corollary:

Lurk before you leap

When you enter a domain of cyberspace that's new to you, take a look around. Spend a while listening to the chat or reading the archives. Get a sense of how the people who are already there act. Then go ahead and participate.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Rule 4: Respect other people's time and bandwidth

It's a cliché that people today seem to have less time than ever before, even though (or perhaps because) we sleep less and have more labor-saving devices than our grandparents did. When you send email or post to a discussion group, you're taking up other people's time (or hoping to). It's your responsibility to ensure that the time they spend reading your posting isn't wasted.

The word "bandwidth" is sometimes used synonymously with time, but it's really a different thing. Bandwidth is the information-carrying capacity of the wires and channels that connect everyone in cyberspace. There's a limit to the amount of data that any piece of wiring can carry at any given moment -- even a state-of-the-art fiber-optic cable. The word "bandwidth" is also sometimes used to refer to the storage capacity of a host system. When you accidentally post the same note to the same newsgroup five times, you are wasting both time (of the people who check all five copies of the posting) and bandwidth (by sending repetitive information over the wires and requiring it to be stored somewhere).

You are not the center of cyberspace

Presumably, this reminder will be superfluous to most readers. But I include it anyway, because when you're working hard on a project and deeply involved in it, it's easy to forget that other people have concerns other than yours. So don't expect instant responses to all your questions, and don't assume that all readers will agree with -- or care about -- your passionate arguments.

Rules for discussion groups

Rule 4 has a number of implications for discussion group users. Most discussion group readers are already spending too much time sitting at the computer; their significant others, families, and roommates are drumming their fingers, wondering when to serve dinner, while those network maniacs are catching up on the latest way to housebreak a puppy or cook zucchini.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

And many news-reading programs are slow, so just opening a posted note or article can take a while. Then the reader has to wade through all the header information to get to the meat of the message. No one is pleased when it turns out not to be worth the trouble. See "Netiquette for Discussion Groups" on page 65 for detailed rules.

To whom should messages be directed? (Or why "mailing list" could become a dirty word)

In the old days, people made copies with carbon paper. *(Endnote #8)* You could only make about five legible copies. So you thought good and hard about who you wanted to send those five copies to.

Today, it's as easy to copy practically anyone on your mail as it is not to. And we sometimes find ourselves copying people almost out of habit. In general, this is rude. People have less time than ever today, precisely because they have so much information to absorb. Before you copy people on your messages, ask yourself whether they really need to know. If the answer is no, don't waste their time. If the answer is maybe, think twice before you hit the send key.

Rule 5: Make yourself look good online

Take advantage of your anonymity

I don't want to give the impression that the net is a cold, cruel place full of people who just can't wait to insult each other. As in the world at large, most people who communicate online just want to be liked. Networks -- particularly discussion groups -- let you reach out to people you'd otherwise never meet. And none of them can see you. You won't be judged by the color of your skin, eyes, or hair, your weight, your age, or your clothing.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

In addition, make sure your notes are clear and logical. It's perfectly possible to write a paragraph that contains no errors in grammar or spelling, but still makes no sense whatsoever. This is most likely to happen when you're trying to impress someone by using a lot of long words that you don't really understand yourself. Trust me -- no one worth impressing will be impressed. It's better to keep it simple.

Don't post flame-bait

Finally, be pleasant and polite. Don't use offensive language, and don't be confrontational for the sake of confrontation. See "The Art of Flaming" on page 71 for details.

Q. Is swearing acceptable on the net?

Only in those areas where sewage is considered an art form, e.g., the USENET newsgroup alt.tasteless. Usually, if you feel that cursing in some form is required, it's preferable to use amusing euphemisms like "effing" and "sugar." You may also use the classic asterisk filler -- for example, s***. The archness is somehow appropriate to the net, and you avoid offending anyone needlessly. And everyone will know exactly what you mean.

Rule 6: Share expert knowledge

Finally, after all that negativity, some positive advice.

The strength of cyberspace is in its numbers. The reason asking questions online *works* is that a lot of knowledgeable people are reading the questions. And if even a few of them offer intelligent answers, the sum total of world knowledge increases. The Internet itself was founded and grew because scientists wanted to share information. Gradually, the rest of us got in on the act.

So do your part. Despite the long lists of no-no's in this book, you do have something to offer. Don't be afraid to share what you know.

It's especially polite to share the results of your questions with others. When you anticipate that you'll get a lot of answers to a question, or when you post a question to a discussion group that you don't visit

often, it's customary to request replies by email instead of to the group. When you get all those responses, write up a summary and post it to the discussion group. That way, everyone benefits from the experts who took the time to write to you.

If you're an expert yourself, there's even more you can do. Many people freely post all kinds of resource lists and bibliographies, from lists of online legal resources to lists of popular UNIX books. If you're a leading participant in a discussion group that lacks a FAQ, consider writing one. If you've researched a topic that you think would be of interest to others, write it up and post it. See "Copyright in Cyberspace" on page 133 for a few words on the copyright implications of posting research.

Sharing your knowledge is fun. It's a long-time net tradition. And it makes the world a better place.

Rule 7: Help keep flame wars under control

"Flaming" is what people do when they express a strongly held opinion without holding back any emotion. It's the kind of message that makes people respond, "Oh come on, tell us how you really feel." Tact is not its objective.

Does Netiquette forbid flaming? Not at all. Flaming is a longstanding network tradition (and Netiquette never messes with tradition). Flames can be lots of fun, both to write and to read. And the recipients of flames sometimes deserve the heat.

But Netiquette does forbid the perpetuation of flame wars -- series of angry letters, most of them from two or three people directed toward each other, that can dominate the tone and destroy the camaraderie of a discussion group. It's unfair to the other members of the group. And while flame wars can initially be amusing, they get boring very quickly to people who aren't involved in them. They're an unfair monopolization of bandwidth.

For advice on sending and receiving flames, see "The Art of Flaming" on page 71.

Rule 8: Respect other people's privacy

Of course, you'd never dream of going through your colleagues' desk drawers. So naturally you wouldn't read their email either.

Unfortunately, a lot of people would. This topic actually rates a separate section. For now, here's a cautionary tale. I call it

The case of the snoopy foreign correspondent

In 1993, Michael Hiltzik, a highly regarded foreign correspondent in the Moscow bureau of the *Los Angeles Times,* was caught reading his coworkers' email. His colleagues became suspicious when system records showed that someone had logged in to check their email at times when they knew they hadn't been near the computer. So they set up a sting operation. They planted false information in messages from another one of the paper's foreign bureaus. Hiltzik read the notes and later asked colleagues about the false information. Bingo! As a disciplinary measure, he was immediately reassigned to another position at the paper's Los Angeles bureau.

The moral: Failing to respect other people's privacy is not just bad Netiquette. It could also cost you your job.

Rule 9: Don't abuse your power

Some people in cyberspace have more power than others. There are wizards in MUDs (multi-user dungeons), experts in every office, and system administrators in every system.

Knowing more than others, or having more power than they do, does not give you the right to take advantage of them. For example, sysadmins should never read private email.

For more on the abuse of power in the milieu of computer networks, see "Egregious Netiquette Violations" on page 83. For more about privacy, see "Email Privacy: a Grand Illusion?" on page 125.

Rule 10: Be forgiving of other people's mistakes

Everyone was a network newbie once. And not everyone has had the benefit of reading this book. So when someone makes a mistake -- whether it's a spelling error or a spelling flame, a stupid question or an unnecessarily long answer -- be kind about it. If it's a minor error, you may not need to say anything. Even if you feel strongly about it, think twice before reacting. Having good manners yourself doesn't give you license to correct everyone else.

If you do decide to inform someone of a mistake, point it out politely, and preferably by private email rather than in public. Give people the benefit of the doubt; assume they just don't know any better. And never be arrogant or self-righteous about it. Just as it's a law of nature that spelling flames always contain spelling errors, notes pointing out Netiquette violations are often examples of poor Netiquette.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 4
Introduction to Electronic Mail

Electronic mail is known for its informality. This is partly because of the hacker culture whence email springs and partly because email is so easy to send. In some ways email has more in common with phone discussion than with paper memos, which are traditionally more formal in tone.

Because email communications are written, they can be much more detailed than a phone conversation. And they're delivered almost instantaneously, rather than overnight. So colleagues or friends can have a long "conversation" -- with a written record of what they said -- over the course of a day.

Anatomy of an email message

When you receive an Internet email message, it usually contains many lines of incomprehensible gibberish before the beginning of the actual text. *(Endnote #11)* This chunk of gibberish is known as the "header" of the message. Most of it is a record of the path the message took from the sender's computer to yours. It's useful only when an email message gets lost or

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

the interruption of email. And an immediate response is very impressive to many people -- they think it means you're right on top of your work. If you prefer to read every message as soon as you notice it, go for it. You'll find that more and more of your work gets done via the mail system rather than the phone.

Those wacky email features

Email is full of useful features that, in many cases, didn't exist before. As with paper memos, you can carbon copy (cc) or blind carbon copy (bcc) your notes to anyone on your mail network. You can attach return receipts to your notes so that you'll know when your email has been opened. You can schedule tickler messages months ahead of time. You can flag your messages as "urgent"; in many cases, these notes will appear immediately on the reader's screen. And, on some systems, you can set up a "bozo filter" or "kill file" that automatically screens out email from people whose messages you deem unworthy of reading. All these features vary from system to system.

Carbon copy (cc) and blind carbon copy (bcc)

Use these features anywhere you'd use them when sending a paper memo -- for example, when your boss has delegated a project to you and you want to keep her up-to-date on it, or when you request information from a higher-up and want to be sure his secretary also knows about your request. A few carbon copy don'ts:

- Don't cc Steve Jobs on your analysis of the war in Bosnia.
- Don't cc Michael Spindler on your hatchet job about Steve Jobs and John Sculley.
- Don't cc your boss on your lunch date with your friend in Accounts Payable.

In other words, don't waste other people's time.

Return receipts

A receipt is a message the email system sends to the writer of a note

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

When to send files (and when not to)

Many email systems allow you to attach files to your email notes. This is a handy feature for the sender, but under some circumstances, a pain in the neck for the receiver, especially if he doesn't have the right tools to access the file. Even under the best circumstances, reading an email note, then saving and opening a file takes significantly longer than just reading an email note. So you should never send a file when a simple note would do.

An example: Occasionally, I used to receive email notes saying only "see attachment." The attachment would invariably turn out to be the word processing file for a paper memo announcing a meeting. It would have been a lot easier for me -- and everyone else who received the file -- if the relevant information had simply been copied into the email note itself. And copying that information into the note would hardly have taken the sender any longer than sending the file.

On the other hand, the ability to transmit files is a godsend when your file contains important formatting (boldface, italics, et cetera) or other non-text information (a spreadsheet, for example). That's because many email systems allow only ASCII text in their notes, but attached files can contain any kind of information. You can also send a file that's too long to paste into an email note.

All these situations are most likely to arise when both you and your correspondent are working with the files in question. For example, I sent *Netiquette* to my publisher in the form of files rather than email notes because (1) it contained important formatting information and (2) it was long.

When you send a file, it's important to make sure that your correspondent has the application software necessary to open the file. If you're "uuencoding" your file (an Internet standard), make sure your recipient can "uudecode" it. And check whether her version of the software is older than yours. There's nothing more frustrating than trying to open up, say, a PageMaker file, and discovering that your correspondent has

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

already upgraded to the brand-new version while you're still using the old one.

Finally, it's a good idea to include your email address within any file you send. It's a courtesy -- just like putting your return address at the top of your letter, as well as on the outside of the envelope, which might get thrown out.

Email flames

Like many other cyberspace travelers, email writers sometimes forget the Golden Rule of Netiquette -- Remember the human -- and write things they would never say out loud.

Here's a sample situation: A colleague has just used email to respond to some written work you did. The note doesn't just disagree with the point of view you took up; it attacks you in rather personal terms. You're upset. How do you respond?

It takes a little courage, but it's not difficult. First, wait a few hours -- even a day or two -- to cool down. Then reply to your colleague's note. Say that, while you respect his right to disagree with you, you want him to know that his personal comments hurt your feelings. If you choose, you may also use this note to reply to the substance of his criticisms, but it's probably better to wait. This approach usually brings the discourse back where it belongs -- to the substance of the issues, rather than the morals and personal habits of the people in the discussion. It works because it reminds your colleague that you're a human being who deserves to be treated with respect -- even over the network.

Of course, if your colleague is the kind of subhuman scum who will never get that message, just flame back. ;-) *(Endnote #12)*

Email as a substitute for live interaction

People will occasionally say things like "Electronic communication is no substitute for human interaction." Hogwash. Of course it is. Humans

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

have been developing substitutes for live interaction since the invention of smoke signals.

The valid point in that statement is that electronic communication can't -- and shouldn't -- *completely* replace live human interaction. A case in point: The *Wall Street Journal* *(Endnote #13)* reports on a group of managers who agreed to start using email less. Why? They found that because they solved most of their easy problems via email, they only met when they had to deal with something really nasty, which led to very unpleasant meetings. They agreed to meet more regularly (although still less frequently than they did before the advent of email) so as to stay on better terms with each other.

Email can be a great tool for dealing with people you can't stand in person. I once had to work with an incredibly nervous man whose tension was contagious. Rather than having him call me up at all hours of the day, we agreed to communicate by email. I sent him a project update every day or so, and if I left any of his questions unanswered, he would ask them by return email. I would try to reply by the end of the next day. I also tried to send him my reports right before I went home in the evening, so that if he did decide to follow up with a phone call, I'd be gone. It worked pretty well.

We still had to meet in person once in a while, though. You can't have everything.

Email Never-Neverland: home of the lost messages

Somewhere in cyberspace, there's a limbo of lost email messages. Like the souls of unbaptized babies, these notes wait, unread, for the end of time.

The Post Office has always had its dead letter office. Mail delivery in cyberspace is no more foolproof. The advantage of electronic delivery is that lost information isn't irretrievable; you usually have a copy of anything you sent to someone else.

Chapter 5
The Elements of Electronic Style

The truth is that computer networking is still in its infancy. Probably nothing illustrates this more clearly than the "ASCII jail": 90% of network communications are still limited to plain old ASCII text -- that is, the characters of the alphabet, the numerals 0 through 9, and the most basic punctuation marks. It's bad enough that multimedia communications have not been implemented in most of cyberspace. Most of the time you can't even put a word in bold or italics!

Because people cannot see or hear you in cyberspace, you need to pay close attention to the style of your electronic communications if you hope to make a good impression there. The *style* of electronic communications encompasses everything about your correspondence except its content, from your use of network conventions like "smileys" and "sigs" to the number of characters per line in your email messages.

Style considerations are influenced by several of the rules of Netiquette, especially Rule 4, Respect other people's time, and Rule 5, Make yourself look good online. It doesn't matter how brilliant your messages are if they're formatted in such a way that no one can read them.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Tone of voice online

The fact that most network interactions are limited to written words can be the source of misunderstandings. Fortunately, clever network users have had years to deal with this. They've created a shorthand to help communicate the tone that you'd otherwise get from the other person's voice, facial expressions, and gestures. These shorthand expressions are known as smileys or emoticons. They're easy to figure out once you get the hang of it. Just remember that they're all sideways faces.

See Table 1 for a list of the most commonly used emoticons. There are whole books about smileys for those who are interested, including the enjoyable *Smiley Dictionary* by Seth Godin.

People also use abbreviations to express emotional states or to qualify what they're saying. See Table 2 for a list of common abbreviations.

The "FLAME ON/FLAME OFF" notifier

When you really want to run off at the keyboard -- but you want your readers to know that you know that you're not expressing yourself in your usual measured, reasoned manner -- you need to let them know that you know that you're flaming. So before you begin your rant, simply enter the words FLAME ON. Then rant away. When you're done, write FLAME OFF and resume normal discourse. See "The Art of Flaming" on page 71 for more details.

Looking good online

One of the neat things about computers is that they let us use all kinds of special effects in our documents that we didn't even dream of back in the days of typewriters (if you're old enough to remember those days). But when you're communicating online, in most cases it's back to the typewriter as far as effects go. Even if your mail system lets you use boldface, italics, and tabs, there's no guarantee that your correspondent's system will understand them. At worst, your communication will turn into unreadable gibberish.

- To indicate underlining, surround the material with _underscores_. Use this for book references as well -- for example, this book is called _Netiquette_.

Signature files

Some systems allow people to create a "signature file" or "sig file." These signatures automatically appear at the end of each message the person sends. They usually contain the person's full name and often include cute quotes or little drawings. For example:

```
    A\   Seth Ross
   A A\   Publisher, Albion Books
  A   A\   4547 California St., San Francisco, CA 94118
 AAAAAAA\   seth@albion.com, 415-752-7666, fax 415-752-5417
A       A\   "Computer books for a converging world."
```

Some people rant about oversized or silly signatures. But from a time-wasting point of view, they're not really that big a deal. Since they're automatically inserted at the end of the message, you can read the whole message without looking at the whole sig. On the other hand, the force of human curiosity that drives us onto the net in the first place makes it hard for many of us to ignore screens full of type, even if we know there's probably nothing worth reading there.

One positive aspect of sigs is that they often contain "offline" contact information. This can actually save time and bandwidth because it allows people to respond privately by telephone or by (gasp) U.S. mail. By placing an email address in a sig, the sender is also hedging against the chance that the email "header" message may get garbled in transit.

In most situations, Netiquette frowns on excessive sigs and smiles on pithy ones. Keep in mind that some public access Internet sites automatically restrict sigs to four lines. Silly sigs are definitely not recommended for business correspondence -- see "Electronic Mail at Work" on page 91 for a discussion of the rules of business email.

Chapter 6
Netiquette for Discussion Groups

You and your virtual buddies

Much of your cyberspace interaction will take place in discussion groups -- areas where notes on a topic of common interest are posted and stored for anyone to read. Discussion groups are also known as newsgroups, message boards, bulletin boards, and forums. To participate, you read the notes that people have posted over the last few days. You write your own response and post it yourself. Then you check in the next day and see how other people responded to you.

When you first start posting messages to discussion groups, you may feel shy. That's good -- it's a sign that you're concerned about the impression you're going to make on a bunch of people you've never met. Fortunately, most discussion group readers are there in the first place because they're friendly people who enjoy interacting with others. (Although there's a very loud minority that takes pleasure in tearing down other people and their ideas; see "The Art of Flaming" on page 71 for more.) Here are some hints on making friends, not enemies, in cyberspace:

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

- Phrase your postings politely. Cursing is frowned upon (except in designated areas like the USENET newsgroup alt.tasteless). If you want to express a strong opinion, cute euphemisms and made-up expletives are usually acceptable.
- Make sure your postings are correct. This is particularly important with information about serious topics -- for example, an illness. Information -- whether true or false -- spreads rapidly through cyberspace. You wouldn't want to be responsible for making people sicker than they already were.
- Don't assume that posted information is correct, and don't spread it around if you have any questions at all about it.
- Be careful about posting late at night or any time you're tired, sick, or having a terrible day. Your judgment may not be at its best. When in doubt, hold off until you feel better.

Developing time-saving habits

Many of the basic Netiquette rules for discussion groups fall under Rule 4, Respect other people's time. Here they are:

- When posting to a discussion group, try not to ask stupid questions. I'm familiar with the belief that "there's no such thing as a stupid question." On the net, that's not necessarily the case. A stupid question is one that you could have found the answer to yourself with a little research, or one that you're asking in the wrong place. If you do the basic research suggested here (i.e., read the FAQ) and don't find the answer to your question, and you have reason to believe that you're looking for the answer in the right place, go ahead and ask. Fortunately, most network surfers are kindly folks who will be happy to help you out, even if your question is considered stupid. But it's only polite not to take advantage of their time if you don't have to. So read the FAQ. If your question is answered there, you didn't waste anyone's time either reading or

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

- If the FAQ doesn't answer your question, go ahead and post. But, if you still suspect that it's a request for some fairly basic information, ask that responses be sent to you by email. That way, you're not responsible for discussion group readers having to wade through screens full of identical answers.
- Use descriptive and specific subject lines. This helps others decide whether your particular words of wisdom relate to a topic they care about.
- Try not to post comments that don't add anything to the discussion. When you're just cruising through a thread in a leisurely manner, it's not too annoying to read through a lot of "hear, hear"'s and "I agree"'s. But if you're actually trying to find information, it's a pain in the neck. So save those one-word responses for threads that have degenerated to the point where none but true aficionados are following them any more.
- If your posting is only of interest to a specific geographic area, try to limit the distribution to that area. I live in California; even if I wanted to, I couldn't easily adopt a cat that lives in Boston.
- Post messages to the appropriate discussion group. It may seem obvious, but don't post stories or questions about fighter planes to a newsgroup for gardeners. If you're in doubt, it's always OK to ask -- but ask briefly. I once read a long (and apparently sincere) posting in a discussion group for feminists from a guy who was looking for tips on how to meet women. He did have the sense to acknowledge that this might not be the best place to start his search. But he should have stopped there and asked for confirmation and suggestions for other groups to ask.

Things never to post to a discussion group

- Requests to have your name added to a mailing list. There is always a separate email address for such requests; for Internet and BITNET lists, it usually starts with "LISTSERV" or "listname-request." Find it and use it.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 7
The Art of Flaming

Although flames often get out of hand, they have a purpose in the ecology of cyberspace. Many flames are aimed at teaching someone something (usually in overstated language) or stopping them from doing something (like offending other people). Flame messages often use more brute force than is strictly necessary, but that's half the fun.

Netiquette does ask that you consider the art of flaming before pulling out the flame-thrower. Any wannabe with an email account can ignite a firestorm of ill-conceived and boring flames. It takes diligence and creativity to pull off an artful flame. Who knows -- if your flame is good enough, you might even make it into the Hall of Flame (see "Flame newsgroups" on page 79).

Choose your flames well

If you must flame, don't flame gratuitously. Choose your target with care. In other words, hold back on flaming the newcomer to a discussion group who asks a dumb question. Or the prophet of doom who posts his "the end is near" message to the entire USENET newsgroup hierarchy. *(Endnote #14)* In addition, think twice before flaming the gurus on the net. This won't earn you popularity points and, most likely, the guru will

Flame wars

The USENET news group rec.food.veg is famous for its flame wars. One favorite of mine was about whether vegans or omnivores were more subject to vitamin B-12 deficiencies. It got pretty ugly.

Flame wars can be amusing for the twisted among us to read. (I particularly enjoy reading the outrageous flames sent by readers complaining about the flame wars.) Nevertheless, it's generally considered rude to subject other readers in a discussion group to a protracted flame war, especially when it gets personal. Perhaps more important, prolonged participation in a flame war can get you a really bad reputation on a discussion group. Imagine losing the respect of hundreds -- even thousands -- of people you've never even met! If you want that kind of abuse, you might as well run for president; the pay is better if you win.

USENET participant Graham Wolff Christian points out that flame wars are almost ubiquitous. He writes

> *Every* discussion list of which I have been a part--no matter what its subject--has fallen victim to such ills--a few have gone down in e-flames. The pattern is absolutely consistent. Writer A drops a light remark--always *tangential* to the main discussion. Writer B interprets the message in the worst possible light and fires off an outraged reply, in which writer A is called a racist, a classist, a fascist--whatever seems to apply. Writers C-L chime in, rather like the crowds in a DeMille film, muttering "Shame!" or "I agree!" or "A is right!" or "B is right!" Writer A replies saying, "Gosh, it was just a joke. I'm not a fascist. Lighten up." Writer B says, "This issue (the South, date rape, Nicaragua) is DEADLY SERIOUS. I won't lighten up. I won't." By the time things have cooled down, Writers A and B have left the list; or Writers N-DD have left the list; or the list has died. These are not *odd* occasions--they happen to *every list.*

In the worst-case scenario, a protracted flame war can destroy a discussion group. Inevitably, the least common denominator principle takes hold, and the group sinks to the level of the loudest and lowest flamers.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

The problem flamer

Although flaming isn't necessarily bad Netiquette, a flamer can sometimes get out of hand. For example, say you participate in the ultra-friendly newsgroup rec.pets.cats. Somebody posts a message to the newsgroup suggesting that all kittens should be "buried up to their necks at lawn-mowing time." What do you do?

Your first impulse may be to respond to the culprit -- either publicly or by private email -- casting aspersions on his/her morals, intelligence, ancestry, etc. Don't do it. People who post flagrantly offensive flames like this are either flexing their net.muscles, or desperately crying out for attention, or some combination of those things. Many (perhaps most) such flamers are college students who have just discovered cyberspace, and whose social skills haven't yet caught up with their technical abilities. A return flame may be just what they want, and in any case probably won't change their behavior.

Some better suggestions (offered by the friendly folks on rec.pets.cats): *(Endnote #15)*

- 1. Ask your moderator to stop posting anything the flamer writes. (This isn't an option on an unmoderated newsgroup like rec.pets.cats. If there were a moderator, the offensive posting probably would never have appeared.)
- 2. On the theory that attention is what the flamer wants, just ignore him/her.
- 3. Use your news reader's "kill file" feature to prevent anything the flamer writes from appearing on your screen.
- 4. In cases of flagrant abuse, you can try sending a note to the flamer's system administrator asking for him/her to intervene. But save this for extreme cases of repeated, abusive postings. Don't waste the

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

sysadmin's time just because someone on his/her system was having a bad day.

- 5. Send a chilly note to the miscreant. Kay Klier's version is "Your post to rec.pets.cats was inappropriate to this news group. Please do not post similar material here again." Kay often receives an apologetic reply to this note. Other times, the flamer simply disappears from the newsgroup. Occasionally, someone will reply abusively. If that happens, you can forward the reply to the writer's system administrator and ask to have the person gently reminded of proper network behavior.

Netiquette recommends solution 5 (above) for several reasons:

- It always feels better to take action.
- As world events demonstrate, ignoring those who are childishly screaming for attention doesn't always make them stop. Better to gently point out the error of their ways; at least you tried.

The varieties of flaming experience

Flames tend to proceed along predictable patterns. That is, the same flames are repeated over and over again in different forums and at different times. Below are some classic flames.

The Spelling Flame

It happens every day. Someone misspells a word in a public message. One or more people absolutely must publicly correct the error. Judging from the number of times this happens, there seem to be millions of high school English teacher wannabes in cyberspace. Ironically, spelling flames nearly always contain spelling errors.

Spelling flames are bad Netiquette. If you feel absolutely compelled to correct someone's spelling or grammar, do so via private email. Keep in mind that English is not the first language of many people on the Internet.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

commercial messages will always be flame-bait in many parts of cyberspace. After all, no one wants to be bombarded with commercial messages or see the net turn into a nausea-provoking advertising machine like Prodigy.

If you post new product announcements, self-promotions, or ad copy where it's not expressly allowed, be prepared for flameage. Unsolicited direct email advertising is probably the worse transgression. Consider this: in conventional direct mail, a 2% response rate is considered decent. If your company experiments with unsolicited direct email, don't be surprised if you get a 98% response, from people flaming you for clogging up their electronic mailboxes.

The Gross-Out Flame

Otherwise known as the Deliberately Offensive Flame. By definition, these flames have no redeeming value. Often they involve uncalled for personal attacks. Sometimes they amount to no more than racist or sexist drivel (see "The PC Flame" on page 78). Netiquette forbids gross-out flames, except in clearly marked gross-out domains (see "Flame newsgroups" below).

"Censorship" on the net

One of the remedies noted above for errant flamers is appealing to the culprit's sysadmin or to the newsgroup moderator to have network privileges revoked. This will no doubt elicit cries of "censorship!" from some. Sorry. Currently, no network service that I'm aware of is run as a democracy. While scorn is rightly heaped on such services as Prodigy -- which monitor discussion group content ruthlessly for anything that could be construed as remotely offensive -- there is such a thing as Going Too Far in almost any group. Privately owned and managed groups do have a right to monitor and censor their contents.

Flame newsgroups

Some USENET newsgroups, like alt.flame and alt.tasteless, exist purely for the purpose of sharing rude and offensive writings. There's even a "Hall of Flame" newsgroup: alt.flame.hall-of-flame. Surprisingly,

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

even these groups have their own etiquette, but it's frequently breached, and there's not much you can do about it. If you're having a really bad day, you might try posting to alt.flame; at least you never have to worry about negative repercussions. One of my own favorites is alt.flame.roommate. If you have roommates, you'll empathize; if you don't -- and especially if you used to and don't any more -- it'll remind you how lucky you are.

Apologizing

Q. I sent flame mail to a discussion group I participate in, and now I regret it. What should I do?

A gracious apology is almost always appreciated. Here's a good example of one:

> >>Sorry for the flame yesterday. Bad day. I too appreciate a flame-free environment.<<

Note that this method can be used to retract or to correct statements you made, or simply to apologize for the manner in which you spoke. You can stand by what you said but regret the way you said it. Like calling a flamer on his actions, this takes some courage. But most readers will appreciate the effort and remove you from their scum-of-the-earth lists.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 8
Netiquette for Information Retrieval

When you retrieve information across the net, you're not interacting directly with other humans. So Netiquette for this activity is fairly simple, and is mostly governed by Rule 4, Don't waste other people's time and bandwidth.

Although time and bandwidth are different -- bandwidth is information-carrying capacity; time is time -- in practice, conserving one tends to conserve the other. Conserving bandwidth is particularly important when you retrieve information from a host or server, because carelessness about your own usage can prevent other people from getting information they need. Only a limited number of people can be connected to a server at any one time. And a server can only transmit a certain amount of information per second. When too many people are trying to download too much information, some users are denied access, and system performance slows down for everyone.

What can you do to prevent that? Here are some simple rules:

- Don't stay logged in when you're not doing anything.
- If possible, log in at off-peak hours.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 9
Egregious Violations of Netiquette

Just like the real world, cyberspace contains people who commit flagrant acts of misbehavior. Fortunately, these people are in the minority. Unfortunately, we have to watch out for them anyway. Here are a few egregious violations of Netiquette to be on the alert for as you travel through cyberspace.

Cyberspace predators

Perhaps the worst Netiquette violators are people who use their cyberspace connections to gain the trust of others and then take advantage of them in real life. Some of the most unpleasant stories involve pedophiles who get to know kids online, engage in sexual discussions with them, and in some cases, arrange to meet them live.

Children aren't the only ones who are vulnerable to this kind of abuse. The story of the "Net Lothario" (page 117) is an example of how adults can also be fooled by someone who lacks morals and writes persuasively.

This doesn't mean that you can't trust anyone you meet online. It does mean that you need to exercise at least as much caution with your cyberspace acquaintances as you would with a friendly person you met

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

at the grocery store. In fact, because it's so easy for predators to misrepresent themselves online, a little more caution is in order.

Children, in particular, should be warned never to give out personal information -- their addresses, their phone numbers, their passwords, or the times they're home alone -- online. And unfortunately, every cybernaut needs to remember that fellow net travelers may not be who or what they claim to be.

Alternate personae

Many people who create false identities online aren't predators -- they're just fooling around. In many areas of cyberspace -- particularly MUDs (multi-user dungeons) and their close cousins, MOOs (object-oriented MUDs) -- it's normal and expected behavior. MUDs and MOOs exist specifically for the purpose of exploring fantasy worlds and fantasy identities. Men often represent themselves as women. (For some reason, it's less common for women to appear as men.) All that is just fine.

Other cases are closer to the borderline of acceptable behavior. For instance, male journalists have created feminine handles to investigate sexual harassment on the net. While that isn't particularly nice, neither is sexual harassment. Netiquette permits it as long as the journalist refrains from getting deeply involved with anyone under false pretenses. The story of "Joan" (page 118) is an example of a man whose "experiment" in cyberspace cross-dressing got out of control.

Long-term misrepresentation of oneself in romance discussion groups or chat areas, where the purpose of the interaction is to form a serious relationship, is definitely not acceptable. See "Love & Sex in Cyberspace" on page 115 for details.

Electronic forgery

Every piece of email and every posting to a discussion group carries an electronic signature. And, just as it's possible to forge a handwritten signature, it is sometimes possible to send email from someone else's ID. A recent example occurred when five college freshmen decided it

would be funny to send a false letter of resignation for a new university official. They also circulated demands for tuition to other students and letters implying that the official was gay. Administrators had begun acting on the resignation before they found out it was a fake.

In another bizarre incident, readers of alt.fan.douglas-adams, the USENET fan club for *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* author Douglas Adams, started circulating rumors that genuine postings from Adams -- who occasionally reads the newsgroup -- were fake. Then an actual fake Douglas Adams started sending abusive notes to readers. The real Douglas Adams had a terrible time straightening out the mess.

Forging email is just as wrong as forging a paper letter. Forged email is also fairly easy to trace. Bad idea.

Chain letters

Have you ever gotten one of those letters promising you millions of dollars if you just send a few dollars to a list of people, but threatening you with hideous death within a year if you don't? Those things circulate in cyberspace as well. The best-known is a long, rambling letter signed by "Dave Rhodes." It appears periodically in random discussion groups and mailboxes.

Chain letters are forbidden on BITNET and on most commercial network services. If you receive a copy of the "Dave Rhodes" letter, or any other chain letter, don't follow the instructions! Forward a copy to your system administrator or postmaster and request that action be taken against the sender. You can also reply to the sender yourself and tell him or her that sending chain letters is not acceptable network behavior.

Electronic hoaxes

Some people don't stop with forging email from real people. Some people construct entire fictional companies and publicize them on the net.

A recent example that received a lot of publicity was the Sexonix hoax. A fellow named Joey Skaggs announced to the media that he had set up

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

the world's first virtual reality sex provider, called "Sexonix." He actually rented a booth at a Canadian trade show to show off his wares. Then he claimed that the Canadian government had seized all of his hardware and software on his way to the show. He posted a press release to The WELL claiming that the seizure had destroyed his business. The trouble was, he had no hardware, no software, and no business except that of fooling people.

In this case, the worst thing that happened was probably that the people who were fooled felt -- well, foolish. But it's not hard to imagine stories that could have far more dangerous consequences. Hoaxes are bad Netiquette.

Rumors

A close cousin to the hoax is the rumor. Two rumors that weren't invented maliciously have gained special prominence on the net. The first is the Craig Shergold story. Here's the true part: A number of years ago, Craig Shergold, a young English boy, was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. He decided that before he died, he wanted to make it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* for receiving the most get-well cards ever. He succeeded. Better yet, a wealthy American had the idea that maybe Craig's cancer wasn't inoperable. He paid for Craig to see specialists in America. It turned out that the type of cancer had been misdiagnosed, the tumor was removed, and when last heard from, Craig was fine.

Well, almost fine. Somewhere along the way, Craig's request for get-well cards mutated into a request for business cards. And the news that Craig was fine didn't spread as fast as the requests. Craig's mailbox has been piled full of unwanted business cards for three or four years now. It's driving his mother crazy! If you see this story, *please* tell the well-intentioned person who passed it on that the cards are no longer wanted and Craig is well.

The other rumor that resurfaces periodically is the modem tax story. Several years ago, the U.S. Congress did discuss imposing a special "telecommunications tax" on modems. A call to action was posted and

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

protests were lodged. Eventually, the idea was dropped. Unfortunately, the call to action posting wasn't. If you see this story floating around, squelch it immediately.

Email harassment

It's hard to believe, but some people are both stupid and venal enough to harass their colleagues via email. I know of one case in which a male manager started emailing outrageous sexual suggestions to a female employee. Initially, the notes were fairly innocuous -- for example, "That was a great-looking dress you had on yesterday." Over time, they progressed into obscenity. The really funny part was that about half of each note would be more or less pornographic, and the other half would be perfectly reasonable business correspondence.

The employee, being far smarter than her boss, simply saved copies of the notes. When the situation got out of control, she took them to the human resources department. Everything she needed to prove her case was right there, including the dates and times the messages were sent. Her manager, of course, was fired.

With a milder form of harassment -- for example, Joe Schmoe keeps sending the blonde joke of the day to everyone in the department -- less drastic steps might be in order. If you don't object to other people reading blonde jokes but don't want to get them yourself, send a reply to one of Joe's messages and ask him to take you off his mailing list. If you feel that his use of company resources is inappropriate and should be stopped, tell him so. But in either case, keep copies of everything. If the situation ever escalates, you'll have backup.

Worms and viruses

Right up there with the email harassers and the rumor-mongers are the people who get kicks out of sending worms and viruses throughout cyberspace. Cornell graduate student Robert Tappan Morris became notorious in 1988, when he shut down large areas of the Internet with a program -- variously described as a worm or as a virus -- that succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Morris actually intended this stunt as a harmless experiment; he had no intention of shutting down the Internet. He saw that there was a "back door" in the Internet email system and wanted to see how far he could go with it. He found out -- and paid for it with a federal conviction for "computer fraud."

Morris made a big mistake. There's no excuse for repeating it.

Snooping

Various types of networks can make it more or less easy to get into another person's personal files. On Macintosh networks, it's possible to publish your entire hard disk as a server, making all your files accessible to anyone on the network.

Even if you should happen by a machine that -- essentially -- has its front door wide open, don't snoop. You're not in the habit of walking up to people's houses and trying their front doors, are you? (I hope not!)

If, because of your position or your superior knowledge, you have the power to snoop in other people's mail or files, it's even more important that you don't do it. It can be very tempting. But their mail is really none of your business. Netiquette forbids the abuse of power (see "Rule 9: Don't abuse your power" on page 44).

Keep in mind that Netiquette alone does not protect the privacy of your email. See "Email Privacy -- A Grand Illusion?" on page 125.

Mailbombing

Sometimes, annoyed discussion group readers will try to take vengeance on a particularly obnoxious flamer by flooding his mailbox. This is called mailbombing, and it's a bad idea. Yes, it annoys the miscreant. But it also eats up hard disk space and wastes system administrator time for other users of that person's server. Don't do it.

Chapter 10
Electronic Mail at Work

The conventions for email at work are a little different than for email among friends. Professional email can still be informal. But a lot of the humor and wit that's appropriate in a discussion group is out of place at work. For the most part, signature files are not used in work email, unless the email is sent to external recipients.

Q. My organization just installed an email system, and everyone is starting to use it. How often do I need to check my mail?

Preferably three or four times a day, but at least twice a day. You should always check your mail in the morning when you come in to the office and in mid-afternoon, or an hour or two before you leave. That way, you pick up messages that were sent while you were out of the office (late-evening messages if you're a morning person, early-morning messages if you're not) and act on them immediately. Your mid-afternoon check allows you to deal with the day's business promptly. A midday check and a final check before you leave for the day are always a good idea, as well.

If you're really too busy to check your mail that often, or if you're going to be out for more than a day, consider deputizing someone to

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

check your mail. Giving out your password is generally not recommended. But you can put a temporary password on your mail system while you're away and change it back later. Some systems also allow you to set up a limited-access password for the person screening your mail.

Another useful feature, called "answermail" or "vacation" in the UNIX world, lets you write a message that automatically responds to anyone who sends you email while you're away. The message tells your correspondent how long you'll be gone and whom to contact if the information is urgent. This is a great feature; if you have it, use it. Do be careful, however, if you've subscribed to mailing lists. If the program automatically responds to everyone on the list, thousands of uninterested people could be forced to read about your vacation schedule.

The effects of email on the working world

If you've been working for more than a few years, you remember when electronic mail was quite unusual. Today it's commonplace, and it's changing the way we work. It can even affect us physically. I gained about 20 pounds in the two years after email was installed throughout my workplace, and I'm pretty sure it was because I had so much less running around to do. (It's a good excuse, anyway.)

Email has made a number of major changes in the way business functions:

- Since many executives read their own email, rather than having it screened like their paper mail and phone calls, it's often possible to contact powerful people directly.
- Many systems make it easy to send mail out to everyone at the site or everyone at the company.
- Email overload: Some people receive dozens of messages per day. Others don't actually receive that much mail, but can't seem to handle it anyway.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

- Snail-mail ignorers: Other people get so used to doing everything over the wires that they forget -- or don't bother -- to read their paper mail.

Is all this good, bad, or indifferent? Probably some of all three. Let's handle each one of these issues in turn.

Emailing the CEO

A recent *New Yorker* article, entitled "E-mail from Bill," published the email address of Bill Gates, chairman of software giant Microsoft and one of the richest men in America. *(Endnote #18)* In the article, Gates says (via email, of course), "I am the only person who reads my email so no one has to worry about embarrassing themselves or going around people when they send a message."

This is an interesting statement on a number of levels. First of all, Gates is making it clear that he doesn't mind getting email from the world -- presumably (one hopes) he gave permission to the *New Yorker* to reprint his email address, something the magazine would never consider doing with, say, the direct dial phone line to his office. Second, he says that he doesn't need a secretary, assistant, or other gatekeeper to screen his messages. (This doesn't mean that he doesn't screen them himself; elsewhere in the same note he says, "If someone isn't saying something of interest, it's easier not to respond to their mail than it is not to answer the phone.")

But perhaps most interesting is the statement that "no one has to worry about embarrassing themselves" when they email him directly. I don't know about anyone else, but I'd worry a lot more about saying something stupid in email to Bill Gates than I would if I were talking on the phone to his secretary. Sure, his secretary might tell him I sounded like a jerk; but if I were nice enough, I'd probably get a positive report. And most of the managers I've known take their secretaries' character assessments very seriously.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

The point is that when you introduce yourself via email, not only are you making a first impression, you're also leaving a written record. So use caution, especially when dealing with powerful people.

Additionally, not all chairmen and CEOs are as willing to receive information directly as Gates is. The fact that your company president's email address is listed in the organizational directory doesn't necessarily mean he wants to hear directly from his rank and file employees. And even if he doesn't mind, your own boss, or your boss's boss, might not be too pleased to learn that you circumvented his authority and went straight to the top. It depends on the politics of your organization.

Finally, some executives do have their secretaries screen their email. So if you do decide to send email directly to your company president -- or to Bill Gates, for that matter -- don't assume that he'll be the only person to read it. Bill may decide to hire an email screener now that his address is public knowledge.

Q. When should I give out another person's email address?

Anytime it would also be appropriate to give out a work phone number.

Emailing the company

A true story:

Two middle managers at a large computer company -- both married to other people -- were having an affair. They started sending each other pornographic love notes over the company email system. One day, one of them accidentally sent one of these missives to everyone at company headquarters. Both were fired.

The moral of this story is:

- (a) Be faithful to your spouse.
- (b) Don't cheat on your spouse on company time.
- (c) Don't send anything over email that you wouldn't want published on the front page of *USA Today*.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Email overload -- real

In the *New Yorker* article, Bill Gates is said to spend at least two hours a day reading and responding to his email. I'm surprised it's not more. Many people in business find that they spend half their time or more dealing with email. You can do your part to ease this problem by remembering Rule 4 -- Respect other people's time -- and sending mail only when it needs to be sent.

Don't waste your colleagues' time by copying them on notes that don't affect them. (On the other hand, do keep them informed about projects they're working on. Don't assume that they already know what's happening. Remember Felix Unger's injunction: When we assume, we make an ASS out of U and ME.) *(Endnote #19)*

Don't send email telling people that you put something in their paper in-basket. This is a killer time-waster and rude to boot, since it assumes that the recipient isn't going to read his or her snail mail. If you think the paper you're sending looks so unimportant that no one will read it, attach a paper note explaining why it is important. If it's not important, don't send it.

An exception to this rule might occur when you know that the recipient is a snail-mail ignorer (see below). It's also acceptable to send a short email message alerting someone that you've sent her U.S. mail.

Try not to send a string of related messages in a row because you forgot an important point (e.g., the time or date of a meeting), or resend the same document several times because you corrected an error. Everyone makes mistakes, and one of the great things about electronic communications is that they make correcting errors so simple. But remember that it's easier on your readers (as well as making you look better) if you get it right the first time.

Finally, I believe it was Einstein who said something like "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." That goes double for email. Whether you're asking or answering a question, try to

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

include all the necessary information without wandering or rambling. Actually, the world would be a better place if people followed this advice in all their communications, electronic or not.

Email overload -- imagined

A related problem is that of people who don't really receive an outrageous amount of email, but think they do. Some of these people are technophobes who haven't yet figured out that reading their work email is a professional responsibility just like answering their phones. Others just think their own work is so important that they don't have to pay attention to anyone else. I've had the unpleasant experience of sending fairly urgent email to one of these folks, running into the culprit in the hallway later in the day, and being told, "Oh, I had 20 messages in my mailbox this morning so I didn't read any of them."

In case anyone missed the question above "How often should I check my email?" here's the answer again: At least twice a day. The fact that important information comes to you electronically is no excuse for ignoring it -- I don't care how busy you are.

If you're stuck working with someone who's not good about reading their email, you have two options:

- 1. *Don't use email to communicate with them.* Unfortunately, email ignorers are usually equally difficult to reach by traditional methods, so this probably won't work.
- 2. *CYA.(Endnote #20)* Use the return receipt feature on your mail system. (Guy Kawasaki hates this feature, but here's one place where it's useful.) If you send important mail and it's not read in a reasonable amount of time, follow up with a phone call. If you still get nowhere, send another email note and copy your own boss (if you just want to keep yourself out of trouble) or the other person's boss (if you want to get the other person in trouble). Warning: Copy a manager only when it's really important that your information get through. It's a technique guaranteed to make you unpopular with the person

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

- you're supposed to be working with, and the boss may see it as evidence that you're not capable of working out your problems on your own. Copying both bosses is almost always overkill.

Snail mail ignorers

Some people get so addicted to their email that they decide they don't need to read their snail mail any more. That's another no-no. The existence of email doesn't excuse you from looking through your paper mailbox regularly -- even if 95% of its contents are junk. Check your paper mail at least once a day.

The agony of automatic deletions

Most email isn't stored locally on your workstation; most of it is stored elsewhere in your organization, on a server that's maintained by computer worker bees. This has the advantage to you, the user, of not clogging up your own personal hard disk with mail messages. The server's hard disk gets clogged up instead.

So what's a computer worker bee to do? Simple: Schedule periodic deletions. Where I used to work, all messages over 30 days old were deleted once a month. The computer folks usually gave us plenty of notice, and it was easy enough to save important messages before they were deleted. Easy, that is, if you didn't have hundreds of messages from the last two months to sort through. Or if you didn't forget to deal with them till you were halfway across the country on a trip.

The result of an automatic deletion is that your old email messages -- which have supplemented or replaced your paper chron file -- disappear. That might be great; there might be messages there that you'd rather have disappear. On the other hand, someday you might want a copy of the note your boss sent you saying "Don't worry about the Furshlugginer project; it's a low priority right now."

What can you do? A number of things:

- Protect yourself: Remember to save copies -- on paper, on your own workstation, or both -- of your own important email messages.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 11
You, Your Company & Cyberspace

Netiquette and company policy

Traditionally, many companies have required their employees to insert a "standard disclaimer" in all email messages they send from their company address. The disclaimer goes something like "these opinions are my own and do not necessarily represent those of XYZCorp." and is often humorously modified to things like "These opinions belong to me, not to my company -- they don't want them and they can't have them." *(Endnote #21)*

But despite the disclaimer, management at many organizations has the uncomfortable feeling that its employees are representing The Company out there in cyberspace. That is, if management has any awareness at all that cyberspace exists. Interestingly, nobody else in cyberspace believes that. If you work at IBM and you send a note to the USENET newsgroup rec.pets.cats saying "Fleabusters is the best!", no one reading the newsgroup is going to think that Fleabusters has IBM's official

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

endorsement, even though the company name appears in your Internet address.

So what are your Netiquette responsibilities as your organization's ambassador to the Net?

That's a tricky question. Many people's only access to the Internet and other network services is through work, and most people use it for something that's not strictly business-related at some point. Historically, most companies have turned a benign blind eye to the situation, as most do to limited personal use of the telephone at work. But as network access becomes more common, more companies will start trying to impose restrictions on how it's used.

Netiquette vs. business etiquette

Many of these questions fall outside the realm of Netiquette. They're really questions of business etiquette and business ethics.

Here's a good example: A large company instituted a drug testing program for new job applicants. One long-time employee disapproved. He called up the director of the program and, over the phone, got a detailed rationale for the program's existence. He then wrote an essay summarizing the rationale and, point by point, demolishing the argument. He posted the essay to a public discussion group. Needless to say, the folks in Public Relations were a little disconcerted when they found out about it.

Did the employee in question break any rules of Netiquette? Assuming that nothing he posted was an outright lie or misrepresentation of the facts, he did not. No one in cyberspace cares whether you follow your company's chain of command.

However, I don't know what repercussions, if any, came back to the fellow from his employer. That Netiquette fails to forbid an activity doesn't make it a good idea.

In summary: Netiquette certainly doesn't forbid the use of work facilities for personal purposes. Nor does it require slavish adherence to

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

company policy. But Netiquette does forbid spreading misinformation, personal or confidential information, or any statement that is needlessly damaging to others -- including businesses. What's "needlessly damaging"? That's up to you to decide.

Company privacy policies

An important part of any company's cyberspace policy is its rules on email privacy. See "Email Privacy -- a Grand Illusion?" on page 125 for discussion.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 12
Netiquette at Home

When you enter cyberspace from home, you probably spend most of your time pursuing activities that are just for fun. As you start getting connected, you may find that you want to spend more and more time in cyberspace. You may find yourself spending less time with your family. If you're a teenager, both you and your family may consider this an advantage. But, in many cases, your family will decide it wants you back.

What to do about this? First of all, never let the computer replace human interaction. Sure, networks are a substitute for face-to-face conversation. We've used substitutes like that for a long time; that's why writing was invented. But even with letters, telephones, videoconferences, and email, we still fly across the country for a meeting occasionally. And you owe your family at least the same courtesy you give your colleagues.

Try to schedule your online time for when others in your family are doing something else. For example, if you live with a sports fan but you can't tell the Bills from the Cowboys, the Superbowl is a great opportunity for some heavy net interaction.

If you're a student, you can always claim to be doing your homework. If you live with your parents, chances are good they'll never figure out what you're up to. Roommates are more likely to catch on, especially if

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 13
Netiquette at School

Cyberspace has the potential to be a tremendous resource for students and teachers at all levels. The Internet was invented as a research tool, and it's been used at universities, especially by graduate students and professors, almost since its inception. Its use is now spreading downward to undergraduates, high school students, and even elementary schools.

And new uses pop up every day. There's a discussion group that functions as a support group for first-year teachers. Other discussion groups allow teachers in the same discipline to exchange ideas and teaching methods. At Monta Vista High School in Cupertino, California, there's a class devoted solely to the Internet. College teachers encourage their students to do their research on the net.

Unfortunately, all this new net traffic can present problems. The Internet was designed for use by adult computer experts, not novices and children. Children, of course, rapidly become computer experts. But the openness of the Internet, which makes it so useful to all users, can also be problematic in several situations. Adults worry that children in the midst of more or less innocent net surfing may stumble across adult material not meant for their eyes. And novices can bombard experts with basic questions (violating Netiquette Rule 4, Respect other people's time).

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Fortunately, there's a lot that can be done about these problems.

Kids in cyberspace

Netiquette prescribes no special rules for kids in cyberspace. But following the rules of Netiquette requires a level of maturity that even many adults lack. Additionally, some areas of cyberspace contain material that, in the words of the TV disclaimers, "may be inappropriate for young people." So it's up to adults to introduce kids to cyberspace in a way that is pleasant and productive both for the kids and for the people they meet on the net.

In their article "The Internetworked School: A Policy for the Future," Barry Fishman and Roy Pea address some of these issues. *(Endnote #22)* They note that new approaches to teaching often spark community controversy, and that therefore, educators would be well advised to think through possible problems before they put their classrooms online.

Fishman and Pea suggest that any special ground rules for primary and secondary students in cyberspace should be based on existing sets of analogous guidelines. The most important of these is probably the school's existing policy on speech and behavior. They recommend that schools not routinely inspect students' private email or other areas designated as private. However, they do approve of rules against obscene, harassing, or abusive language. Additionally, just as students are expected to behave especially well when they're on "field trips" away from school, they suggest reminding students that they are in effect on a "virtual field trip" when they communicate with others in cyberspace.

I performed a few brief, totally unscientific interviews with some high school Internet users in my neighborhood. These students operate under rules that conform fairly closely to what Fishman and Pea suggest:

- They're forbidden to access any USENET newsgroup or other area of cyberspace that their parents or teachers would disapprove of.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

- They're expected to know what kind of material that includes and to leave the area immediately if they encounter it accidentally.
- They're prohibited from using any form of obscene, harassing, or abusive language online.
- If they break these rules, they lose their school-sponsored Internet accounts.

The students I spoke to didn't mind these restrictions. In fact, when I asked them what net behavior they found most obnoxious, the first thing they mentioned was long, rude, profane, or off-the-topic flaming. Several thought that potentially offensive material should be curtailed to prevent younger children from seeing it. They also felt it was perfectly appropriate for operators of private bulletin boards to remove particularly obnoxious users.

See "Cyberspace Predators" on page page 83 for more on specific dangers to kids in cyberspace.

Knowing whom to ask, or the art of getting help

In Risks Digest 15.57, Dan Yurman tells a distressing story about an incident that took place at a major Eastern university. *(Endnote #23)* A graduate teaching assistant told a class of undergraduates to use the Internet as a research resource for an assigned paper. The students followed their instructions and fired off a lot of very basic questions (example: "What is hazardous waste?") to a mailing list used mostly by experts to discuss environmental issues.

The rest of the tale is a familiar one of escalating flameage. The experts were annoyed at having their time wasted in this manner. They told the undergraduates to take a walk to the library or look the information up in an almanac. The students and the teaching assistant were surprised, angry, and defensive.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 14
Love & Sex in Cyberspace

Naturally, some people use cyberspace as a venue for romantic encounters. Net romance can take many forms. I know one California woman who, through a series of coincidences, started corresponding electronically with a man in France. Gradually their interest became romantic, and eventually they decided to visit each other's countries and meet in person.

Robin Williams, author of *The Mac Is Not a Typewriter* and other Macintosh books, writes about receiving email from a young man she didn't know. He had searched the profiles in the commercial online service they both used and discovered that they shared an interest in Shakespeare. Despite differences in age, religion, and geographic location, they kept up the correspondence. Eventually they got to know each other better innocently "chatting" in a "private room." "Somehow, over the months," Williams writes, "this unlikely relationship took an unexpected romantic turn." *(Endnote #25)*

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

well, that's what kill files are for. If your system doesn't offer a kill file, lobby with the management to get one.

Things to watch out for

Romance is probably physically safer online than, say, at a downtown bar. It's harder to get beaten up, raped, or infected with an incurable disease when you're communicating via computer.

But cyberspace romance is no safer emotionally than real life. The questions above hint at some of the dangers you might encounter. Here are some stories:

The Net Lothario

In one well-publicized case, a particularly charming fellow was quite successful in romancing women on the WELL. With at least two women, the relationship progressed to the physical level. Through discussion in a women-only area of the WELL, his victims learned they had all been involved with the same guy, and he'd told each one how special and unique she was. Needless to say, they weren't pleased.

Their response: They posted a note to a public forum warning others about the "Cyber-Scam-Artist." They didn't reveal his name in the posting, but offered to give it to anyone who called and asked them.

This response was an example of excellent Netiquette. The women took action to protect other women rather than to get revenge. Their decision not to reveal the cad's name in their posting was especially well-considered. And they seem to have successfully stopped the cad's actions.

However, the cad himself felt his treatment was unfair. Although he admitted he had made mistakes -- both by lying and by assuming "that computer relationships were somehow different than physical relationships" -- he defended himself by saying that both he and the women had been voluntarily "experimenting in a very new area." *(Endnote #27)* That's true, but it's no excuse.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

unfortunately, the flamers have co-opted the conversation. You pretty much have to go to a moderated discussion group to have an intelligent discussion on feminism.

In some MUDs, a behavior called net.sleazing takes place. Net.sleazing is going around a MUD and soliciting "tinysex," or onscreen sex talk. Extreme sleazes have been known to save these conversations to text files and post them to USENET.

In general, Netiquette frowns on these behaviors. But keep in mind that there are discussion groups, MUDs, and MOOs for every proclivity. Try to be aware of where you are in cyberspace; it may be a place where you don't like the conventions. If that's the case, just leave.

However, harassment is not appropriate in most areas of cyberspace. If you experience it, you have pretty much the same options that you have when you're subjected to a gross-out flame:

- Email the offending party and explain that his/her behavior is not acceptable.
- Email the system operator or system administrator and ask that the offender be censured or disciplined.
- In extreme cases (such as that of the Net Lothario, above), post a complaint or an exposé to the net. Be cautious with this technique, however; you could cause a major flame war.

Pornography in cyberspace

Like the real world, the virtual world contains pornography. And, like real-world etiquette, Netiquette takes no position on pornography's existence.

However, Netiquette recognizes that some people are deeply offended and upset by material that others enjoy. Therefore, those who enjoy

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 15
Email Privacy -- a Grand Illusion?

When you send an email message to a friend, you probably assume that random people won't be reading it. You could be right. But don't count on it.

Why not? First of all, most email is sent in the form of plain ASCII text, which means humans can read it. Encrypted text, on the other hand, requires a key or a supercomputer to decode into human-readable form.

Second, every email system has administrators who have unlimited access to all mail messages sent from, to, and through that system. It's possible to design a system that doesn't have this feature, but there aren't many. In fact, when you send an email message across the Internet, it often hops from server to server several times before it reaches its destination. As a result, it can be read by system administrators all across the country -- possibly the world.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. To make a system work, the sysadmin needs this kind of power. If a message is incorrectly addressed, the sysadmin can open it up and figure out who should get it. If messages

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

The prescription for these ills is twofold:

- 1. Understand how your email system and network are set up, and just who can see what.
- 2. Don't do stupid things.

Unfortunately, etiquette books can't eliminate human carelessness. So, just as the only 100% effective form of birth control is abstinence, you could prevent breaches of privacy by refusing to use email. For most of us, however, neither remedy holds much attraction. A fallback remedy is to follow your grandmother's advice: Never put anything in writing that you wouldn't mind seeing on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Of course, the rule of etiquette is the same for email as for old-fashioned letters: Never, ever snoop in another person's papers.

Company policies on email content and privacy

The Electronic Communications Privacy Act (ECPA) of 1986 makes it illegal to intercept electronic messages sent over public systems (for example, America Online or MCI Mail) without a search warrant. But the law doesn't address the privacy rights of employees whose email accounts are provided by their employers. Even in states like California, where citizens have a constitutional right to privacy, the rules aren't clear. That leaves the legal ball in the court of the company policy.

But few companies have policies on corporate email. The email policies that exist address the content, distribution, and privacy of email. Privacy policies range from "Management can read any message any time for any reason" to "No one looks at anyone else's mail. Period." Rules on the contents can be as restrictive as "Email is to be used for business-related communication only" or as open as "Email may be used for personal purposes at will."

The best of these policies reserve the company's right to examine email for legitimate business purposes, but forbid any unauthorized person to read or intercept another person's mail. They usually allow personal use within reason, operating on the assumption that if an employee

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Systems: A Tool Kit for Formulating Your Company's Policy." It's $45 and is available from EMA at (703) 524-5550.

But be warned: The EMA's position on privacy is that "employers need the right to control, evaluate, and monitor all forms of employee communication." EMA director William Moroney has stated that corporate email users shouldn't expect "any more right of privacy than they get from tossing a memo in their out-basket." *(Endnote #33)*

Encryption: privacy protection or national security threat?

There is a way to protect your private email from snoopers. It's called encryption. Just as army dispatches during wartime are coded in case they fall into the wrong hands, it's technically possible to code, or encrypt, email messages. The technologies and techniques vary. But, for a variety of political reasons, built-in encryption has not been widely deployed in email systems.

The lack of a widely deployed encryption system has held back the commercial growth of the Internet. This is ironic given that several practically unbreakable systems are available. One very promising concept is called "public-key encryption." To grossly oversimplify, with this encryption system, everyone has two encryption keys: One is public, the other is private. I send my public key to anyone who wants it, but I alone keep my private key.

Here's where it gets really cool. If you wanted to send me a secure message, you would encrypt it with my public key. The message sent over the wires would be indecipherable jargon. When I received it, I'd decrypt it with my private key. For arcane reasons beyond my understanding, this actually works, even though the two keys are different. Only I could decrypt a message that was encrypted with my public key.

Similarly, a message I encrypted with my private key could be decrypted only with my public key. That doesn't make the message

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Chapter 16
Copyright in Cyberspace

Warning and disclaimer

Netiquette rules listed here are suggestions for helping people get along better; they carry no force of law. Explanations of U.S. copyright law in this chapter are a layperson's interpretation and are here for educational purposes only. I am not a lawyer, and nothing in this chapter should be construed as legal advice. Additionally, the interpretation of copyright law changes all the time, so anything in print here may have changed by the time you read it. If you need legal advice, talk to a lawyer!

Some basic information on copyright

This is an extremely basic introduction to the complex subject of copyright. For more detailed information, let me recommend the excellent copyright FAQ by Terry Carroll, available by anonymous FTP from rtfm.mit.edu. *(Endnote #37)*

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

and if the resulting product doesn't compete with the original work.

Please note that this is a very cursory discussion of the concept of fair use. Check out the Copyright FAQ for more information.

Copyright and posted material

The free exchange of information through cyberspace has raised all sorts of questions about who owns that material. Is material that's posted to a discussion group still owned by the original author? What if it's repeatedly quoted in further discussion? What if you write a FAQ and make it publicly available -- do you still own the copyright?

The answer to these questions is yes, yes, and yes. If it's your original work and you wrote it down, the copyright is yours.

There's a common -- and mistaken -- belief that posting information to USENET, or anywhere else in cyberspace, puts it in the public domain. That's not true. Think about it -- if you paint a picture and display it for all to see, you're not giving up the copyright to it.

Q. What's the public domain?

Anything that's not under copyright is in the public domain. That means anyone can freely copy and distribute it. You can give copies away for free, or, if anyone's willing to pay, you can charge them.

As of 1994, most works created before 1922 are out of copyright and in the public domain. An author can also choose to put a work into the public domain by declaring, in writing, that he is doing so. That doesn't apply to most of the material that's posted in cyberspace. So most of the posted material you see -- whether it's a note in a discussion group or an article whose author is seeking comments -- is under copyright and belongs to the author.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Q. But why shouldn't I? Who would it hurt?

Good question. In the short run, maybe it wouldn't hurt anyone. But remember that copyright law exists to encourage the "useful arts" by ensuring that artists profit from their creations. If you upload those cartoons and give them away for free, and later the *New Yorker* decides to create its own for-profit online service that offers cartoon downloading, your action would have affected their potential market. And, at least in theory, that could ultimately discourage the *New Yorker* from printing cartoons at all, which would be a sad day for everyone.

In addition, if the folks at the *New Yorker* get wind of your activity, they might not take it kindly. And they might have the resources to sue you and make your life very unpleasant.

In summary, remember: Copyright isn't just good Netiquette -- it's the law.

The promise of Xanadu (it'll be ready in 6 months)

You may have heard of Xanadu or of Ted Nelson. Nelson, a certified Brilliant Guy, came up with the idea for Xanadu in the early 1960s. Ever since then, he's been swearing it's going to be available in six months.

But whether or not Xanadu ever comes to fruition, it's a really interesting idea. Among other things, it's a technical solution to the legal and ethical problem of maintaining copyright in cyberspace.

Xanadu would be -- or will be -- a huge repository of published information. It could contain anything -- music, reference material, stories, movies, you name it. Users would connect to it from outside and read or download as much or as little information as they liked. And -- here's the really clever part -- users would *automatically* be charged for their usage, and a royalty would *automatically* go to the author.

There's a lot more to Xanadu than that. If you're interested, I recommend Nelson's 1974 book *Computer Lib/Dream Machines,* which was reissued by Microsoft Press in 1987.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Conclusion
Whither Netiquette?

There's a famous paper called "The Tragedy of the Commons" -- so famous that referencing it is almost a cliché all by itself. In this paper, economist Garrett Hardin talks about the village commons, a grassy area where sheep graze. The sheep are owned by individuals, but the commons belongs to everyone in the village.

According to Hardin, it's inevitable that one person, motivated by the completely reasonable desire for profit, will put too many sheep on the commons, resulting in overgrazing. This person starts underselling his neighbors, who have the choice of joining him in the abuse of a common resource or going out of business. In the short run a few people maximize their profit, but in the long run the commons is ruined for everyone.

Today, cyberspace is a commons. Many, many people have access to it at little or no direct cost; it's supported by private enterprise and tax dollars. And the many people who pay no per-message charges for email could easily start "overgrazing" the Internet by, for example, sending out huge numbers of messages to huge numbers of users.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

NEtiquette™

Endnotes

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books, San Francisco

Editor's Note: The bound edition of this book contains footnotes which appear at the foot of the page where cited. Formatting for World Wide Web has impeded preserving footnotes on each page. Consequently, this online edition contains these endnotes. We hope you'll find this arrangement to your liking.

Endnote #1 *(Page 19)*
William Gibson invented the term cyberspace -- and this definition for it -- in his book *Neuromancer,* the original cyberpunk novel.

Endnote #2 *(Page 20)*
Quarterman's book *The Matrix: Computer Networks and Conferencing Systems Worldwide* is an excellent overview of the net (Digital Press, 1990).

Endnote #3 *(Page 20)*
The great John Perry Barlow, co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and lyricist for the Grateful Dead.

Endnote #4 *(Page 21)*
Vaporware: Software that exists only in the imagination of the marketing department.

Endnote #5 *(Page 23)*
Flames are angry letters or discussion group postings, usually sent in response to an offensive letter. A *bozo filter* (also called a *kill file*) allows a reader to avoid seeing mail from anyone he or she considers a bozo.

Endnote #6 *(Page 25)*
This definition is cribbed from Quarterman's *The Matrix,* p. 278.

Endnote #7 *(Page 26)*
For an excellent guide to Internet and other cyberspace resources, pick up *NetGuide,* from Random House Electronic Publishing.

Endnote #8 *(Page 40)*
For readers who don't remember carbon paper: It's like the black stuff they put between the sheets of your Visa receipt, only in 8 1/2" x 11" pages. People used to put it between sheets of typing paper and make their copies at the same time as the original. It saved a lot of time at the copier, which was an especially good thing given that hardly anyone had copiers.

Endnote #9 *(Page 41)*
Actually, there's a controversy on the net -- not exactly raging, but ongoing -- over how important these issues are. Some people believe that electronic communication should be spontaneous and from-the-hip. They don't think anyone should worry about spelling or grammar. Others feel it's worthwhile to think before you post, and that bad spelling and grammar make a bad impression. Obviously, I belong to the second group. However, spelling and grammar flames are *always* bad form. See Rule 7.

Endnote #10 *(Page 41)*
23 or older, or out of school for two or more years.

Endnote #11 *(Page 47)*
The text may also be incomprehensible gibberish, but that's a separate issue.

Endnote #12 *(Page 54)*

See "Emoticons" on page 59 for explanation of this symbol.

Endnote #13 *(Page 55)*
Wall Street Journal, November 29, 1993, "Manager's Journal: Robert's Electronic Rules of Order" by Michael Schrage.

Endnote #14 *(Page 71)*
Someone actually did this in the aftermath of the 1994 LA earthquake. The net responded with reams of flameage, an utter waste of time.

Endnote #15 *(Page 74)*
Thanks to Desiree McCrorey, Jim Graham, Kay Klier, David Wren-Hardin, and others on rec.pets.cats.

Endnote #16 *(Page 78)*
If you're looking for legitimate places to adver... I mean, post product information, check out the USENET "biz" hierarchy, comp.newproducts, and various "*.forsale" groups.

Endnote #17 *(Page 82)*
Remember:
A host is a host
From coast to coast
But always connect to the host that's close.

Endnote #18 *(Page 93)*
"A Reporter at Large: E-Mail From Bill" by John Seabrook, in the *New Yorker,* Jan. 10, 1994.

Endnote #19 *(Page 96)*
From the classic TV show "The Odd Couple."

Endnote #20 *(Page 97)*
Cover Your Ass.

Endnote #21 *(Page 101)*
The disclaimer is often embedded in a "sig file" that automatically appears in every note you send. In fact, the standard disclaimer may have been the reason the sig file was invented.

Endnote #22 *(Page 110)*
Printed in *TECHNOS: Quarterly of Education and Technology,* 3(1), pp. 22-26.

Endnote #23 *(Page 111)*
You can retrieve Yurman's report, entitled "Email Courtesy," from the Red Rock Eater information archive maintained by Phil Agre. Just send email to rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "archive send courtesy".

Endnote #24 *(Page 112)*
To retrieve Agre's article "The Art of Getting Help," send email to rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "archive send getting-help".

Endnote #25 *(Page 115)*
In *The Official America Online Membership Kit & Tour Guide,* by Tom Lichty, p. 249.

Endnote #26 *(Page 116)*
"Love Over the Wires" by Paulina Borsook, in *Wired* magazine vol. 1.4, September/October 1993.

Endnote #27 *(Page 117)*
"He went to the WELL too often," *San Francisco Examiner,* July 13, 1993.

Endnote #28 *(Page 118)*
"The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover" by Lindsy Van Gelder, *Ms.,* October 1985.

Endnote #29 *(Page 118)*
Statistic from "Gender Issues in Computer Networking" by Leslie Regan Shade, McGill University.

Endnote #30 *(Page 120)*
Rot13 encryption can also be used when posting a "spoiler" -- a note that reveals the ending of, for example, a movie or novel.

Endnote #31 *(Page 126)*
However, the last thing I want to do is cast aspersions on system administrators as a group. In general, sysadmins are overworked and underrecognized. Be nice to your

system administrator and she'll be nice to you.

Endnote #32 *(Page 126)*

Any UNIX sysadmin worth his salt can use the *grep* command to concoct a simple script to search all incoming and outgoing mail.

Endnote #33 *(Page 129)*

"Privacy Act would force firms to inform their employees about E-mail monitoring," in *PC Week -- Special Report on Workplace Privacy,* June 28, 1993.

Endnote #34 *(Page 130)*

For an explanation of how all this works, see Bruce Schneier's *Applied Cryptography* (NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

Endnote #35 *(Page 131)*

Phil Zimmerman created PGP, or "Pretty Good Privacy," an implementation of the public-key encryption concept for personal computers. PGP is currently embroiled in a patent dispute and availability of its freeware version is limited.

Endnote #36 *(Page 131)*

You can contact the EFF at info@eff.org or 202-347-5400.

Endnote #37 *(Page 133)*

Connect with server rtfm.mit.edu and look for the directory called /pub/usenet/news.answers/law/Copyright-FAQ, files part1-part6. Or try ftp.cni.org, in directory /CNI/forums/cni-copyright/other/FAQ. You can also obtain a copy via email. Start by sending a message to mail-server@rtfm.mit.edu with the command "help" in the body.

Endnote #38 *(Page 138)*

Some FAQs and related documents can be copied electronically but not printed without paying a license fee. Erik J. Heels' wonderful "Legal List" works this way. (It's available via FTP at ftp.cni.org, directory /CNI/forums/cni-copyright/other/FAQ/legallist.txt).

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Bibliography

Most of these works are listed here because I actually refer to them in *Netiquette*, or because they provided important background material. Others are listed because I think they'd be useful references for someone getting started in cyberspace, or just because they're fun to read. The bibliography is divided into printed works and works available online. All the online materials listed are available on the Internet via email or anonymous FTP, and the information necessary to retrieve them is provided.

Have fun!

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Printed Works

Barlow, John Perry. "The Economy of Ideas: A framework for rethinking patents and copyrights in the digital age." *Wired* 2.03, March 1994.

Borsook, Paulina. "Love Over the Wires." *Wired* 1.4, September/October 1993.

Gibson, William. *Neuromancer*. New York: Ace Science Fiction Books, 1984.

Godin, Seth. *The Smiley Dictionary*. Berkeley: Peachpit Press, 1993.

Hafner, Katie, and John Markoff. *Cyberpunk: Outlaws and Hackers on the Computer Frontier.* New York: Touchstone (Simon & Schuster), 1991.

Kawasaki, Guy. *The Macintosh Way*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1990.

---. *The Computer Curmudgeon*. Hayden, 1992.

Krol, Ed. *The Whole Internet User's Guide and Catalog*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly & Associates, Inc., 1992.

LaQuey, Tracey, with Jeanne C. Ryer. *The Internet Companion: A Beginner's Guide to Global Networking.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993.

Levy, Steven. "Crypto-Rebels." *Wired* 1.2, July 1993.

Lichty, Tom. *The Official America Online Membership Kit and Tour* Guide. Chapel Hill, NC: Ventana Press, 1992.

Marine, Craig. "He went to the WELL too often: Cyber-Casanova's women cry wolf on 'Lectronic Link." *San Francisco Examiner,* July 13, 1993.

Martin, Judith. *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior.* New York: Warner Books, 1979.

---. *Miss Manners' Guide to Rearing Perfect Children.* New York: Atheneum, 1984.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Works Available Online

Agre, Phil. "The Art of Getting Help." *The Network Observer,* Vol. 1, No. 2, February 1994. Send email to rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "archive send getting-help".

---. "The Internet as a Commons." *The Network Observer,* Vol. 1, No. 3, March 1994. Send email to rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "archive send tno-march-1994".

---. "Networking On the Network." Send email to rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "archive send network".

Note: You can also subscribe to Agre's incredibly useful Red Rock Eater News Service. For information about the email service and how to subscribe, send a message to the server at rre-request@weber.ucsd.edu with the subject line "help".

Carroll, Terry. Copyright FAQ. Available via FTP from rtfm.mit.edu: pub/usenet/news.answers/Copyright-FAQ, files part1-part6. Or from ftp.cni.org, in directory /CNI/forums/cni-copyright/other/FAQ. You can also obtain a copy via email. Start by sending a message to mail-server@rtfm.mit.edu with the command "help" in the body.

Shade, Leslie Regan. "Gender Issues in Computer Networking." Talk given at Community Networking: The International Free-Net Conference, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada, August 17-19, 1993. Available via FTP from alfred.carleton.ca: pub/freenet/93conference, file leslie_regan_shade.txt.

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Index

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

Next Page ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

Colophon

Bound Edition:

Cover design by Jennie Birch

Layout by Seth Ross

Composed on a NeXT Computer running FrameMaker

Printed & bound at Olympian Graphics

Online Edition:

Original formatting for World Wide Web by Fortuity Webmasters

---

Back Cover ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**

NetEtiquette™

Back Cover

for *Netiquette* by Virginia Shea
published by Albion Books

Netiquette
The first and only book of network etiquette

"...mandatory reading for new users of the Internet. It should be bundled with every modem."

-- from the Foreword by Guy Kawasaki

Cyberspace is booming. Each month, millions of people are discovering the power of the Internet, online services, and corporate email systems. With this power comes responsibility.

People who wouldn't dream of burping at the end of a formal dinner post grossly offensive messages to international fourms. Middle managers inadvertently send romantic email messages to the company-wide email alias. People at computer terminals forget that there are real live people at the other end of the wire. Topics are lost in noise, feelings are hurt, reputations are damaged, time and bandwidth are wasted.

There's no longer an excuse. This book brings etiquette to the bustling frontiers of cyberspace. In a series of entertaining essays, the author establsihes the do's and the don'ts of communication online, from the Golden Rule to the art of the flame, from the elements of electronic style to virtual sex. Accessible to both network wizard and clueless newbie, this is the first and only book to offer the guidance that all users need to be perfectly polite online.

PHOTO CREDIT: Andrew Browne

Virginia Shea has been a student of human nature all her life. She attended Princeton University and has worked in Silicon Valley since the mid-1980s. She now lives in

Sunnyvale, California, with her husband and their four cats.

Albion Books

USA $19.95
Computing/General
Edition 1.0
ISBN 0-9637025-1-3

Front Cover ... Previous Page
Contents ... Index ... **Netiquette Home**
