

The Ruin of the Digital Town Square

Do You Know Who Your 'Friends' Are?

Ashley May

The point is old but still true that we need good manners for a good society. Edmund Burke wrote that “Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in.” Small habits of manners impact a society’s moral landscape—which is why the virtual absence of manners online has been devastating.

Since the early days of the World Wide Web, attempts have been made to address the need for online manners, for “netiquette.” But because we tend to be focused on *what* we should do and not to do online, we often ignore a more basic question: *who* are we talking to? Unless we become more intentional about sorting our relationships online and drawing sharper distinctions about how particular platforms serve our relationships differently, guidelines about respecting others’ privacy, or avoiding snarkiness, or not saying online what you wouldn’t say in person—all are hollow.

In the *Slate* podcast “Manners for the Digital Age” that ran from 2011 to 2012, “Dear Prudence” advice columnist Emily Yoffe teamed up with technology writer Farhad Manjoo to discuss a wide range of scenarios of how to interact with people on social media: teachers who tweet too much about their personal lives, “friends” who criticize you on Facebook but not to your face, whether or not to correct other users’ false factual claims, and so forth.

What’s striking about many of the questions asked, and the answers given, is how often they were related to boundaries in relationships. One letter writer asks about following her psychiatrist on Twitter. Yoffe asks a reasonable question: Why should you? What’s the benefit to you? “I think it’s really important not to let that relationship spill over into social media.”

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While social media has made it possible for us to connect with an astonishing array of people, it thoroughly jumbles our categories of who gets what kind of information about our lives. It's this jumbling that prompted many of the scenarios addressed in the podcast. On the surface, they were about manners—about how to act—but the deeper questions that bubbled up were about how to reinstate boundaries that were mistakenly erased.

There is a similar pattern in the 2013 book *Emily Post's Manners in a Digital World: Living Well Online*, in which Daniel Post Senning carries on the work of his great-great-grandmother's famous writings on etiquette. Senning first orients the reader to each social media platform, and then lays some basic ground rules for discourse like "leave the flamethrower at home," "don't make a personal attack on the person you are arguing with," and "don't feed the trolls." But what's interesting is how he ends the book—with a plea for boundary-making:

In an increasingly connected world, it is up to each individual to set boundaries. Between work and personal lives. Between close family and friends and more casual acquaintances. Between total strangers and ourselves... To do this well requires us to think about the relationships in our lives and make deliberate choices about how we want to conduct and maintain them.

Much talk about online civility today revolves around content: What not to post on your Facebook page, what not to say to someone you disagree with on Twitter, what kinds of selfies you shouldn't post on Instagram. We focus on solutions like policing fake news, distinguishing clearly between fact and opinion, not oversharing, paying attention to our tone.

But both the *Slate* podcast and Senning's book point us in a different direction—in the one case by illustrating it and in the other case as an afterthought. They both suggest that this type of instruction, by itself, can hide the more pressing point that to apply good manners we need to be clear with ourselves about what kinds of relationships we are cultivating online, and why, and what kinds of platforms may be best suited for some kinds of relationships rather than others. Are your relationships with your Facebook "friends" strong enough that you can trust them with what you post there? If your Twitter account is public, do you really want to share information about your personal life with strangers?

Perhaps it's the blurring of professional and personal relationships, of sharing the same information with our friends and our enemies, that has gotten us into the pickle we're in today. Perhaps the way to a better

digital discourse is to sort the relationships in our lives, and to develop boundaries that are appropriate for each group.

For example, a friend of mine is a public school teacher. She is “friends” with her students through Facebook and uses it to communicate with them about school events. But she doesn’t allow any of her current students to follow her on Instagram. That platform is for her close friends and family. Once a student graduates, and if the relationship is healthy, then the student can follow her personal, pictorial life.

This kind of thinking is where we must start if we are to build a new code of manners. Your dance card only has so many slots—so who do you want to relate to, and what’s the best platform for you to use for that purpose? “Who are my friends?” is a loaded question. But our culture’s default answer—that you can reveal yourself to anyone and everyone and find satisfaction in the act of “self-expression”—is empty. If anything, revealing large chunks of your personal life to the widest possible public, whether through oversharing or constantly testing out witticisms, is a formula for disappointment.

A new code of manners would lay out some basic ground rules and expectations. For example, Twitter can be a great tool for commenting on ideas, or for following a public figure you admire. But it’s a bad place to look for affirmation, or to confront someone’s personal ills. Would you respond well to a stranger’s public denouncement of your character flaws? It’s this sorting of “this is a private conversation” and “this is a public conversation” that a code would cover. It wouldn’t be just about cleaning your public Facebook page or making it private in case a future employer googles you, or instructions on how to be civil and nice in every single conversation you have. Perhaps such a code could even be enabled by changes to the platforms themselves, like Mark Zuckerberg’s March announcement of his plan to refocus Facebook around private communication rather than public sharing.

Efforts to codify online manners haven’t really done much because they can work only if we first become deliberate in arranging the relationships that our digital interactions supposedly serve. It’s only once we get clear about when we’re interacting with friends we truly trust, or with a broader range of friends, or with strangers with whom we share certain interests, or with the general public that we can start thinking about manners in digital life. Coming up with lists of rules or general principles for online civility is easy enough. What we need is a discussion of how we can help people in boundary-making when digital technology makes this increasingly difficult.