

# TIPS FOR ON-LINE DISCUSSIONS

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When I first went online in the early 1980s, we were so enthralled about the ability to communicate via computer that what we actually said wasn't very important.

Some of our exchanges were "tech talk": that is, "Do you know the proper initialization string for a Hayes 300 on an IBM-XT?" Sometimes we just nattered. "What about that May 17 meeting?" "Is the new Word Perfect really that bad?" "Hey, my dog just chewed up my floppies!"

Before long, online communication expanded and we had chat rooms, e-mail lists, listservs, and new software that made online "conversation" more like "real discussions."

Or did it?

As I have watched cybertalk grow, both professionally and personally (my grandson will soon be saying "goo-goo, Grandpa!" via a videophone in my computer), I worry that either we are overrating online communication as means of dialogue or we have not learned how to do this new kind of communication very well.

An online "community" is not quite like a community in time and space, but it is still a community. That is, a people come "together" (virtually) to share information, ask questions, listen to an expert, or debate with one another. The community develops a character and informal protocols that let it do business.

## **Ecunet and LutherLink**

About 10,000 people are in the religious "online community" known as Ecunet, and 3,000 are in the Ecunet component called LutherLink. There are thousands of other online communities composed of people on e-mail lists, user groups, and the discussions fostered by various organizations and marketers. Some exist simply by mass mailing messages and responses or developing threads of dialogue branching from the original topic.

I have found many of these "communities" underdeveloped and generally unsatisfying. Even with such simple things as trying to discuss fixing a computer glitch, I find that I am often led down endless dead-end threads, with no continuity or cohesiveness to the postings.

I steer clear of most chat rooms, where it is common practice to use phony names, assume attitudes, and "play" with the group rather than discuss issues.

It will be years before researchers can determine how these kinds of online communication may have helped (or hurt) human interaction. I think we ought to worry about those whose primary interaction with others is via cyberspace. My wife sometimes refers to my online correspondents as my "imaginary friends" because I have never met most of them face to face.

On the other hand, online discussion has kept me in close touch with real friends far away and sustained relationships that might otherwise have lapsed.

The Ecunet and LutherLink communities, I believe, offer a richer mix and a more wholesome online dynamic than do many other groups. I have been enlightened, though not always made happier, by most of the discussions there. However, occasionally these "talks" will go astray because people do not sense the protocols of the community.

### **Tips for Communicators**

Every meeting on Ecunet or LutherLink is slightly different. But here are some tips for those who take part in cyberdiscussion.

*Be attentive to how participation in online discussion affects your own sense of community.*

1. When you join a group, "lurk" (that is, read, but don't write) for a while. See how the group conducts itself, the nature of the comments posted, the "style" of the meeting. Is the meeting breezy or formal? Are disputes punchy or polite? Does the moderator of the discussion keep people on the topic?

2. Unless you are very adept at extemporaneous speaking, compose your postings off line. See whether you have actually said what you intended to say. Check your messages for correct grammar and spelling. Just because it's ephemeral doesn't mean you can be sloppy. Some of us find misspelled words and sloppy grammar insulting.

3. Be as brief as possible. This is not easy, but remember that, while in a face-to-face discussion you might speak for two or three minutes, four or five screens of online comments usually cause the readers to tune out.

4. Don't feel compelled to respond to everything that is said.

5. Handling personal information is tricky. You might want to let folks know what gives you standing to comment; for example, "as a licensed marriage counselor..." I think self-deprecating comments ("I'm only a..., but...") in online discussion seem disingenuous.

6. If you join in a discussion that is heated, be willing to take the heat. As a matter of fact, I think that many online debates are too polite. We should be able to express strong opinions without our discussion partners calling "foul!" or feeling hurt.

7. Ecunet makes "private meetings" possible. You and certain members of a group can have a closed meeting or conversation and you won't have to worry about who might try to intrude on your special topic. Some say that it is in these private meetings that real dialogue and closeness develops.

8. Remember that online discussion lacks the added information given by vocal inflection or body language or "instant" feedback. Not even emoticons such as the familiar sidewise grin :-)) can always put the right spin on your remarks.

9. Be attentive to how participation in online discussion affects your own sense of community, your attitudes toward your discussion partners, and your ability to dialogue. The medium may not be ideal for everybody. Some find it too frustrating, too terse, or too limiting for deep emotional debate.

We are not yet sure where this medium is taking us. But—to put it oddly—"virtual communities" are a reality in our world. People of faith ought to be present in them.

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