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Ridiculous Questions!
The Issue of Scale in Netiquette

By Judi Harris

I have a confession to make—let’s keep this just between us, OK? I maintain a file for my e-mail messages called Ridiculous Questions. In it, I store queries that I receive by electronic mail that I think are—well, you guessed it. I’ve named the file as I have, frankly, to serve as an outlet for frustration. Without offending the messages’ authors, I can append a copy of each new ridiculous request to the Ridiculous Questions file, take a deep breath, and respond with kindness, rather than sarcasm spawned by a stressful schedule.

Why should I tell you about my personal file-naming habits? Ridiculous questions can actually lead to helpful suggestions for online interaction, if the nature of the questions themselves is examined closely. By doing this, we can add important dimensions to our practice of “netiquette,” or network etiquette, and our understanding of considerations of scale in personal—but nonetheless global—telecommunications.

New Netiquette

Etiquette in online communications has become increasingly important as growing numbers of messages from new users have found their way into e-mail boxes, chat rooms, and public discussion forums on the Internet. Online communities, like geographically proximate social groups, have well-formed, albeit often unstated, norms for behavior. Uninformed “newbies” can unwittingly upset virtual elders with quite innocent behavior.

For example, have you ever become impatient with folks carrying on personal conversations in a public forum, such as a listserv or newsgroup? To help new users to learn to participate in online communities in productive ways, specific suggestions for netiquette have been compiled and shared as publicly available documents posted on the World Wide Web, in discussion forums for new users, and even as a book (Shea, 1994). Some of the most helpful of these are indexed on the October, 1997 “Mining the Internet” Web page, available at http://teach.virginia.edu/go/mining/. Particularly notable in this collection is Arlene Rinaldi’s comprehensive, clearly written, and well-organized “The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette” (http://www.gsn.org/web/html/netiquet/index.htm).

Netiquette suggestions usually refer to behavior in a public online forum, including the forms that are appropriate for such openly accessible postings. Tips for successful private communication, especially communications conducted using electronic mail, are less frequently offered. As the number of Internet account holders in the world doubles each year, and as the indexes for online address directories (such as the Internet Address Finder: http://www.iaf.net/) grow larger, we are faced with familiar, but often unacknowledged netiquette challenges. Users participating in one-to-one exchanges are often unaware of scale-related considerations for information requests, especially those sent to people with whom the originator is not already acquainted. For example, in April of 1996, I received this message:

tyler,bobby,and joe we are in 8th grade,and we would like some information for a project on heat energy.

And, lest you assume too quickly that scale-related netiquette breaches are more common among minors, please consider this message, which I received in October of 1995:

Please send me your ideas so I can integrate them into my curriculum. I am a special needs inclusion teacher.

Yes, that’s all that the message said, with the exception of the person’s name, which I withhold here for obvious reasons.
Dimensions of Scale
Long ago I learned that people who share their work freely on the Internet can go from being a "nobody" to a "somebody" rather quickly, and, unfortunately, as their work becomes better known online, so do their e-mail addresses. Folks often ask me how much e-mail I receive each day. Frankly, I don't want to calculate the average, and I suspect that you don't want to calculate yours, either, for you may become convinced by the numbers that the load is impossible to handle. Suffice it to say that many of us are receiving increasing numbers of genuine but unsolicited requests for information, and many of these messages' authors (such as the folks anonymously quoted above) could have been better informed about netiquette-related issues of scale.

As I reviewed my Ridiculous_Questions files from the past three years, seven basic scale-related misconceptions emerged from the content of the e-mail messages. I will describe these in the form of suggestions for action, offering examples for each. Please understand that I share these with a friendly twinkle in my eye, my tongue often in cheek, and my fingers crossed in hopes that none of you will recognize your own words quoted below. If you do, please laugh and learn along with me.

1. Don't assume cooperation before it is requested.

Eight months after I conducted a presentation to about 150 people—at a conference outside of my home state—an enterprising person to whom I don't even remember making any commitment sent the following message:

Judi,

I attended your presentation at the [specific] conference in Des Moines last fall on using Internet resources such as Keypals.

We are writing a grant proposal and would appreciate a letter of commitment. Letters of commitment need to accompanied by a vita also.

I have included an attachment for a letter of commitment and our vision.

Please note that although the nature of my involvement in the proposed project might have been apparent to this grantwriter, he didn't think to tell me to what I would be committing myself.

I chuckled when I received the following message from someone with whom I had never communicated before:

Greetings from Ostrava University.

My student assigned to work with your class is Andrea [LastName]. More info later this week.

Obviously, it is important not to assume that someone will agree to grant your e-mailed request before the inquiry is made.

2. Do your homework first!

I received the following two messages within five days of each other in December, 1996. Do you notice any similarities?

The first one said:

I am presently pursuing my Masters Degree in Education... I am in the Army and presently stationed in Hungary supporting Operation Joint Endeavor. I am attempting to write a paper on Conflict Resolution, however, obtaining reference material over here is extremely hard.

The next one requested the following:

If anyone knows how to do this best, you do. I want my lang. arts classes to compare and contrast two different web sites that have similar information. do you know of two good examples?

In replying to these queries, I resisted the temptation to quip, "You know, there are these really neat things called 'search engines' online...."

3. Remember where you are in the world compared with your addressee.

Ah, the innocence of youth! This undergraduate obviously thought that I knew much more than I did.

Dear JB,

I dialed my local number to Michnet and was immediately stopped because I do not have a user ID or a password. How do I get in? I currently have an account at O.U. but I need to know how my elementary school I am interning at in Hazel Park can access for no charge. I am just at the beginning of my search, if you will and will welcome any advice.

And, in case you assume that professors wouldn't forget geographical location as readily as undergraduates, consider that one sent a paragraph of philosophical musings in response to a conference keynote that I gave, then appended this request to his message:

P.S. do you have an e-mail address for Dr. Robert Solomon?

Of course, Dr. Solomon could have been one of more than 65 million Internet users online when this message was written.
The “Netiquette Guidelines RFC,” or Request for Comment, located at http://www.guru.apana.org.au/netiquet.htm, recommends the following:

Know whom to contact for help. Usually you will have resources close at hand. Check locally for people who can help you with software and system problems.

4. Send information requests to people who have a good chance of being qualified to satisfy them.

This message still makes me chuckle:

Subject: ELECTRONICS

Hello! Can you explain what a series circuit is?

Fortunately, I resisted the urge to respond:

Subject: Re: ELECTRONICS

Yes.

Panic can also inspire scale-ignorant queries. For example,

I'm looking for a University anywhere in the U.S. that offers an M.S. in Environmental Science. I need to find 4 specific courses offered during the summer that I can transfer to Texas A & M in Corpus Christi. CC only offers these courses during the Fall and Spring Semesters. PLEASE HELP!!!

I will refrain from making the expected Texas Longhorns vs. Aggies comment here, for it would clearly be a netiquette error of the type described in #3 above.

Finally, it's probably a good idea to try not to include more than one breach of netiquette in a short message.

Hello Mr Harris....I wondering if you knew any telnet or gopher addresses on Kidneys, dialysis, or Transplants of Kidneys....for I'm currendy a Dialysis Patient

thank you

Try to make sure that you know your addressee's gender, or, at least, avoid using gender-specific language when you're unsure.

5. Refrain from making requests for epic responses.

This is the most common type of “scale-clueless” request that I receive. In most examples, the question is too general, or the request too large. A new user in Alabama, for example, wrote:

I teach gifted students gr. 3-6 in Birmingham, AL. I am interested in getting my students involved in some projects on the Internet as we have just gotten email capability. Please email me with the information you have.

Although honesty is always the best policy, it may not be a good idea to admit to being completely clueless, especially to someone whom you have not yet met in person. A parent volunteer in Brooklyn, NY, for example, writing at the request of her child's principal, said:

We have a two new computers that are modem equipped, and do not have any idea how to utilize them to enrich our students activities. Please send me any information and/or suggestions you may have.

Wabash College’s “Introduction to Network Etiquette” Web page (http://jade.wabash.edu/wabnet/info/netiquet.htm) suggests the following:

Respect Others’ Time and Energy

It is very important to keep in mind that people are busy—not everyone wants to spend his [or her] time reading about your life or what is of concern to you. Other people are similarly wrapped up in their own affairs.... When sending e-mail to those you don’t know, try to be as focused as possible.

6. Remember to think while following directions.

My all-time favorite netiquette blooper had the markings of a running gag. In July and October of 1995, eight different people subscribed to the SIG/Tel (ISTE Special Interest Group for Telecommunications) electronic mailing list, using the same subscriber name. What was the problem? The name they used was: Judi Harris. All had names other than Judi, and all were enrolled in educational telecommunications classes (for beginners, of course) in two different U.S. states. Fortunately, our good-natured and ever-helpful SIG/Tel list-tender, Kathy Kothmann, modeled for us a helpful way to respond to such errors. In her return mail to one of these newbies, you will see why these folks tried to register for the listserv using my name.

I just got notification (as listowner) that you subscribed to SIGTEL-L. However, Judi Harris lives in Austin, and I think that you probably have another real name. Judi just put her name in as an example in her book *Way of the Ferret* and her workshop materials. You are the second person to do this from [your Internet domain] recently -- are you all taking a course? anyway - the problem is easy to resolve - just send me your real name (first and last) and I'll change you from being Judi Harris at your email address to being YOU at your email address... ok?

Kathy

Later, Kathy forwarded a copy of the reply that she received from one of the errant telecommunications, who explained that yes, he was in a class that was practicing list registration procedures. Kathy asked me privately:
shall I dare message him back and ask more about the course and instructor? ...

Rest assured, dear readers, we did not stoop so low.

7. Be clear about what you are implying, and make sure that your addressee has a chance to be similarly well informed.

Sometimes, it is nearly impossible to know what a message author really wants. Consider this brief request that I received in December, 1996:

Subject: Bible?
Dear Judi,
You have great books in your work - but where is the greatest Book?

Instead of responding:

Subject: Re: Bible?
In the bookcase in my bedroom. Would you like to borrow it?

I asked the author what prompted his question. He replied with an apology, explaining that the message was done as a demonstration, and was sent by accident.

Huh? A demonstration of what? I suppose that some of my correspondents aren’t the only ones who are clueless.

Scaling Responses
Virginia Shea (1994) gives good advice on how to respond to mistakes online. These suggestions apply well to instances in which information requests disregard issues of scale.

Be Forgiving of Other People’s Mistakes
Everyone was a network newbie once. 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 e-mail 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. (http://www.albion.com/netiquette/rule10.html)

But the best advice on how to attend to scale in private requests for information comes from my many “clued-in” electronic correspondents, in the forms of excellent message models. Debbie Greene, a sixth-grade teacher, for example, sent the following to me in March of this year:

I found your e-mail address on the Web page for ICONnect. My 6th grade World Cultures class will be starting a project in April in which we hope to communicate with classes around the world. We hope to gather information as to their lifestyles. Can you help us? We would appreciate e-mail addresses and Web sites that we could use to give us more places to search. We have posted our project on the Global Schoolnet.

Notice that Debbie tells me how she obtained my address, informs me of her specific information needs, and shows me that she has already done a significant amount of preparatory work on the project described. Clearly, this was far from a ridiculous request. I am hoping that Debbie felt that she received an equally reasonable and helpful response from me.

At their worst, ridiculous requests are irritants. At best, they are important opportunities for telecollaborative learning, both about and with new dimensions of netiquette. For, as Lord Chesterfield wrote in 1748,

Manners must adorn knowledge and smooth its way through the world.

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Reference