

Elements of Internet Etiquette

Eric Behr, Mathematics
February 1991
rev. Sept. 2, 1992

This note contains some suggestions on how to avoid conflicts in daily interactions with other members of the Internet community. It is not intended to replace similar guidelines contained in ‘official’ Internet documents, only to summarize them for the benefit of novice users.

Introduction

There are two primary ways in which an Internet computer user interacts with other users: through electronic mail, and through postings on “netnews”. A third method of communication, falling somewhere in between the other two, is subscription to mailing lists. We will discuss some aspects of all three below.

It is important to realize that direct communication is not the only way in which one user can affect others. Taking advantage of remote resources (FTP accounts, databases available through Telnet, library catalogs, etc.) means taking some of those resources away from other legitimate users. This also applies to the data lines connecting Internet nodes – their capacity is limited, and there are periods when ‘traffic jams’ become noticeable and quite frustrating. Avoiding large file transfers at ‘rush hours’, limiting non-essential activity to the minimum, respecting the rights and needs of other users – these are all aspects of Internet *savoir vivre*.

General rules

One of the iron-clad rules of Internet is that it is essentially a non-commercial enterprise. It is thus forbidden to use its hardware and software for commercial gain. For example, advertising, solicitation of business, brokerage, etc. are all out of place. There are some areas set aside for classified ads, but even there large-scale marketing is frowned upon.

Impersonating another user is also a big taboo, especially when done with malicious intent. Every year or so the Internet community sees one or more such incidents, perpetrated usually by new Computer Science students who think that being able to fool Internet mail software is reason for glory, and a good joke on top of it. It only annoys others, who have better things to do than reading electronic forgeries.

Since there are many written and traditional rules of behavior, it is impossible to list them all. This leads to yet another general rule, perhaps the most important of them all: it is a good idea to take some time to *observe* habits and peculiarities of the Internet before jumping into public discussions and exchanges, just like you would after entering an unfamiliar household as a guest.

Using electronic mail

There are relatively few rules here. It is assumed that e-mail, just like ordinary mail, is private. The form and contents of a letter will thus be dictated by the tolerance of the particular recipient. Keep in mind, however, that other users may occasionally gain access

to it. This happens due to software screwups, your own addressing mistakes, rare instances of unethical behavior on part of a system manager, or indiscretion of the addressee. Needless to say the latter, i.e. publicizing private mail (especially inflammatory letters) without permission from the author, is in very bad taste.

Because of the peculiar character of e-mail, opinions exchanged in this fashion often produce unexpected results. There are many instances when people with diametrically opposing views quickly get to respect each other after corresponding electronically. But it is even more common to see an unfortunate phrase, misinterpretation, or even a simple typing mistake, inflame passions in a most stunning way. One of the reasons is that e-mail does not afford the author the benefits of facial expressions, voice inflexions, etc. To get around this problem, several special symbols are used by seasoned Internet writers (see Appendix).

One more golden rule which helps keep fires down is this: before shooting off an angry response, wait an hour or two – maybe even sleep on it. It may occur to you that you’ve misunderstood something; you may come to the conclusion that the statement which upset you wasn’t so outrageous after all; or even if it was, you may decide that it may be better to simply ignore it.

News

Internet news (‘netnews’) is divided into a few hundred topics, or newsgroups, to which you can subscribe. When you see a posting in a particular newsgroup, you have the option of replying to it publicly (posting a followup), or replying by mail to the author. In the former case, all subscribers to that newsgroup will see your reply.

The rules which apply here are much more complicated. First, many newsgroups focus on quite controversial topics (religion, abortion, war, gun control). Second, discussions may last for weeks, with hundreds of different people pitching in their two cents; it is usually difficult to remember who said what, which only adds to the confusion. Finally, every group has its specific rules and traditions. Here are some of the general principles.

- Always remember that netnews is a big experiment in Applied Democracy 101. There is no doubt that many texts you will see are going to upset you; don’t let this cloud your judgement.
- When replying to a posting, or submitting a new one, make sure that it will go to the right newsgroup. There is nothing worse than seeing a long diatribe on Star Trek IV posted in ‘talk.religion.mideast’.
- If you wish to quote the text which you are replying to (news software usually allows you to do that), *edit!* Include only the relevant points, and the original author’s signature. Use a standard symbol to mark quoted lines (news software will usually do that for you by prepending > to each line of the quotation).
- Keep in mind that after a longer discussion, quotations begin resembling a Mayakovski poem, with nested quotations scattered around. Make sure that you identify the different authors correctly; otherwise you may end up offending someone whose views you really support...

- Resist the temptation to point out spelling errors made by others. At the same time, do all you can to make sure that your grammar and spelling are more or less correct. In general,

stay away from petty disputes which contain *ad hominem* attacks, calls for censorship, etc. If anything, try to pour oil on the troubled waters.

- The main value of netnews lies in the fact that many knowledgeable people will usually take the time to answer questions, volunteer advice, etc. Occasionally such free advice comes from the same professionals who would charge an arm and a leg for it, if they were doing it on their job. Please reciprocate whenever you can: “donate” your knowledge and experience for the benefit of other users.

Mailing lists

Mailing lists are the Bitnet substitute for netnews. Some Internet materials are also distributed in this fashion. In order to subscribe to a mailing list, you first have to identify its name and the *list server* where it resides. In our example, we will assume that John Doe wants to subscribe to the list POWER-L (devoted to the RISC family of IBM workstations), which is distributed by the North Dakota State University. The next step is to send a subscription request by mail or an interactive message: send a letter with the line ‘SUB POWER-L John Doe’ (without quotes) to the address `LISTSERV@NDSUVM1` on Bitnet.

The list server acts as a ‘reflector’; participants in the discussion send their articles to a single address (you will be notified what address to use when your subscription is confirmed), and the list server then mails copies of those articles to all subscribers. Most of the time this goes on without human intervention. In principle, mailing lists are similar to netnews, and similar rules should be respected here.

Recommended reading

The newsgroups `news.announce.newusers` and `news.newusers.questions`. See the local administrator for information on how to access Usenet news.

Interesting and/or controversial newsgroups

At the time of this writing there were over 800 netnews discussion groups on various subjects. Here is a small sample. The asterisk means that there are several (up to 30 or so) subgroups in that category, e.g. `comp.os.xenix`, `comp.os.mac`, `comp.os.vm`, etc.

`comp.dcom.lans`, `comp.lang.*`, `comp.org.ieee`, `comp.os.*`, `comp.risks`, `comp.society.futures`, `comp.sources.*`, `comp.sys.*`, `misc.consumers`, `rec.arts.*`, `rec.games.*`, `rec.ham-radio`, `rec.humor`, `rec.music.*`, `rec.photo`, `rec.sport.*`, `sci.edu`, `sci.math`, `sci.med`, `sci.space`, `soc.college`, `soc.culture.*`, `talk.politics.misc`, `talk.religion.misc`, `alt.conspiracy`, `alt.drugs`, `alt.fan.dave_barry`, `alt.skinheads`.

Commonly used symbols

: -) happy face, or smilie; indicates that the writer is not serious

:-(sad face; regret
8-()	surprise, astonishment (one of the many variations on the smiley theme)
something	emphasis; asterisks are an equivalent of boldface or underline