

# Chat etiquette...

...and keeping civil whilst typing at speed



**Ivan Trundle**

Manager,  
communications  
and publishing  
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

It must be time to revisit the interactive components of internet activity. Having just installed a chat server on ALIANet [<http://www.alia.org.au/chat/>], and following observation of how people communicate through the limitations of the keyboard, it is apparent that there is a whole new dimension to two-way information flow.

Of course, many regard chat as merely an accelerated version of electronic discussion list activity. And in many ways, this is entirely true. However, a crucial aspect of communication via chat is often missing: that of authentication. Whilst e-lists offer a degree of comfort to those communicating (or merely observing), in that the sender is usually identified, and can be traced (mostly), no such authenticity is offered via chat sessions. For many, this is an attraction of chat. For others, the identification issue makes users hesitant to communicate on the same level as they might via e-mail, either through e-lists or through one-to-one communication.

Let me paint a scenario that I observed in a chat room recently. But before I get to the detail, a quick word of explanation for those unfamiliar with chat sessions. Most chat servers offer a number of defined 'rooms' in which to conduct chat session. A chat server such as ALIA's, for example, has around six identified chat rooms which allow chat users to first enter a general area (or room) by typing in a user name of their choice, and then announce to all and sundry that they are about to move to the 'cpd' room, or the 'technicians' room, for example. At the point of announcement, those who wish to follow the protagonist (identified by the user name that appears alongside each of his or her comments) will proceed to the new room (or perhaps not). Indeed, there is often little or no control over who follows, or when. Some chat servers, on the other hand, allow private chat sessions to take place, in which the protagonist is allowed to select who joins them in 'private' conversation. The purpose of the individual rooms (private or otherwise) is to help sort out the different threads of 'conversation' that may take place, and to allow individuals to pick and choose (to a greater or lesser degree) whom they chat with.

But allow me to return to the scenario. Many chat sessions involve a great deal of frantic and furious typing, replete with misspellings, typographic mistakes, illiterate programmer's talk (why is it that so many computer people cannot spell?), and the odd

reference to acronyms that are meaningless to those outside the inner circle. Some of these sessions involve the dreaded chat overlap, where person 'a' is composing a message to person 'b' as person 'b' is composing a response to person 'a', and both messages invariably are sent at the same time, forcing users to untangle the thread and place the comments back into proper context. I have seen new chat users arrive on the scene into what might appear at first glance either a very confused chat environment or, much worse, one that appears to have the users being most impolite and not responding to the right question or comment in the right order. On more than one occasion, I have seen wires get crossed so badly that abuse flows — as it can under the relative impunity of real-time chat, which is (generally) not recorded for posterity.

Similar problems can arise with e-lists, since most list servers do not record the order in which messages should be processed, and sometimes a response can be broadcast to a message before the message itself arrives in all intended recipient's mailboxes. However, the time lag with e-lists allows the opportunity for users to think before they respond, and invariably most potentially inflammatory issues lose much of their excitement by the time someone has been able to formulate a response and press the send key. Not so with chat! Chat not only allows instant responses, but actively encourages it. Inflammatory remarks can be as easily distributed as if the person was standing amongst a group of hecklers in a crowded and noisy hall. Indeed, many see chat as being that style of environment in which the loudest heckler (the fastest typist?) gets centre-stage. It is sometimes difficult to be contemplative in chat sessions, and often difficult to be respectful. However, it pays to think before you type, and it also pays to read what you have typed before you send!

One other thing: some chat sessions allow other users to see what you are typing, and when you type it. My advice is to be very careful when you compose messages. I have software that allows me to see what people type *before* they choose to send. There is nothing more illuminating than watching a typist compose a message, and then retrace their steps to modify an inappropriate word or two, and then cautiously hunt for a word that is more suitable. This can tell me a good deal more than the message itself! Think about the possibilities here... ■

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