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PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR:
Analyzing Modes of Social Interaction
from Prehistory to the Present

It is no secret that Western civilization has been captivated by the
electronic age. Tradition, customs, and etiquette of the past are declining,
resulting in the evolution of social behavior before one’s eyes. For centuries
society relied on the patterns of behavior developed and designed by manners
experts and etiquette writers. Now society has thrown out their years of
advice in exchange for common-sense, when in reality, a new design has
emerged, a technology culture. Today’s patterns of behavior are now being
designed by technology. Society looks upon these new technologies with wonder
and awe, thinking of the inconvenience and inefficiency of the past. People
often assume that newer technology is better, but while technologies may be
making life more convenient, are they really enhancing life experience?

Most striking is technology’s whirlwind affect on personal interaction
and relationships. Social technologies such as texting, tweeting, instant
messaging, e-mailing, blogging, forum posting, and social networking on one
level or another have penetrated everyone’s lives. Merriam-Webster defines
“conversation” as: oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions,
or ideas (Conversation). Technology has redefined what it means to have a
conversation. However, beyond the glowing aura of technology, one must ask
himself or herself, what are these digital designs of communication doing to
one’s relationships? People often follow the patterns of society without being
critical of the behaviors or knowing their true source. Social technologies
have rapidly altered society’s modes of social interaction, often resulting in
detrimental affects on one’s relationships. People must know what has happened
before, simply to understand their own lives. How can they understand the influence of technology if they know nothing of the past? By first examining the history of social interaction one can gain some perspective on the current situation and then become critical of whether what is new is truly better.

EVOLUTION OF COURTESY

Appropriate behavior evolved over time from basic manners to courtesy to etiquette. The ideal changed from the righteous man of biblical times to the man of chivalry of early medieval times to the courtier in the 16th century and finally to the gentleman (Wildeblood 20). Although there were many authors of courtesy books, the history of courtesy will be examined only through the most influential authors. In order to best understand the past patterns of social behavior, it is important to revisit the general evolution of courtesy. This is followed by the history of appropriate social interaction: salutations, conversation, correspondence, and visiting.

The Ancient period, from roughly 3500 BC to 300 AD, saw the birth of writings on manners and the emergence of the righteous man (List; Wildeblood 20). The first recorded writing, The Precepts of Ptahhotep, was conceived around 2000 BC in Ancient Egypt (Aresty 17). Ptahhotep's words of wisdom probably went around orally for generations before being written down, so his original precepts can possibly be dated as early as 2560 BC. In biblical times, the ideal person was the righteous man. Courtesy was often carried to the people in a religious and moral context. Ben Sira outlined this ideal in Ecclesiasticus, part of the original Old Testament, with echoes of Ptahhotep's teachings (19). Between 100 and 500 AD, morality was also outlined for those of the Jewish faith, with the reorganization of Hebrew law in what is known as the Babylonian Talmud (22). Part of the Talmud, Derek 'Erez Rabbah, was devoted to manners and conduct. The Ancient period also gave rise to one of
the most influential manners writings of all time. Around 200 AD in Ancient Rome, *Distiche de Moribus ad Filium*, more commonly known as the Maxims of Cato, was written by Dionysus Cato (Distichs 1). While the original text was not specifically Christian, it became one of the most well known textbooks throughout the entire Christian world (11).

During the Middle Ages, from 300 to 1500 AD, the major focus was common-sense manners, such as do not pick one’s nose or belch in public (List; Aresty). However, by the end of the period, courtesy books, that began to add structure to social interaction, started to appear. Cato’s book from the Ancient period was the most widely used manners book for the majority of the Middle Ages (Aresty 25). The text was copied by monks for hundreds of years, translated into countless languages, and memorized by schoolboys everywhere. Its simplicity and practical nature resulted in its use as a textbook for fifteen centuries in nearly every European country and beyond (Distichs 8; 11). By the 800’s, feudalism and knighthood had taken hold (Glimpses 128). However, the chivalric knight became more of an ideal than a reality (Aresty 43). Knights were a symbol of aggressive masculinity, their purpose: to serve their lord. While chivalric code was invented to make knights keep their word, it simultaneously concealed a code of debased immorality (44). Pagan drives were still mixing in with Judeo-Christian ethics. The illicit love of knightly conduct reflected the old pagan impulses. However, the effort to uphold morality and the righteous man continued in the religious sphere. By the 1000’s Hebrew household manuals started to become commonplace in Jewish homes (25). Outside of these homes and religious life in general, courtesy remained absent. Around 1095, European princes began visiting Constantinople during the Crusades. As a result, a Byzantine influence started to mix with Judeo-Christian ethics and court life grew in sophistication and ceremony. At this point knighthood was corrupt and wild. The majority of the knights
who joined the Crusades did it for adventure and loot (48). This gross lack of morality and refinement in manners partially resulted in the emergence of courtesy books. In the 13th century, Italy came to the forefront on courtesy (27). Brunetto Latini’s *Il Tesoretto*, was a well known courtesy book from the Italians during this period (31). Latini, among other Italians, took manners to a new level. Instruction in civilities began to emerge. While Italy remained the expert, France began writing courtesy books in the 14th century, followed by England in the 15th century (27). By the end of the Middle Ages, after the invention of the printing press in 1440, courtesy books became more specific, moving beyond common-sense manners (57). William Caxton was the first to print such a courtesy book. *The Book of Courtesye* and John Russell’s *The Boke of Nurture* were among those widely used (57; 51). The main function of these earlier courtesy books was to train young male aristocrats to perform their household duties (50).

The Early Modern period, from 1500 to 1700, saw the transition from knight to courtier to gentleman as well as the shift in expertise from the Italians to the French (List; Aresty). With the publication of *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione in the 1520’s, the courtier replaced the knight as the ideal (Aresty 63). There was a new focus on intelligence. A man could be as well with his mind as with his sword. Giovanni Della Casa’s book *Il Galateo*, written in the mid 1500’s, was the first to divide manners into categories, foreshadowing the future etiquette books (68–9). While Italy continued to progress in the sophistication of courtesy, the English were generally coarse and ill-mannered, prompting many authors to publish satires on the appalling English conduct (83). Despite this, Tudor England saw the gentleman replace the courtier as the ideal, as it bridged the gap between medieval times and modern history (76). By the end of the Tudor period, parental advice books, that contained realistic attitudes for society, had
become extremely popular (108). France became the headquarters of civilité, where Louis XIV measured human worth in manners and decorum (101). A touch of elegance was added to the rules of conduct. This elegance could be found on every page of Antoine de Courtin’s Nouveau Traité de la Civilité. This book was the first step toward etiquette books, as it contained precise details for every activity.

During the Modern era, from 1700 to 1970, etiquette experienced some of its highest and lowest points, but by the end had virtually disappeared (List, Aresty). Between 1700 and 1720, writings on conduct were essentially absent (Aresty 132). In 1774 the publication of Lord Chesterfield’s letters to his son, Advice to his Son, personified the new etiquette (149). The humanistic ideal was translated to the more cynical, materialistic society (Wildeblood 37). In the mean time, America for the most part rejected manners and rules of etiquette as incompatible with the land of equality (Aresty 189). Over the course of the industrial revolution, women replaced men at the center of social life (169). In 1836 Charles William Day was the first to spread etiquette outside the elite inner circle (162). After the publication of Etiquette and the Usages of Society, etiquette was no longer “inside” information.

By the 1830’s American manners hit an all time low (195). The hastily gobbled meal became an American symbol and chewing and spitting tobacco was rampant (197-8). Women led the assault on behavior, revising European rules to suit the American attitudes of individualism and egalitarianism (201-2). In the 30 years before the Civil War, 67 etiquette books were published, with Eliza Leslie’s The Behavior Book being one of the most popular (201). Leslie, along with other authors, continued the legacy began by Courtin, covering a wide range of situations in minute detail. The encyclopedic coverage continued with Mary Elizabeth Sherwood’s Manners and Social Usages of the late 1800’s (261-2). Sherwood was considered an oracle of behavior of her time.
By the end of the Victorian era, society had become extravagant with intense social competition causing a new craze for etiquette (258–9). Between 1900 and 1910 the huge preoccupation with etiquette books continued (275); however, there was now a new concern with the changing female youth (276). Women began to enter business and athletics, wear more mannish clothes, and use slang (276–7). These changes only intensified in the 1920’s as old standards began to crumble under the impact of the automobile, prohibition, postwar euphoria, and cinema, resulting in a decline in etiquette books (286). Emily Post saw the need for a sensible updated etiquette book. With the publication of *Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage* in 1922, Emily Post became synonymous with etiquette (284–5). However, by 1970 and the beginning of the Post Modern period, wide use of etiquette books was nearly extinct.

SALUTATIONS

Conversation is the key to social interaction, but before conversation comes greetings and salutations. The evolution of verbal greetings as well as physical gestures will be explored. Throughout history, for the most part, appropriate salutations consisted of signs and words of respect, goodwill, and concern for others. Their development in complexity and increasing coverage in etiquette books reveals their importance to society.

Prehistoric times reveal that the first greetings arose out of suspicion and fear. The verbal greeting originated when man first encountered a stranger (Wildeblood 125). Suspicion and curiosity led to questions, which were the precursors to the modern “how do you do?” The handshake can also be traced back to Prehistoric man’s anxiety. Men would hold out their empty hand to show they were unarmed, then quickly grasp hands so neither could grab their weapon (Brasch 71). Eventually this led to the extension of the right hand, the weapon hand, as a sign of goodwill (Eichler 157). Another physical
gesture, doffing the hat, can be traced back to the first civilizations (159). The Assyrians would strip their captives naked to show their subjugation. Over time it became restricted to just the upper body and eventually just the hat. Thus, removing the hat came to mean “I am your obedient servant,” a sign of deference and respect (Brasch 72).

In Ancient times, proper salutations became more defined, influenced by civilization’s hierarchy and religion. Subjugation toward superiors and respect and concern for others became dominant themes. In early civilizations it was necessary to kneel and bow to superiors to show deference and respect (Wildeblood 126). In Ancient Greece, the appropriate verbal greeting “be well” and farewell “be strong” introduced the theme of concern for others. A kiss of welcome was the customary physical gesture as well as clasping the right hand in friendship or to pledge honor (130). In biblical times, the religious influence was apparent in the common greetings “the lord be with you,” “the lord bless thee,” and “shalom,” meaning peace, all a reflection of the theme of concern for others (126). By this time, superior deference was at an extremely high point. Complete prostration was the norm (128). One was expected to kneel and bow face to the ground and clasp the knees or feet of the superior. Ben Sira wrote on the importance of respect toward superiors, “bow thy head to a great man” (Sira).

In the Middle Ages, the greetings continued to reflect religion, concern, and respect. Verbal greetings included “sir, god you keep” and “sir, ye be welcome” (131). Sir could be replaced with ye lady, ye damoiselle, fellow, or friend depending on the person. Men would bow and women would curtsy while doffing their hat or hood as it was considered bad manners to hide one’s face (133–5). In bowing, the knee only touched the ground for royalty or nobility. The women’s curtsy was just like the bow except the feet stayed together and both knees bent. The importance of respect continued to be highlighted in
courtesy books. Russell wrote, “Of youre souerayne take no leue; but low to hyffl alowt,” meaning bow to one’s lord (Russell 66). At this time, a handclasp was not used in greeting, but as a pledge or honor (137). A kiss was used in greeting among all, to show one’s concern and goodwill.

By the Elizabethan era of the Early Modern period, the bow and curtsy had proper angles and feet placement (165). The way in which salutations were performed could be considered more or less polite. While the methods became more complex, the intentions remained the same, to show respect and concern. Bows were always done on the left foot, the side of the heart, to show reference from one’s heart (167). The hand kiss was high in fashion at this point, yet another method of admiration and reverence (168). Verbal greetings continued to reflect the same themes. “Your very humble servant” was a common and appropriate greeting in the 1600’s (197). At this time, the bow had changed in form, but not in meaning. It changed from taking the leg back to taking the leg forward and bending the upper body (196). Two forms emerged: a more formal bow with extreme forward inclination and a slighter bow in passing salutation. The curtsy still consisted of bending both knees, but it also took on two forms: one for greeting superiors, and one for passing salutation (197). So the bow and curtsy were used to show respect toward many levels of society, not just superiors. Antoine de Courtin highlighted both the importance and meaning behind salutations when he wrote, “...the Way or Precedence is by giving the right hand to him you would honour... should a Man neglect to pull off his Hat, and salute another Person who had done it to him (tho’ perhaps his Condition was inferiour) he would be thought very defective in his Education” (Courtin 79; 11). Here, Courtin noted the importance of salutations as a sign of respect, even to those who are inferior.

The Modern era saw the highest development of salutations as well as the disappearance of the bow and curtsy. While religion and subjugation had
completely vanished, themes of respect and concern endured till the end of the period. The traditional bow and curtsy became an art in the 18th century, but eventually disappeared in the 19th, except for formal occasions (225; 248). For everyday greeting, a lady would bow slightly while a gentleman raised his hat (249). The handshake was also an accepted physical gesture of greeting (252). Day highlighted the necessity of courteous greeting, “Never nod to a lady in the street, neither be satisfied with touching your hat, but take it off, —it is a courtesy her sex demands” (Day 122). Eliza Leslie and Mary Elizabeth Sherwood both devoted an entire chapter to the proper way of introducing people. These three author’s extensive advice on introductions further proves its importance as a sign of respect and kindness toward others. Sherwood wrote, “In America it is the fashion to shake hands, and most women, if desirous of being cordial, extend their hands even on a first introduction; but it is, perhaps, more elegant to make a bow only, at a first introduction… the gentleman bows first. There the matter of the raising the hat is also important. An American gentleman takes his hat quite off to a lady” (48–9). Like Day and countless other experts, Sherwood noted the importance of being courteous and showing respect toward others.

At the beginning of the 20th century “how do you do?” and “how are you?” were appropriate salutations, showing concern for the individual (Post 8). Emily Post wrote three separate chapters for introductions, greetings, and salutations in the original edition of her book. Despite Post’s lengthy coverage of the subject, the 20th century saw the decline in salutations. She even hints to the decline in courtesy on this matter when she writes, “On very informal occasions, it is the present fashion to greet an intimate friend with “Hello!” This seemingly vulgar salutation is made acceptable by the tone in which it is said” (Post 15). In this passage, Post referenced the lack of meaning behind the word hello, whereas the themes of respect and concern must
be inflected in intonation.

Today, for slightly more formal situations people still use “hello” and “how are you?,” but the common verbal greeting has degraded even further. A mere “hey” or “what’s up?” suffices. The handshake is only used for formal introductions, and even then is dying out among younger generations. Most noticeably, the curtsy, bow, and doffing of the hat are completely antiquated. The themes of respect, goodwill, and concern for the well-being of others through salutations, while they dominated both verbal and physical gestures of greeting for roughly fifty centuries, are now virtually absent from everyday life.

CONVERSATION

Now conversation itself will be examined: appropriate behavior while speaking, as well as appropriate or inappropriate topics of conversation. Although the importance of conversation went up and down throughout history, several underlying points remained the same for centuries: speak clearly and pleasantly without swearing, speak of subjects that are of interest and pleasing to those listening, pay attention to those speaking, avoid dispute and speaking of vulgar or indiscreet matters, do not lie, and most importantly always think before speaking, do not babble or say just anything that comes to mind.

Those first questions of greeting in Prehistoric times led to more questions and answers (Wildeblood 125). Those questions and answers blended together to create conversation.

In Ancient times there was an emphasis on holding one’s tongue (Aresty 19). Ptahhotep stressed this point, “Only speak when you have something worth saying” and “Your silence is more useful than chatter... Speaking is harder than all other work” (Precepts). He also warned against spreading gossip and
rumors, arguing, and losing one’s temper. Years later, Ben Sira wrote similar advice, “Praise not a man before he speaketh, for this is the trial of men” (Sira). In these times, people were urged not to speak their mind. The advice for the righteous man also brought forth other themes that would continue for centuries: one should not lie, swear, or speak of indiscreet matters. According to Ben Sira, babblers should be scolded and warned.

For people of the Middle Ages, Cato wrote, “Try not with words the talker to outdo; On all is speech bestowed: good sense on few” (Distichs 17). All throughout the Middle Ages there was still a focus on holding one’s tongue and always thinking before speaking. The advice to avoid quarrels and lies also continued into this period (15). By the end of the Middle Ages, courtesy experts advised on being eloquent with smooth speech, not talking too loud or too soft, speaking with authority and clear pronunciation, and not letting one’s eye wander by looking at the person with whom one is speaking (Book 12; Latini 83; Russell 24; 17-8). They also advised to listen and learn from others and most importantly, to speak little (Book 16; Latini 81; Russell 27). However if one must speak, first form one’s thoughts in the mind before voicing them (Book 21; Latini 81; Russell 39).

The Early Modern period saw the development of conversation into an art. As it evolved in style and elegance, the core values remained the same. In the beginning of the period, there was a new emphasis on the importance of conversation (Aresty 63). This was largely due to Baldassare Castiglione. Conversation became an art and small talk became a social grace (65). Opinionated and intelligent conversations were now allowed. Although still bound by codes of deference, one could respect one’s own values when conversing with superiors. Castiglione advised against false flattery, lying, boasting, and speaking of indiscreet matters, continuing earlier themes (Castiglione 119). Later, Della Casa also continued with similar advice from
past centuries. He cautioned one’s speech not to be vain or filthy, not to speak in a harsh, shrill, soft, or loud voice, not to speak slowly, not to complain, be angry, or babble, think before speaking, and to speak plainly and not on matters that are out of place (Della 29-30; 85-6; 89; 94; 75). Conversation began its ascension to the highest art in France in 1607 when the first salon was established at the Hotel Rambouillet (Aresty 140). These salons were gatherings of nobles, literary people, and brilliant minds to practice the art of conversation. The bourgeoisie copied these salons adding a certain polish and finesse to conversation (Eichler 144). Their king, Louis XIV, held the art of conversation above all other accomplishments. There was a new emphasis on playfulness with a goal to please others (Craveri 345). Beneath the new layer of elegance and flattery, experts advised the same themes on conversation from the past. Courtin described the ideal conversationalist, “…for we must not only have a good Fancy, and a pleasant Wit… But we are to think before-hand what we are to say, and when we do speak, to bring forth something that is new, smart, or sublime, answerable to the Quality of the Person to whom we speak, and not impertinent to our Subject” (Courtin 192).

In the Modern era, the rules of conversation became increasingly complex, but again the underlying values remained steadfast. On conversation, Chesterfield instructed his son to always pay attention to the person who is speaking, when in disagreement speak in a soft and gentle tone, avoid arguments, and never talk about scandal (Chesterfield 50; 56; 70). Later, in the 19th century, Day wrote, “…the object of conversation is to entertain and amuse” (Day 81). He also, as countless others before him, advised against disputes and talking loudly (81; 90). In America, during this period, Eliza Leslie pointed out, “…to be a good conversationalist, you must have a well-stored mind, originality of ideas, and a retentive memory” (Leslie 210). Also, one must have a clear voice, avoid argument, never talk about horrors,
physical ailments, or disease, never lie, and avoid slang (186; 196; 206; 216). Mary Elizabeth Sherwood gave advice on speaking in a pleasant and sweet voice with correct pronunciation and advised against talking about scandal (Sherwood 326; 325). At the beginning of the 20th century, Emily Post instructed readers against being a chatterer, a pest, or a bore, by simply thinking before speaking, echoing the advice from centuries past (Post 41). Post wrote, “Try to do and say those things only which will be agreeable to others” (41). She also advised against creating contradiction and argument, and speaking of ills, misfortune, or unpleasantness (46). She emphasized the importance of the listener and paying attention to those who are speaking (48).

Through expert after expert over the course of Western history, several themes on conversation continued to be repeatedly stressed: speak clearly and pleasantly without swearing, speak of subjects that are of interest and pleasing to those listening, pay attention to those speaking, avoid argument, scandal, indiscretions, and lying, and most importantly always think before speaking. In 2010, the art of conversation sounds like a distant and silly ideal. Today, people are “real.” The discourse, especially online, knows no bounds. Any subject matter is discussed, arguments are not avoided, sometimes they are even sought out, and the use of profanity and slang is becoming commonplace.

CORRESPONDENCE

Throughout time, societies have discovered alternate modes of communication: how to send messages when talking face-to-face is not possible and also how to preserve one’s thoughts. Since letter-writing became common, the overall trend was a neat presentation combined with a conversational style of writing. Letters were seen as a direct reflection of the writer. From the beginning they were an important means of communication, in which style, form,
and content were both thoughtful and purposeful.

Alternative modes of conversation began with the invention of writing at the start of the Ancient period. In the 3400’s BC, the Sumerians created cuneiform and shortly after this Egyptian hieroglyphs emerged (Brasch 271). The alphabet then evolved from these hieroglyphs, to the Phoenician, Greek, and finally Latin alphabet, which emerged in 8th century Rome. (Eichler 290–1).
The origin of letter-writing is unknown, but it was common among the Ancient Greeks (Perelman 97). The use of couriers to send royal letters and messages dates back to early eastern states, where the first postal system can most likely be attributed to Ancient Persia in the 500’s BC (Roberts 39). Here, the Princess Atossa may have been the first to write a letter on paper (2).

By the 200’s BC, human messengers on foot and horseback were commonplace. As bureaucracy grew and kingdoms expanded, the importance of letters as a means of communication rose (Perelman 98). However, it was still confined to political and ecclesiastical discourse.

In the early Middle Ages, sending letters was expensive and unreliable, but letter use continued to grow as a vital means of communication. With this growth, a new concern emerged for the art of letter-writing. As the letter became a representation of oneself, it prompted works on proper form and composition. By the mid 1400’s personal letters were becoming common among the literate and upper classes (Key). Soon literacy began to spread beyond the elites with the invention of the printing press in 1440, due to the new ability to mass-distribute information (Aresty 57). As literacy rose, so did the practice of writing letters.

The Early Modern period saw a steep increase in letter-writing. This occurred, in part, by the postal service in England being made available to the public in 1635 (Key). As letters started to expand to everyday use, courtesy experts began to go into greater detail on proper form, style, and
Courtin was the first of the experts examined to give advice on letter-writing, “The same Rules to be observ’d in our Behavior and Discourse, are to be observ’d in our Writing...” (Courtin 118). He explained that the letter should be like a conversation. Just as how one behaves in conversation is vital to others’ perceptions of oneself, the letter is no different. The form, style, and content of the letter is a direct reflection of the writer. This is emphasized by Courtin’s in depth explanation of correct formats, proper styles, subjects, and numerous example letters (119–83).

Letter-writing reached its highest point of development in the 17th and 18th centuries and became commonplace by the Modern era (Eichler 302). On letters, Chesterfield advised, “It is of the utmost importance to write letters well” (Chesterfield 46). He stressed the importance of neatness and explained that letters should be written as if in conversation with the correspondent (47). In addition, many books containing example letters started to appear at this time (Aresty 248). They included very specific types of letters, which reflects the society’s further desire to represent themselves properly. Eliza Leslie devoted 23 pages to the etiquette of letter-writing, which stressed the same themes from past writers. Like Chesterfield and Courtin, Leslie noted the nature of the letter, “The ‘wording’ of your letter should be as much like conversation as possible...” (166). Her intense detail from appropriate papers and inks to how to fold the paper stresses the importance of the letter as a representation of oneself as well as the intense desire at the time to make that representation as perfect as possible (150–73). Great emphasis was placed on the neatness of the letter.

New communication technologies began to emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries. In 1714 the first typewriter was invented, followed by the electric telegraph in 1831, Morse code in 1835, and the telephone in 1876 (History). The popularity of letter-writing began to decline with these new technologies
Mary Elizabeth Sherwood devoted four separate chapters to correspondence, but lamented the changing times. She wrote of the dying epistolary art, “However, the electric telegraph and cheap postage and postal-cards may have been said, in a way, to have ruined correspondence in the old sense; lovers and fond mothers doubtless still write long letters, but the business of the letter-writer proper is at an end. The writing of notes has, however, correspondingly increased” (Sherwood 159-60). Her mention of notes here foreshadowed the drastic change in the nature of writing. In the 20th century, the art and personal nature of the letter continued to die out. Nevertheless, etiquette writers continued to cover letters in minute detail. Emily Post gave correspondence encyclopedic coverage, expounding the same themes as past centuries. Post writes, “The letter you write, whether you realize it or not, is always a mirror which reflects your appearance, taste and character” (Post 495).

With the advent of the Post Modern period and the technological revolution, letter-writing experienced a severe decline. The personal computer came about in the 1970’s, e-mail originated from technologies created in 1965, cellphones arose in the 1980’s, and the World Wide Web, text-messaging, blogging, and social networking all appeared in the 1990’s (Boyd; History; Thompson; Urman; Vleck). People started to spend more and more time online. MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter emerged in the 2000’s, coinciding with an explosion in social networking popularity (Social). By 2005, personal letters made up less than 1% of the mail handled by the post office (Fallows). In 2008, a national survey revealed that 4 out of 5 teens carry a wireless device (Cell). Surveys in 2009 revealed that 75% of online Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 belong to a social network and on average, American adults spend almost 4 hours a day online (Knight; Social).

Today, personal letter-writing has virtually disappeared. They are so
rare that the surprise of finding one in the mail is like receiving a present. E-mail, texting, and social networking are the new means of correspondence. These messages no longer reflect the past themes on form, style, and content. While one’s messages are still a reflection of oneself, the reflections have greatly changed. With messages able to be sent at the click of a button, the original thoughtfulness and purpose behind personal messages are gone.

VISITING

Finally, the last subject to be explored in the evolution of appropriate social interaction is the custom of visiting. Throughout history, visiting was an important activity in order to stay in favor with one’s friends and superiors, and to show respect and concern for others.

From the beginning, visiting was a homage paying activity (Eichler 310). In Prehistoric times, members of the tribe would visit the “Strong Man,” “Wise Man,” the tribal leader, etc. to give gifts and win approval. This eventually evolved into the ceremonious visit, to show homage and respect to superiors. The idea of the visiting card can also be traced back to this time (Wildeblood 254). When visiting neighboring tribes, men would yell or build a fire to warn the tribe of their arrival (Eichler 317). This showed they were not enemies trying to sneak up on them.

In the Ancient period, visiting became more than an homage paying activity, adding the element of empathy. Rabbis of the Ancient Israelites would visit to comfort the sick and console the bereaved (Eichler 309). Ben Sira advised the righteous man to visit the sick (Sira). The practice of visiting was adopted by the Egyptians and soon spread to Europe (Eichler 310). In writings on manners as early as Cato, the visit was advocated as a sign of respect. He promoted frequent visits to the elected magistrates (Distichs).

With the introduction of the feudal system in the Middle Ages, visiting
continued to function as a sign of respect to superiors as well as a way to stay in their favor. Vassals were required to visit their suzerians, who in turn visited their lords, who visited the king (Eichler 312). By the late Middle Ages, visiting also started to become a sign of friendship. John Russell instructed his readers to welcome friends into their homes with gladness (Russell 44).

By the Elizabethan era of the Early Modern period, courtesy visits were important for congratulations and condolences (Wildeblood 171). Giovanni Della Casa wrote on the importance of visiting, “If you doe not visite him at home at his house : then you knowe not your dutie” (Della 28). Visiting continued to grow in social importance until the 17th century, when it became a vital social duty (Wildeblood 202). In 17th century France, the ceremonious visit was important for personal social advancement (Aresty 104). It is here that the visiting card came into general use as an established fashion (Eichler 318). On visiting, Courtin wrote, “...a Person... must know, that in some Cases it would be great want of good Breeding not to pay his Visits, especially where he has any design of continuing, or contracting a Friendship” (Courtin 105). He went on to emphasize the absolute necessity of visiting superiors in order to remain in their favor, the same theme from past centuries.

The Modern era saw visiting intensify with complex rules of protocol. While the behavior became elaborate, the purpose behind the visits continued to reflect respect and recognition. In the first half of the period, visits changed into more informal friendly meetings (Wildeblood 228). However, the ceremonious visit remained a custom for marriage, birth, or mourning, reflecting the lasting theme of homage and respect. Social visits reached a new extreme in the 19th century and daily rounds of social visits became customary in order to remain in favor with one’s acquaintances (Aresty 173). Visits between intimate friends always took place in the morning and ceremonious
calls occurred in the late afternoon (171). Ceremonious calls, guarded by heavy protocol, were for repayment of a previous call, congratulations, condolences, or thank you’s for recent entertainment. In the mid 19th century, etiquette books included strict rules of appropriate behavior for these visits. Eliza Leslie explained, exhaustively, the appropriate behavior for every type of visit, attesting to society’s emphasis on its importance as a social duty to show respect and concern for others (Leslie 9-52).

By the end of the 19th century, social calling began to change (Aresty 229). Mary Elizabeth Sherwood, in her chapter on visiting, explained the changing nature of visits, but continued to highlight its importance, “The decay of social visiting is a cause of regret to all the old-fashioned people who remember how agreeable it was... Ceremonious visiting is the machinery by which an acquaintance is kept up...” (Sherwood 58). As society grew and cities expanded, visiting became difficult and calling cards essential. No longer able to visit so many acquaintances, calling cards were used to maintain them. Instead of having an actual visit, a card with one’s name on it was left at the home. As Sherwood hinted, by the 1920’s the ceremonious call was obsolete and the use of calling cards was dying out (Eichler 314). A few “duty calls” remained for deaths, marriages, or after being entertained by someone, remnants of its purpose to show respect. Emily Post noted the changes, “…the principal use of a visiting card, at least the one for which it was originally invented—to be left as an evidence of one person’s presence at the house of another—is going gradually out of ardent favor in fashionable circles... punctilious card-leaving, visiting, and ’days at home’ have gone out of fashion in New York...” (Post 71; 78). Despite Post’s in depth chapter on visits and visiting cards and her insistence on its importance as a means to show respect and keep up acquaintances, the social call continued to die.

In the Post Modern period, visiting and calling cards cease to exist.
Visiting at each other’s homes is rare among adults and no longer used as a means of social advancement. Today, social advancement is largely a topic concerned with profession and wealth. Showing up at someone’s house unannounced can even be seen as rude. The ceremonious visit is completely dead, where a simple phone call suffices for congratulations or condolences. Along with the loss of the themes of respect and concern in salutations, these gestures have become even more rare with the loss of the social call.

FROM COURTESY TO TECHNOLOGY

While this is a mere snippet and drastic summary of the 5,000 years and millions of pages of advice written by courtesy experts, it is evident that the underlying themes behind social interactions, despite their increases and decreases in complexity, remained relatively steadfast. These underlying themes nourished rich and respectful relationships. With the decline of writings on courtesy and etiquette, society simultaneously witnessed a decline in the importance of the art of salutations and conversation, traditional modes of correspondence, and the necessity of visiting and social calls, as well as the underlying themes and values behind these modes of behavior. Through history one can clearly see that the decline in courtesy was, at least partially, a direct affect of various new technologies, such as the automobile, electric telegraph, telephone, cinema, and new social technologies like cellphones, e-mail, and social networking. Without much debate and despite the advice of these experts, these technologies were immediately embraced, thus resulting in strong affects on the patterns of social behavior. Are these changes for the better or worse? Is one’s own common-sense really superior to centuries and centuries of expert advice? Has this new technology culture brought society to a better place for social relationships?
While technology has some beneficial affects, it can be argued that the
detriments outweigh the positives, especially when it comes to relationships.
Today’s technology culture has transformed social interaction for the worse.
Outside of social technologies, real world relationships are experiencing
negative life impacts. The detriments of technology will be argued through
various research, studies, and critics. Technology in general will be
discussed, followed by the negative repercussions of social technologies.

The majority of society fails to realize that technology has both
positive and negative effects. Neil Postman says, “A new technology sometimes
creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates.
But it is never one–sided” (Postman, Informing). Marshall McLuhan’s criticism
adds to this duality. He wrote that every technology is an amplification of
man’s abilities, but an amputation of another (McLuhan 42). For example, an
extension of the feet is the automobile, which amputates walking culture. The
trade-offs result in winners and losers, where some people benefit and others
do not (Postman: Informing). Postman writes, “Should the losers grow skeptical,
the winners dazzle them with the wondrous feats of computers…” (Postman,
Informing). Winners create personifying language for digital components of the
computer, such as “desktop,” “Facebook wall,” and “virus,” in an attempt to get
humans to relate to these machines (Postman, Technopoly 113). However, this is
just another layer in technology’s false seduction of today’s culture.

New technologies are more convenient and practical. When people can
do things quicker, they then have more time for fun and leisure. Technology
allows for mass–production and cheaper items so people can live at “higher
standards of living.” The internet provides instant information, keeping
everyone constantly informed. Individuals can now access new things otherwise
unavailable. People are connected in a global network and can communicate at
anytime, almost anywhere. The internet allows anyone to share their thoughts with the world. Now everyone can have a voice.

With this positive emphasis, technology has warped into a false idol (Postman, Informing). Society tends to look the other way when it comes to negative effects of technology. Industry creates pollution, climate change, and waste. Mass-production can lead to items of poorer quality, in contrast to the dedication and craftsmanship of the past. Genetic modification of the food chain leads to cheaper foods, at the detriment of the animals. Examples like these only support the notion that technology is the antithesis of life. Postman stresses, “The best way to view technology is as a strange intruder” (Postman, Five). The problem is that the majority of the world is not thinking in this way.

When one technology amputates another, values immediately shift to those of the new technology (Postman, Informing). Postman postulates on the computer’s values, “… the computer person values information, not knowledge, certainly not wisdom. Indeed, in the computer age, the concept of wisdom may vanish altogether” (Postman, Five). However, while information may be valued, it has become virtually worthless because it is so abundant. Since the information is readily available at any time, impetus to commit the information to memory is decreased. In addition, internet reliability and accuracy goes unchecked. Postman notes, “The computer and its information cannot answer any of the fundamental questions we need to address to make our lives more meaningful and humane…” (Postman, Informing). The computer does not enhance life experience; it distracts people from it.

Technology can lead to personal problems, such as health issues, anxiety, addiction, loneliness, and negative life impacts. More leisure time can lead to inactivity and obesity, especially when that leisure time is spent with technologies such as television, the internet, video gaming, etc.
Technologies such as these, have led to a neglect of literature among today’s youth, an example of society’s shifting values. A constant connection means the ability to constantly work (Hughes). One can never really get away and disconnect. Some even feel a sense of panic when they do not have cell service or the internet connection is down. Many have formed a dependence on their devices; a dependence that can be described as addiction (Trusty 4).

In a study on virtual addiction, David Greenfield revealed a pattern of compulsive internet use for some participants as well as strong indications that the internet can be easily abused, especially in certain content areas such as: pornography, gambling, stock trading, shopping/auctioning, and cybersexual areas (Greenfield). The results supported earlier studies. He writes in summary, “It should be remembered that unless technology improves the quality of our lives, it is of no benefit” (Greenfield).

Abundant research has been conducted on loneliness and internet use, all reaching similar findings. A study on undergraduate students from 2009 “showed that individuals who were lonely or did not have good social skills could develop strong compulsive Internet use behaviors resulting in negative life outcomes (e.g., harming other significant activities such as work, school, or significant relationships) instead of relieving their original problems. Such augmented negative outcomes were expected to isolate individuals from healthy social activities and lead them into more loneliness” (Kim 451).

Similarly, several studies have been conducted on the relationship between internet use, psychosocial development, and negative life impact. A study from 2007 on undergraduate students found that high levels of technology use for entertainment purposes was associated with an overall less healthy lifestyle (Lloyd 492). They write, “...current study show that students’ psychosocial development regarding peer relationships is not positively impacted by the use of technology. In fact, the use of Facebook, an online
tool designed to connect students with one another... has a negative effect on students’ peer relationships” (490). These studies lead into the examination of social technologies.

SOCIAL TECHNOLOGIES

Social technologies have resulted in a huge impact on human relationships. These new digital modes of behavior have permanently altered the way people interact.

As seen through the studies on loneliness, the internet has an isolating effect, which is ironic considering it is also a form of connection between one another. Individuals sit at home chatting through a monitor instead of interacting with people face-to-face. Digital communication presents a paradox, “...one can be closer because some form of contact is experienced and further apart because that contact serves to create a less accurate representation of the participants and their messages. The absence of the characteristics associated with face-to-face communication can result in a loss of fidelity and an increase in the psychological distance between interactants” (McQuillen 617). Society is getting to the point where people do not have to interact in the physical. Are these real conversations? There is no intonation in an e-mail, text message, or online post. Doesn’t intonation, body language, and facial expressions make up half of the experience in a conversation? Also, growing dependence on technology is allowing everyone to become more self-sufficient, which allows the individual to become more isolated and reclusive (622). The need for social contact can be fulfilled by social media, but these are not necessarily real friendships.

Online relationships allow: an idealized self, selective representation of oneself by presenting only favorable aspects of oneself, and time to plan and edit responses, whereas face-to-face conversation places greater demands
on cognitive resources (620). Courtesy experts advised for centuries against being insincere and false as well as the importance of one’s messages as a reflection of oneself. In contrast, online relationships facilitate infidelity or inaccuracy, lying by omission. Stephen Benson summarizes, “Any form of communication other than direct face-to-face contact is an impoverished form of communication... the very means and processes of communicating reinforce separation between and isolation of the communicating parties... The isolation which in years past was primarily a function of distance and geography is now a function of increased choice” (Benson 32–3). The behavior of today is an extreme deviation from the days when visiting friends was a daily activity and thoughtful letters spanned the gap when distance stood in the way. Since technology has been so ingrained in modern culture, people participate in these new behaviors willingly and gladly, not realizing that forming social relationships through the Internet leads to social interaction that is inferior to traditional face-to-face conversation (Cummings 108).

Despite expert advice, it is clear that today’s forms of social interaction, such as social networking, facilitate superficiality. As selective representation can lead to superficial identities, these superficial identities can lead to superficial relationships. In the study on loneliness, the authors write, “…users are spending time online, often investing in online relationships, which are artificial and weak, at the expense of real life relationships” (Morahan 660). In the study on Facebook mentioned earlier, many students reported having friends that they barely encountered outside of Facebook, “…maintaining relationships that may otherwise be only ephemera” (Muise 441; 442). Are these people really friends? The answer is no. They are artificial and void of real meaning. As seen through the ages, friendships, in order to be maintained, required frequent personal visits. Seeing one another enriched one’s relationships. Today’s abounding superficial contacts are a
direct repercussion of the usurpation of visiting and social calls by social technologies.

The internet is not the only social technology that has altered society’s behavior. Constant connection extends outside the home through the use of cellular devices. Andrew Trusty quotes Christine Rosen, “‘the ease of obtaining instant advice encourages cellphone users to respond to any uncertainty, crucial or trivial, by dialing instead of deciding’… cellphones are eroding self-reliance and creating self-doubt” (Trusty 2). Mobile devices also result in the illusion that everyone can be reached at anytime. People become angry when others do not answer their cellphones. The perception of constant connection is making society more and more impatient. Cellphones introduce private space into public space (3). Onlookers and eavesdroppers learn about other people’s lives, often details the cellphone user would not have shared face-to-face. This brings up the issue of privacy.

Expert after expert advised against revealing indiscretions or private matters, but contrary to their hundreds of years of advice, privacy is decreasing in importance in this Post Modern era. Another study conducted in 2009 among undergraduate Facebook users revealed the level of disclosure online. The study states, “Results indicated that participants perceived that they disclosed more information about themselves on Facebook than in general… Participants were very likely to have posted information such as their birthday and e-mail address… pictures such as a profile picture, pictures with friends, and even pictures at parties and drinking with friends” (Christofides 341). The study also concluded that disclosure was an aspect of online identity construction (343). The amount of disclosure was positively correlated with the desire for popularity. The study states, “the risks of limiting access to personal information become greater than the risks of disclosure, because when limiting access, the individual also limits the potential for identity
construction and thus potentially reduces his or her popularity” (343). So according to today’s youth, information disclosure is necessary for acceptance into society. A stark contrast to centuries past, when disclosure of this nature would have resulted in the opposite of acceptance. Modesty was highly valued. Today’s vulgar exposure rids relationships of mystery and intrigue. The study went on to explain that while many are uncomfortable with employers seeing this information, they do not attempt to adjust who sees it; the researchers hypothesize that privacy is not worth the sacrifice in popularity.

While people discover details about others lives that might not have been revealed in a face-to-face interaction, online information can also be misinterpreted. Another study on Facebook “…revealed that increased Facebook use significantly predicts Facebook related jealousy” (Muise 441). Information out of context is easily misinterpreted. These misinterpretations can lead to increased jealousy and negative impacts on relationships in the real world. Traditional modes of conversation occur face-to-face or in direct letters between individuals, greatly decreasing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Without a doubt, reading other’s messages, not necessarily intended for one’s eyes, would be considered scandalous to experts of the past.

The slogan on the Facebook home page states, “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook). Since when did people need help connecting and sharing with the people in their lives? MySpace states, “a place for friends” (MySpace). Did society not have a place for friends before? The irony in these slogans is evident in the negative life impacts on relationships being revealed by numerous studies on these social networking sites. The alienation of digital communication stands in extreme contrast to the traditional “place for friends” of past centuries, the intimate space of one’s home.
To summarize, technology has both positive and negative effects, which result in winners and losers. Technology has become mythic, worshiped like a false god, despite its true nature as a contradiction to human life. Technology is not merely an addition to culture, but an attempt to take over and become the culture. As new technologies replace old technologies, society’s ideologies and values are permanently altered. Social technologies are a disconnecting form of contact, resulting in increasing isolation of individuals. Online communication, identities, and relationships are inferior and lacking when compared to real-life face-to-face interaction. The very nature of social technologies promote information disclosure and superficiality.

So is technology’s convenience and illusion of leisure a fair trade off for all of these consequences?

CONCLUSION

All new things replace old things. The birth of America gave rise to a new sense of individualism, but with this new personal freedom society lost some of its sense of community. The sense of community has been further estranged. From the beginning of humanity, communities were vital. Primitive man found collective groups and tribes a success in compared to living alone. Human instinct is to work together, so why do people continue to allow technology to further isolate them? While many might think that technology is bringing back community through social networking, this is a false face. How many people sit at home talking to their friends through a computer instead of meeting face-to-face? How many offices across the world are filled with cubicles of isolated individuals with their computers? Jeffrey McQuillen writes, “Tools are intended to make one’s work easier. However, the increased ease and time saved, afford people the opportunity to become less interdependent and more
autonomous and self-reliant. For example, where once women gathered at the water’s edge to do the laundry in social groups outside the home; men and women now go to the laundry room and turn on the washing machine, quickly returning to the comfort of the living room, kitchen, or den. The tools that were originally designed to aid in the execution of some activity have come to replace that activity” (McQuillen 671). Technology is a tool for people to use. People must not let it use them.

Modern American values are those of individual freedom and being critical in order to make one’s own informed personal choices. Is the use of technology such an informed choice? Did society decide to become devoted to technology because that is what people wanted? Behind the screen barrier people can avoid embarrassment when they feel awkward and nervous in real social interactions. The purpose of etiquette is to help people avoid embarrassment, by teaching people how to behave, they can be at ease in all situations. Perhaps, with a new surge in etiquette books they will not have to hide behind the online interactions. They can feel more at ease among people instead of most at ease with their computer.
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