

## Politeness in computer culture: Why women thank and men flame<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

Perhaps nowhere is a concern with politeness (or its lack) currently so evident as in computer-mediated communication and especially in the wide-access, multi-participant discourses that take place on the global telecommunications network known as the Internet. The concern is in part a reaction to the special characteristics of the electronic medium, which permit multiple participants to contribute simultaneously, liberated from such familiar conversational imperatives as the need to secure the next speaking turn and to forestall interruption by other participants. Add to the resulting proliferation and overlapping of messages the fact that the medium, more so even than other written media, is decontextualized—lacking handwriting or even choice of paper as a clue to the personality of the sender—and the likelihood of misunderstanding and breakdown in communication would appear to be high. Many claim in fact that the decontextualized nature of the medium leads to disinhibition in users and thus to an increase in hostile and abusive message content, a phenomenon known in net jargon as *flaming* (Kiesler, Zubrow, Moses, & Geller 1985; Kim & Raja 1990; Shapiro & Anderson 1985).

Public statements of rules of network etiquette, or "netiquette," abound in electronic fora (e.g., Horton & Spafford 1993; Templeton 1991). Surprisingly, however, no comparison of norms of appropriateness with actual computer-mediated behavior has yet been attempted. Aside from a few mostly anecdotal reports of flaming (e.g., Seabrook 1994) and much futuristic speculation, we know remarkably little about how computer users actually interact.

The present paper addresses this lack by comparing behavior in Internet discussion groups with assessments of appropriateness reported in response to an anonymous survey on net etiquette. Nine discussion lists compose the primary data for the investigation. These lists, which include both academic and nonacademic fora, were selected to represent varying percentages of female subscribership, ranging from 11% to 88%.<sup>2</sup> Previous research (Herring 1993a) has shown that women and men exhibit different patterns of net participation in terms of amount, frequency, and manner of posting. The hypothesis guiding the present investigation is that women and men differ not only in net behavior but in the values they assign to such behaviors—in other words, that women and men have different ideas of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behavior on the net.

The results of the investigation reveal that women and men do indeed assess appropriateness differently. However, gender differences in net behavior cannot be explained by politeness alone. While women value politeness and generally behave politely on the net, men operate in accordance with other values, namely agonistic debate and freedom from censorship, which supercede politeness and result in violations (including flaming) of conventional politeness norms.

### THE INVESTIGATION

The method for analyzing politeness in this study distinguishes between positive and negative politeness as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987). Negative politeness is behavior intended to protect one or both participants' *negative face*, or "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his [sic] actions be unimpeded by others" (1987:62). On the Internet, *violations of negative politeness* (abbreviated hereafter as -N) include posting excessively long or low-content messages, since these take up space in people's electronic mailboxes and time in reading or disposing of them, as well as incurring extra charges for net users who pay for their connect time through commercial services. Net behaviors that constitute *observances of negative politeness* (+N) include the use of descriptive subject headers (so that recipients can ignore messages on topics in which they are not interested) and apologies: for example, for posting a longer message than is normally considered acceptable.

Positive politeness, on the other hand, addresses participants' *positive face*, or "the desire to be ratified, understood, approved of, liked or admired" (Brown & Levinson 1987:62). The most obvious *violation of positive politeness* (-P) on-line is flaming, which typically takes the form of personal verbal abuse. In contrast, behaviors such as expressing thanks and appreciation constitute *observances of positive politeness* (+P), as do community-building activities such as welcoming new members to a list and otherwise behaving so as to make others feel supported and accepted.

Politeness behavior of both types is most likely to occur when speakers engage in face-threatening acts, that is, acts that threaten the positive or negative "face wants" of speaker, addressee, or both. In Internet list discourse, face-threatening acts include making requests that cause addressees to make extra effort or otherwise modify their behavior in response, disagreeing with or insulting other participants, and calling attention to participants' inappropriate behavior on-line.

Two competing hypotheses are evaluated here with respect to gender and politeness on the Internet.<sup>3</sup> According to the first of these, women are more likely than men to engage in positive politeness strategies (+P; avoid -P) to a high degree. The association of women with positive politeness (and by extension, men with negative politeness) is consistent with claims by Gilligan (1982) that women favor an ethic of caring and interpersonal responsibility, while men favor an ethic of rights and protection from interference by others. The second hypothesis is that women, as members of a socially subordinate group, will be more polite and

deferential (+P, +N; avoid -P, avoid -N) than men overall (Brown 1980; Lakoff 1975).

In order to determine which, if either, of these hypotheses is correct, the netiquette data discussed in this paper were coded for positive politeness, negative politeness, or "other" (not categorizable in terms of politeness), and if applicable, whether they represent a violation or an observance of each type of politeness. In what follows, results for each part of the analysis are presented under the headings *Observed behavior* and *Netiquette survey*, followed by a summary and conclusion.

#### *Observed behavior*

There is an increasing awareness among both researchers and the general public that women and men have different preferred styles in computer use, including in computer-mediated communication.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the two most striking differences involve amount of posting and the relationship—adversarial or supportive—evoked between speakers and addressees. Men participating in mixed-sex fora post longer and more frequent messages than women do. They also post more messages that are contentious or adversarial in tone, including, in some fora, overtly hostile "flames" (Herring 1992, 1993a; Herring, Johnson, & DiBenedetto 1992; Sutton 1994). In addition, men make greater use of sarcasm, self-promotion, and exceptionless assertions (Herring 1992, 1993a, 1993c). In contrast, women post short messages; contribute more overt expressions of agreement, appreciation, and support; apologize more often; and hedge or present assertions indirectly as suggestions (Herring 1993a, 1993b). These behaviors are not gender-exclusive—women flame and men express appreciation, albeit less frequently<sup>5</sup>—and there is a considerable area of overlap of what might be termed female and male interactional styles into which many messages fall. Nonetheless, the extremes of behavior at either end are well attested and appear to enjoy a symbolic status, such that readers can often infer the gender of the message sender on the basis of the presence of features from the prototypical gendered styles alone.<sup>6</sup> The following examples, I assert, are unambiguously male-gendered; that is, they are recognizably masculine in style. (In the examples, > indicates lines copied from a previous message. The list name is given in brackets at the beginning of each example. Other bracketed material is my addition or revision.)

(1) [PHILOSOP]

While I do not especially care how this gets settled, I am surprised by the continuing absurdity of the discussion.

[detached stance, put-down (*this discussion is absurd*)]

(2) [LINGUIST]

[Jean Linguiste's] proposals towards a more transparent morphology in French are exactly what he calls them: a farce. Nobody could ever take them seriously -- unless we want to look as well at pairs such as \*pe're - me're\*, \*coq - poule\* and defigure the French language in the process.

[strong assertions (*exactly, nobody*), put-downs (*JL's proposals are a farce*; implied: *JL wants to defigure the French language*)]

(3) [POLITICS]

In article [message number] [address (Ed [Lastname])] writes:

>No, but I shall emphasize that should the news admins take it upon  
>themselves to decide the truth of your claim -- a remote possibility  
>indeed -- we surely would not weight most highly your word on the

Who the hell are "we", "edo boy". I was unaware that a net-clown was required to agree on the US Constitution. Well anyway, enough entertainment for a self-exposed "wieneramus". The criminal acts of the x-Soviet Armenian Government come directly under the scope of the Convention on Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 8, 1948, containing the following provisions:

[continues another 8 screens]

[name-calling and personal insults (*edo boy, net-clown, wieneramus*), profanity (*who the hell*)]

(4) [PAGLIA]

>My problem with Paglia is that she wants to have her cake and eat it too -- say  
>whatever she wants and then whine and complain when there are consequences.

That's funny, she says the same thing about you. (And, no, I'm not being flip. If you understood what Paglia says about date rape and sexual harassment, you'd know that's exactly what she says about people like you.) Oh, and could you give me an instance exactly of where Paglia "whine[d] and complain[ed] when there [were] consequences" of what she said?

>But my gut feeling

Which you feel compelled to air here, without any substantiation. [...]

> is that Yaqzan probably had failed to produce much research,  
>was a terrible teacher, or had some other problem, and the university used this  
>incident as a way to finally get rid of him.

To quote the Dread Pirate Roberts, your insight is "truly dizzying". You read a couple of summaries of an op-ed piece by someone unknown to you, and you are able to reconstruct his career. What an amazing power!

>Someone also wrote something

Your usual clarity is, again, breath-taking.

[continues]

[sarcasm, personal insults, previous poster's remarks taken out of context]

(5) [POLITICS]

>yes, they did...This is why we must be allowed to remain armed...who  
>is going to help us if our government becomes a tyranny? no one will.

oh yes we \*must\* remain armed. anyone see day one last night abt charlestown where everyone/s so scared of informing on murderers the cops have given up ? where the reply to any offense is a public killing ? knowing you/re not gonna be caught cause everyone/s to afraid to be a witness ?

yeah, right, twerp.

> ----[Ron] "the Wise"----

what a joke.

[sarcasm, name calling, personal insults]

Of these, examples (3) through (5) would be characterized as flames by most readers because of their personally offensive nature. All of the examples have in common, however, an adversarial, judgmental stance vis-à-vis the addressee(s): the meta-message communicated is: *I tell you that you are wrong.*

In contrast, consider the following examples, which illustrate an unambiguously female style:

(6) [SWIP]

I want to second [Kate's] recommendation of [Ellen's] article, and her "nice job, Ellen".

It really is exceptionally well done.

[agrees, praises another participant]

(7) [WMST]

Well, enough of my ranting. I am very interested in this subject. My area is experimental social psychology. I am also very excited about the book you mentioned. It is a very worthwhile project. If I can help in any way, typing, whatever, I would love to help. Please let me know if there is anything I can do.

[apologizes, appreciates, offers help]

(8) [WMSPT]

i'm a new lurker and have been very impressed with the quality and depth of discussion -- after being in a spiritual desert for a year, with only my own water to keep me afloat this is heaven. can anyone tell me more about Pagan? and BTW, to [Lori] from all you've said i think you're really wonderful - can i talk to you sometime?

sorry to bother you all, but thanks

have a great day, weekend, etc, and BB [Blessed Be]

[appreciates, queries, apologizes, thanks, wishes group well]

(9) [MBU]

I don't know how you would do this analysis, but I wonder if there wouldn't be a significant difference in the degree of abstraction vs. concreteness in male/female communications in this discussion. The women tended (I think) to offer very personal, concrete experiences while the men often launched into rather impersonal, generalized statements. Sometimes I didn't even know what was being said for sure. I'm not saying one was good and the other bad, but it seems obvious (to me anyway)

that a person would be more hesitant to say anything and more cautious (fewer messages, fewer words) if she was offering up her own life than if it was only an opinion about "things" or people "out there."

I'll probably regret this within a few minutes (and all of you who hoped the discussion was dead will, too). Oh well, vacation is coming up and we can all send "nomail" or pretend that we did. Hope you have a good one. Anyone going to MLA? If you want to be really bored, I'm reading a paper on [a female author's novel]. I'd love to see you--besides you'll probably be the only audience I get at that hour!

[hedges, expresses doubt, apologizes, wishes group well, appeals to group]

The female-gendered examples all communicate one or both of the following meta-messages: *I support and value you*, and *I think this, but you may think otherwise.* The appreciative, attenuated tone of female net style contrasts with the confidently judgmental male style illustrated above.

To the extent that they are representative of net interaction, examples (1) through (9) indicate that women produce more overtly polite behaviors than men do. These behaviors include observances of positive politeness (+P) (expressions of agreement, appreciation, and support) and negative politeness (+N) (short messages, apologies, hesitation to impose views)—sometimes both in the same sentence, as in *Sorry to bother you ... , but thanks.* Men, in contrast, regularly violate politeness, again both positive (-P) (ad hominem attacks, name-calling, put-downs) and negative (-N) (long messages, strong assertions that leave no room for alternative views). Moreover, men are more likely than women to produce bald, unmitigated face-threatening acts such as disagreeing with and protesting the behavior of others.

This does not mean, however, that female net users never disagree, criticize, or protest. A dispute that arose during spring of 1994 on the TESL list is illustrative in this regard. TESL-L, an unmoderated list with 56% female subscribers and an active female listowner, is a relatively congenial forum with very little flaming and a self-enforced two-screen limit on length of postings. Recently, however, after a period of several weeks during which the two-screen limit was repeatedly violated, a female subscriber committed a face-threatening act: she pointed out the violations with the goal of putting an end to them. She did so, however, in a mitigated way, by invoking the two-screen limit in a question in the past tense (a distancing, +N strategy), expressing appreciation for shorter messages (+P), and soliciting input from the group at large (+P):

(10) There have been some really long messages on TESL-L recently. Didn't there use to be a two-screen recommended limit? I appreciate the variety of topics we've been discussing recently, but I like the banter and comments more than the discourses and dissertations. Anybody else feel this way? [Jane Munro]

This proposal generally met with support from other female list members, and a consensus that stricter limits should be observed began to emerge. Several male members were opposed to limits, however, and indicated this stance without mitigating their disagreement. Indeed, the posters emphasized their disagreement by various means (assertion of strong negative reactions; sarcasm; evaluatively charged words such as *rot*), as illustrated in the examples below. These behaviors are consistent with the characterization of male behavior on-line as confrontational and face-threatening (-P).

- (11) On Saturday, March 5, [Norman Price] suggested that the number of postings per person per day be limited. I couldn't disagree more with this suggestion. [...]
- (12) To avoid cluttering up the list with long and multiple messages, it seems easiest for everyone to get the address list from the archive and then post our messages to each and every list member individually.  
Or, of course, we could all send messages directly to the archives - may they rot in peace. Or to "cc" - whatever that may mean. [Hans Jurgen]

In contrast, while some women also disagreed, they did so in a manner consistent with female style: for example, by expressing appreciation for the alternative view (+P) and avoiding stating or implying that those with whom they disagreed were wrong (avoid -P).

Finally, and most tellingly, when the listowner stepped in to put an end to the discussion—another face-threatening act—she employed a mixture of strong assertion (-N), as befit her powerful status on the list, and mitigation, as befit her gender, including flattery (+P) and commands framed as suggestions (+N):

- (13) How about we just cut out the talk about who should post what and how often...the fact is that everyone simply needs to be mindful of the needs of others and to respect the time and attention of others in this forum.  
I am personally dead set against any kind of censorship, particularly in an academic environment. However, \*self-control\* is a great idea!  
TESL-L has a 40-line, 2 screen maximum.....it is self-enforced; we do not believe in setting LISTSERV to cut messages off at 40 lines, at limiting the number of postings and so forth. Those kinds of heavy-handed tactics are \*NOT\* what this list is all about. TESL-L members are sensitive and mature enough to try to consider the value, length, relevance, and form of their postings before putting them out on the net.  
Now, shall we close this subject?  
Peace,  
[Anita Listowner]

In all, out of 17 postings that this thread comprises, 10 were contributed by women (including two by the listowner) and 7 by men. Overt expressions of positive or negative politeness, in roughly equal proportions, were found in 90% of the female postings and 14% (N = 1) of the male postings. Conversely, only 20% (N = 2; 1

by the listowner) of the postings by women contained bald face-threatening speech acts, as compared with 56% of the male posts. This example illustrates that women mitigate threats to addressees' face even when challenging and disagreeing. Men, in contrast, tend to emphasize disagreement, in apparent violation of conventional politeness norms.

The question then becomes: Why do these differences exist? Are men unconcerned with whether they appear rude because they feel exempted by their more powerful status in on-line society from the requirement to take the face wants of others into account? Are women perhaps overly polite because they assess situations as more face-threatening to others than they actually are? Or are different value systems at work, such that users of both styles feel they are behaving appropriately? In order to determine what users feel constitutes appropriate behavior on-line, a survey was designed and distributed electronically to Internet discussion-list subscribers. The next section describes this survey.

#### *Netiquette survey*

**Instrument.** The survey instrument has three parts, the first two of which are considered here.

Part 1 comprises three open-ended questions: (1) *What behaviors bother you most on the net?* (2) *What net behaviors do you most appreciate when you encounter them?* and (3) *In an ideal world, what one change would you most like to see in the way people participate on the net?* Several lines were left blank after each question, although respondents who replied electronically had the option of writing longer answers.

Part 2 comprises 30 questions on specific net behaviors. These behaviors were culled from posted netiquette rules, complaints about behavior that arose in on-line discussions, and other behaviors included for the purpose of ensuring that all four categories of +/-P (making others feel liked/disliked and accepted/rejected) and +/-N (not imposing/imposing on others) were represented. For each behavior, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much they like or dislike the behavior, with 1 indicating 'like' and 5 'dislike'.

Finally, the survey includes a section labeled *Respondent Background Information* which asks about the respondent's age, sex, ethnicity, profession, number of years reading discussion lists or USENET newsgroups, and frequency of posting to lists or newsgroups.

A copy of the survey was posted electronically to each of eight discussion lists in the first week of March, 1994.<sup>7</sup> A total of 279 usable responses were returned (256 by electronic mail; 23 by other means), of which 59.5% were completed by men and 40.5% by women.<sup>8</sup> The responses were analyzed statistically using a standard spreadsheet program.

**Results.** In this section, I first address the question of whether women and men evaluate the same behaviors differently (for example, such that what is "polite" for women is "rude" for men and vice versa) by discussing the results of Part 2, the quantitative evaluation of 30 net behaviors. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Average scores and ranking of specific net behaviors (Part 2) by gender\*

Behavior	Female responses (N = 113)		Male responses (N = 166)		Diff. in score	Diff. in rank	Diff. in score x rank
	avg. score	rank	avg. score	rank			
msg w/ racist content	4.87	1	4.56	1	-.31	0	-
msg w/ sexist content	4.86	2	4.48	2	-.38	0	-
quoting all previous msg	4.24	3	4.29	3	.05	0	-
flaming	4.18	4	3.90	10	-.28	6	-1.68
reposting same msg	4.14	5	4.01	6	-.13	1	-.13
boasting	4.13	6	4.05	5	-.08	1	.08
implicit subject header	4.13	6	4.21	4	.08	2	-.16
obscure, unclear wording	4.09	8	3.99	7	-.10	1	.10
private msg misdirected	4.09	8	3.96	8	-.13	0	-
profanity	4.02	10	3.56	12	-.46	2	-.92
not on topic of list	3.85	11	3.92	9	.07	2	.14
long messages	3.72	12	3.30	16	-.42	4	-1.68
irony or sarcasm	3.68	13	3.12	19	-.56	6	-3.36
request for obvious info	3.62	14	3.59	11	-.03	3	-.09
insider references	3.54	15	3.36	15	-.18	0	-
frequently asked question	3.28	16	3.46	13	.18	3	.54
cross-posting	3.28	16	3.09	20	-.19	4	-.76
typos, misspelling	3.25	18	3.27	17	.02	1	.02
tentative, too polite	3.23	19	3.25	18	.02	1	.02
long signature files	3.21	20	3.44	14	.23	6	1.38
personal information	3.18	21	2.98	24	-.20	3	-.60
freq. posts by one person	3.08	22	3.01	22	-.07	0	-
forceful assertions	3.01	23	3.06	21	.05	2	.10
expresses agreement	2.92	24	2.99	23	.07	1	.07
supports/sympathizes	2.53	25	2.65	25	.12	0	-
gives advice	2.37	26	2.33	28	-.04	2	-.08
challenges	2.22	27	2.36	27	.14	0	-
short messages	2.11	28	2.48	26	.37	2	.74
compliments/thanks	2.06	29	2.20	29	.14	0	-
humorous content	1.88	30	1.82	30	-.06	0	-

\*Scale is 1 (like) to 5 (dislike)

Table 1 shows that female and male respondents are substantially in agreement regarding the overall ranking of the 30 net behaviors. Differences are especially trivial at the 'like' end of the scale (behaviors assigned an average score of less than 3.00). Of the seven best-liked behaviors, four (compliments/thanks, short messages, support, and expressions of agreement) are characteristic of female net

style. Further, all but short messages (which observe negative politeness) and challenges to the content of a message (which, despite their face-threatening potential, are presumably valued for their intellectual stimulation) are observances of positive politeness (+P), hypothesized to be the preserve of women. Rather than indicating that men dislike or are bothered by displays of positive politeness on the net, the self-report results indicate that they like and approve of them. This makes the face-threatening behavior of men on-line—especially violations of positive politeness such as put-downs and flaming—all the more puzzling.

Women and men also agree in reporting a dislike of flaming; boasting; profanity; long messages; sarcasm; multiply posted, cross-posted, and off-topic messages; and messages that quote all of a previous poster's message—a list that includes many salient characteristics of male net behavior. These are ranked somewhat differently for female and male respondents, however: women are more bothered than men by sarcasm, flaming, long messages, cross-posting, and profanity, while men are more bothered than women by long signature files and the repetition of frequently asked questions. While the differences in the numerical averages involved are not statistically significant,<sup>9</sup> it is suggestive that the behaviors that bother women more (except for long messages and cross-posting) are all violations of positive politeness (-P), while those that bother men more are impositions on their time and attention, that is to say violations of negative politeness (-N). The results thus lend limited support to the hypothesis that women are more concerned with positive politeness than are men.

This tendency is also evident in the results of Part 1 of the survey, in which respondents provided answers to open-ended questions asking what they most disliked, appreciated, and would like to change about net interaction. In their responses, women displayed a greater concern for P (both observances and avoidance of violations thereof) than did men, and mentioned P slightly more than N overall—53% of all mentions of N and 61% of all mentions of P were supplied by female respondents. The percentages of mention of each politeness type for each question and for all three questions combined are summarized in Table 2.<sup>10</sup>

TABLE 2. Distribution of responses to Part 1 by gender and politeness type

	Dislike		Like		Want to change		Combined	
	-N	-P	+N	+P	-N	-P	+/-N	+/-P
M	39 (49%)	21 (42%)	16 (47%)	16 (39%)	9 (39%)	2 (20%)	64 (47%)	39 (39%)
F	40 (51%)	29 (58%)	18 (53%)	25 (61%)	14 (61%)	8 (80%)	72 (53%)	62 (61%)
Total	79 (100%)	50 (100%)	34 (100%)	41 (100%)	23 (100%)	10 (100%)	136 (100%)	101 (100%)

Is the solution to the puzzle of gender differences on-line to be found in terms of positive and negative politeness? That is, do positive and negative politeness ideals

(informally stated, giving others "positive strokes" as opposed to not imposing on them) underlie characteristic differences in female and male net behavior?

While we have identified a trend that points in this direction, this solution is unsatisfactory in a number of respects. First, it does not explain why men more often than women violate negative politeness norms—if men value maintaining a respectful distance and not imposing, why then do so many male net users impose so often?

Second, this solution does not provide a clear insight into why men violate positive politeness norms (for example, by flaming). It could be argued in response to this objection that a tension is inherent between the kinds of actions that positive and negative politeness ideals can be used to justify. Thus, supportive acceptance of others (+P), especially of inexperienced users (those theoretically most likely to send messages to the wrong place, ask "stupid" questions, and so on), without taking into consideration the bandwidth they occupy could result in imposition on other net users (-N). Here maintaining positive politeness conflicts with the requirements of negative politeness. Individuals who value negative politeness above all else might conceivably be outraged by such violations (especially if they lack the +P values of tolerance and acceptance that implicitly authorize them), perhaps even to the point of flaming. Conversely, freedom from imposition (+N), if acted on without consideration for the needs of others, could result in antisocial behavior such as the posting of offensive material (-P).<sup>11</sup> However, a crucial tenet of both positive and negative politeness is that others' needs *must* be taken into consideration, and thus politeness theory by itself does not predict hostility or aggression.

Finally, an explanation in terms of positive and negative politeness alone is overly simplistic. The differences that pattern along such lines must be viewed in conjunction with the overarching pattern whereby women on-line are more polite than men. This pattern is also evident in the responses to the open-ended questions in Part I of the survey: 87% of the responses generated by female respondents involved politeness (P and/or N), as compared with 73% for men. Thus, whatever importance male users attach to politeness, it appears to be less important to men than to women. A satisfactory explanation should ideally embrace both of these patterns within a larger explanatory framework.

The explanation I propose relies crucially on how people replied when asked what they most dislike, like, and want to change about net interaction. These responses are significant because the respondents were not required to answer in terms of politeness (although the fact that the survey was entitled *Netiquette Survey* undoubtedly biased answers in this direction). When we consider the content of the open-ended responses, a clue emerges to the puzzling gender differences and similarities observed. The apparent paradoxes can be resolved, I suggest, only if men are understood as possessing some other value system that overlaps with and outranks considerations of politeness.

Consider first what bothers people most. Understandably, respondents of both genders are bothered by messages that waste their time (because such messages are long, insubstantial, inappropriate, and so on; -N), and both complain about flaming (-P). However, women are more bothered than men by both types of behavior—women more than twice as often listed these behaviors in their answers to questions 1 and 3, which is consistent with their greater concern with politeness and violations thereof. Men, in contrast, are more likely to name as most bothersome the perceived lack of competence of other participants, or—more intolerable yet—rules and censorship. As one male respondent commented:

As much as I am irritated by [incompetent posters], I don't want imposed rules. I would prefer to "out" such a person and let some public minded citizen fire bomb his house to imposing rules on the net. Letter bombing an annoying individual's feed is usually preferable to building a formal hierarchy of net cops.

Or consider the response of another net vigilante to question 1, *What behaviors bother you most on the net?*:

I'd have to say commercial shit. Whenever someone advertises some damn get-rich-quick scheme and plasters it all over the net by crossposting it to every newsgroup, I reach for my "gatling gun mailer crasher" and fire away at the source address.

These responses not only evoke an ideal of freedom from external authority; they provide an explicit justification for flaming as a form of self-appointed regulation of the social order.

In response to question 2, respondents of both sexes indicate that they appreciate when interactants "agree to disagree," that is, when they accept differences of opinion without flaming (avoid -P), and when messages are brief (+N). Beyond this, however, there is little common ground—women as a group appreciate observances of positive politeness such as thanking and helping others, while men value "candor" and the expression of firm beliefs, behaviors that do not fit readily into a politeness model. Indeed, if carried very far, these male values potentially conflict with politeness values, in that uncensored honesty is face-threatening when one does not like or agree with another (-P), and firmly asserting one's beliefs makes it more difficult for others unaccustomed to or uncomfortable with a confrontational style to express divergent views (-N). In acting in accordance with the values of forthrightness and assertiveness, therefore, male participants could be perceived as rude by female participants whose value system accords a higher place to respecting the face wants of others.

Finally, in answering the questions, respondents sometimes expressed other values that were peripheral to the answer but are revealing nonetheless. For women, a cluster of values emerges that can be characterized as *democratic*, based on an ideal of participation by all and validation of others' experiences regardless of who they are or how experienced they are at using the net. For men, in contrast, there is a valorization of speed (valued not only in computer systems but in human

interlocutors, for whom it presupposes a certain level of technical skill and access to sophisticated equipment) and rational debate, according to which the ideal communicative interaction involves intelligent, reasoned debate about well-documented facts. Reality, of course, often falls short of one's ideals. Nevertheless it is worth noting that the value placed on debate, which characterizes the Western (male) academic tradition more generally, is consistent with the male-gendered messages in examples (3) through (5), which, even though they are flames, are modeled on an agonistic pattern of "point, refutation of point."

The preferred responses of women and men to Part 1 of the survey are summarized in Table 3, along with the responses given by both genders. (*Preferred* is defined here as a response mentioned two or more times more often by respondents of one gender than by the other.)

TABLE 3. Preferred responses to open-ended questions, by gender\*

	Dislike	Like	Change	Other values
M	<b>cross-posting; test msgs; requests by others to do things for them; rules; censorship; bullying</b>	candor; originality; firm beliefs	<b>more self-restraint (rather than rules)</b>	promptness/speed; reason, logic; documented facts; debate; intelligence
F	<i>long msgs; trivial, irrelevant, obscure msgs; flaming; men dominating or patronizing women</i>	<i>expressions of appreciation; helpfulness</i>	<i>shorter msgs; no dominant voices</i>	<i>tolerance (e.g., of inexperienced users); sharing of experience; democratic participation</i>
Both	<b>uninformative subject headers; quoting text; misdirected or off-topic msgs; msgs with little content; long msgs; flaming; egotism; inside jokes; "smilies"</b>	<i>brief msgs; civil disagreement (agreeing to disagree)</i>	<b>training on how to use the net, or a waiting period after joining a group before posting</b>	moderation; care in reading and responding to msgs

\**italics* = positive-politeness behaviors; **boldface** = negative-politeness behaviors

In this table, behaviors characterizable in terms of positive politeness are italicized, those characterizable in terms of negative politeness are in boldface, and behaviors not readily characterized in terms of politeness are left in normal type. Two points should be noted regarding the distribution of these three categories. First is the preponderance of positive-politeness behaviors mentioned preferentially by women, and the absence of positive-politeness behaviors mentioned preferentially by men. Second, rather than citing a complementary preponderance of negative-politeness

behaviors, men invoke values not directly related to politeness, but rather to other ideals such as self-determination, candor, firmness, and rational debate.

These same ideals are evident in the following quotation from R. Hauben (1993) praising the virtues of the Usenet system, on which it is estimated that 95% of the contributors are male:

The achievement of Usenet News demonstrates the importance of facilitating the development of uncensored speech and communication--there is debate and discussion--one person influences another--people build on each other's strengths and interests, differences, etc.

M. Hauben (1993) elaborates:

When people feel someone is abusing the nature of Usenet News, they let the offender know through e-mail. In this manner ... people fight to keep it a resource that is helpful to society as a whole.

Thus, a framework of values is constructed within which flaming and other aggressive behaviors can be interpreted in a favorable (even prosocial) light. Since men exhibit these behaviors more consistently than overtly polite behaviors, it seems reasonable to conclude that the values placed on candor, debate, and so on exercise a stronger determining influence on male behavior than do politeness values.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to uncover the communicative values that lead women and men to manifest different kinds of politeness behaviors on the Internet, hypothesizing that each gender understands *politeness* to refer to different things. I found that this hypothesis was too simple—in fact, although there is a suggestive tendency for women to favor positive politeness and men negative politeness, especially in self-report, the more revealing contrast is between a politeness-based communication ethic and an ethic of anarchic self-determination and vigorous debate. Historically, the latter ethic reflects the civil-libertarian ideals (Rheingold 1993) and the fringe social status (Turkle 1984) of the hacker community that pioneered the virtual frontier, and it has been preserved remarkably intact as the population of net users has expanded beyond computer science to academia, government, business, and the public at large.

This finding calls into question the popular explanation of flaming as the result of disinhibition brought about by the decontextualized nature of the computer medium itself (Kiesler et al. 1985; Kim & Raja 1990; Shapiro & Anderson 1985). The "disinhibition" explanation ignores the fact that flaming is practiced almost exclusively by men.<sup>12</sup> If the medium makes men more likely to flame, it should have a similar effect on women, yet if anything the opposite appears to be the case. An adequate explanation of flaming must therefore take gender into account.

The explanation proposed here is that men flame, at least in part, to regulate the social order, as self-appointed vigilantes on the "virtual frontier." Such behavior is rationalized within a male system of values that assigns greater importance to freedom of expression and firmness of verbal action than to possible consequences to the addressee's face needs. This is not to say that all or even most instances of flaming are motivated by a concern for the larger social good; nor do all men flame. Some of those who flame may be antisocial elements taking advantage of (or seeking to test) the ideology of anticensorship. Others may simply be responding in kind, perhaps because their own antisocial tendencies were awakened, or out of a conviction that certain behaviors should not be allowed to go unpunished. All act under the influence of a larger culture in which confrontation and aggression are valorized in males. What is certain is that flaming is "contagious"—normally polite participants, including women, can be pushed to flame back when sufficiently provoked by another's flames.<sup>13</sup>

Will the Internet community take action to discourage or prevent flaming in the future? My prediction is that flaming is not likely to abate as long as it is implicitly condoned by the value system of the dominant community of net users. It is noteworthy in this regard that most written rules of netiquette (such as those available at FTP sites or sent to new subscribers of discussion lists) urge net users to avoid violations of negative politeness but fail to mention flaming or violations of positive politeness at all.<sup>14</sup> And of those rules that do mention flaming, few unreservedly condemn it.<sup>15</sup> Thus the guidelines for new subscribers to the POLITICS list prohibit "flames of a personal nature," and Shapiro and Anderson (1985) advise, "Do not insult or criticize third parties without giving them a chance to respond." While superficially appearing to oppose flaming, these statements in fact implicitly condone "flames other than of a personal nature" (for example, of someone's ideas or values) and "insulting or criticizing third parties" (provided one gives them a chance to respond; I suspect rather that it is harder to *stop* them from responding). In short, as long as men dominate the Internet and the ideology of anarchic debate continues to be valorized and codified in behavioral norms, we are likely to be singed by flames in cyberspace for some time to come.

## NOTES

1. The research reported on in this paper was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. The author wishes to thank Charles Ess for providing the impetus to undertake the project, and Robin Lombard and John Paolillo for reading and commenting helpfully on the written version.

2. The nine lists are, in order of increasing percentage of female subscribers: PHILOSOP (11%), POLITICS (17%), PAGLIA (discussion of the writings of Camille Paglia; 34%), LINGUIST (36%), MBU (discussion of computers and writing; 42%), TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language; 56%), SWIP (Society for Women in Philosophy; 80%), WMSPR (Women's Spirituality and Feminist-Oriented Religions; 81%), and WMST (Women's Studies;

88%). At the time they were sampled, all were active lists generating between 20 and 100 messages per week.

3. These hypotheses are adapted from Brown and Levinson (1987:31).

4. See, for example, the cover story "Men, Women, and Computers" in the May 16, 1994, issue of *Newsweek*.

5. There is evidence that women tend to be more contentious on male-dominated lists and men more appreciative on female-dominated lists (Herring 1993b).

6. For examples of users suspected of posing as members of the opposite gender on the basis of their posting style, see Herring (forthcoming).

7. The eight lists surveyed are not entirely congruent with the nine lists considered in the first part of the study, for several reasons. I did not post a survey to MBU or POLITICS because I was no longer a subscriber to those lists at the time. Also, PAGLIA-L subscribers were not surveyed because the (male) listowner and moderator declined to post the survey on the grounds that it was not relevant to the topic of the list. To balance this, I surveyed two additional lists with a predominantly male subscribership: PHILCOMM (Philosophy of Communication) and the Computer Underground Digest (a weekly electronic newsletter whose readership includes many computing professionals).

8. Of the 23 completed surveys returned by hand or regular mail, 39% were from men and 61% from women. It is likely that fewer women than men felt competent to edit and return the survey electronically: I received three requests from women (compared with none from men) for instructions on how to do this.

9. An ANOVA factorial analysis was used. For purposes of comparison, I have calculated a rough measure of difference by multiplying the difference between the female and the male average for each question by the difference in rank (1-30). The results of this calculation are given in the rightmost column in Table 1: negative sums indicate behaviors that bother women more than men; positive sums indicate behaviors that bother men more than women.

10. These calculations are based on a subset of survey respondents derived by sampling responses received over time: the first 23 received, then 100-110, 200-210, and all 23 received by nonelectronic means. This produced a sample of 68 respondents, 34 female and 34 male.

11. Much of the debate about electronic pornography centers around this point.

12. As in medical research, women are largely invisible in research on computer-mediated communication that does not have gender as its primary focus (some exceptions, however, are McCormick & McCormick 1992 and Selfe & Meyer 1991).

13. On the PAGLIA list, for example, flaming is the order of the day—women are forced to engage adversarially if they are to be part of the discourse. Only one or two women participate regularly on this list.

14. The usage guidelines for PHILOSOP, LINGUIST, WMST, and the Usenet are examples of this type.

15. The exceptions here are female-owned lists such as SWIP and TESL.

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## "Let me call you sweetheart": The WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION

"... the question [is] how do feminists not only get women a piece of the pie, but rebake the whole pie." —Susan Faludi, *San Francisco Chronicle & Examiner Image Magazine*, Sept. 27, 1992

There is a consistent, widespread, largely unconscious and undocumented metaphor in English equating women-as-sex-objects with desserts, which is manifested both in linguistic expressions (such as *cheesecake*, *cookie*, *tart*, and so on) and in customs (such as women jumping out of cakes).<sup>2</sup> The presence of a virtual bakery of dessert terms for women considered sexually is evidence of an underlying conceptual metaphor of WOMAN AS DESSERT—a metaphor that functions as what Claudine Herrmann has called "a micro-language filled with winks and allusions specifically aimed at [women]" ([1976] 1989:7) and that can have unexpected side effects.<sup>3</sup>

### EVOLUTION OF THE METAPHOR

Conceptual metaphors are not arbitrary; indeed, their insidious power hinges upon the degree to which they "make sense." When a metaphor captures a felt truth, its compelling logic seduces us into accepting unstated conclusions; hence the dictum "The price of metaphor is eternal vigilance."<sup>4</sup>

The evolution of the WOMAN AS DESSERT metaphor is shown in Figure 1. It begins with PEOPLE ARE OBJECTS, an example of which is the special case George Lakoff, Jane Espenson, and Alan Schwartz have called PEOPLE ARE BUILDINGS, as in *Eyes are windows to the soul* (1991:192). This is joined with the stereotype *Women are sweet* (as in the nursery rhyme "What are little girls made of?/Sugar and spice and everything nice ..."), and finally combines with another common metaphor, ACHIEVING A DESIRED OBJECT IS GETTING SOMETHING TO EAT (as in *She tasted victory*), yielding WOMEN ARE SWEET OBJECTS (in this case, DESSERTS).<sup>5</sup> There is a subtle but crucial distinction between mere toothsome objects, such as *sweetie* or *honeybun*, and actual items that could be ordered off a menu, such as *cheesecake* or *tart*; it is this second set that I will examine in this paper.