The Media Equation: How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Pla

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The Media Equation

How People Treat Computers, Television, and New Media Like Real People and Places

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Politeness

The three-term mayor of New York City, Ed Koch, used to ask a simple question: "How am I doing?" His question closed speeches, greeted crowds, and made a great sound bite. Imagine that the mayor, exuding enthusiasm and smiling brightly, turned to you with his question, "How am I doing?" Is your first impulse a critical evaluation of his political agenda? Likely not. "You're doing swell, Mr. Mayor!"

Imagine that in the evening, a pollster from the *New York Times* calls with the same question. "How is the mayor doing?" Without hesitation, your answer might be more truthful: "Not so well."

What explains your two different responses? Was the first a lie? Not really. Instead, it was *polite*, a virtue not a vice, even in New York City. Trying to make people happy is the norm, and it generally works well. When the mayor asks about how he's doing, he's implicitly telling listeners what would make him happy—receiving a positive answer. When someone *else* asks the same question, however, the mayor's feelings are not at stake; honesty prevails.

We don't all carry an etiquette handbook, but everyone seems to know good manners. Although violations exist, most people are polite most of the time. The level of conformity is striking, a fact blurred by vivid memory for occasional lapses. Politeness is ubiquitous, and it's practiced automatically. Communities encourage it, and the rules are a centerpiece of childhood socialization. Politeness, even more than early mastery of letters and numbers, is a genuine mark of an educated child, as any kindergarten teacher can attest.

The example of the mayor's question helps identify one important politeness rule. When people ask about themselves, they will usually receive more positive responses than when an independent person asks the same question. That is, if the person in the question also asks it, politeness reigns.

There is still some chance, however, that a response could be negative. After all, the mayor just asked a question; he didn't give explicit instructions about what the response should be, nor did he mention the response that he would like to hear. The desired response must still be inferred. This is likely, but something could still go awry, especially if the respondent were tempted to think too much about politics. If you were the mayor, is there a way to gain even greater control?

Yes, there is. Imagine the response if the mayor looks you in the eye and says, "I think I'm doing great! How do you think I'm doing?" Now the stakes are even higher. The mayor isn't relying on an assumption that you will be polite. He's giving you an explicit prompt about just what you should say. If you don't answer positively, you are at odds with his expressed self-opinion. That's really impolite.

The subtleties of politeness rules, however, are not fully exposed yet. Consider again the pollster from the *Times*. She is not only going to hear more negative responses about the mayor, she will also hear more varied responses. The mayor himself, since people are likely to be polite, is going to hear pretty much the same thing from everyone: "Things are fine, Mr. Mayor." But the pollster, since she is more likely to hear the truth, will hear a range of responses: some good, some bad, some in between. This suggests another rule: When people ask about themselves, the answers will be more homogeneous than when someone else asks the same questions.

Politeness has received a great deal of attention from psychologists. Their results lend credence to the rules that the mayoral example summarizes. While the scientific experiments confirm an important set of rules for social behavior, they are not surprising. Most people could easily imagine responding in similar ways. Our question was whether the same rules might apply to media. Are people polite to computers?

Politeness Rules for Humans vs. Politeness Rules for Computers

Millions of dollars are spent each year trying to make computers friendly and polite. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but in any case, it is a useful exercise because there are humans at the other end who will recognize and appreciate the effort. Designers want people to like media machines, and politeness is one way to ensure this.

But what about manners in the other direction? Do computer users actually reciprocate? Do people try to be polite to machines? If the answer is yes, we could make the following predictions, substituting computers for the mayor and the *New York Times*:

> Rule 1: When a computer asks a user about itself, the user will give more positive responses than when a different computer asks the same questions.
>
> Rule 2: Because people are less honest when a computer asks about itself, the answers will be more homogeneous than when a different computer asks the same questions.

What "social scene" do these predictions suggest? Imagine that you have just used a computer to do some work. Afterward, the machine, using simple text, praises its abilities. The same machine then asks for an evaluation. Are you polite (as most were to the mayor) instead of truthful? Would you be more likely to tell the truth if you wheeled your chair over to a second computer that asked for the same evaluation? And would the collection of responses to the second computer, because the truth was more likely told, represent a greater variety of opinions?

Many people would answer no to these questions. First of all, computers do *not* have feelings, so it would be foolish for users to be polite to them. Whose feelings would be spared, anyway? Second, it would be quite unusual to think of two different computers as two independent people. What is it that they are independent of? Certainly not each other. Finally, people are trained to be honest to computers, not to humor them. There is good evidence that when people are interviewed about sensitive topics, they are more likely to tell the truth to a computer than to another person.

The two politeness rules may sound silly when you think about their application to media. Thinking about it, however, is exactly what people may not do. We predicted that people would still be polite, media notwithstanding.

Our rationale was this: Computers, in the way that they communicate, instruct, and take turns interacting, are *close enough* to human that they encourage *social* responses. The encouragement necessary for such a reaction need not be much. As long as there are some behaviors that suggest a social presence, people will respond accordingly. When it comes to being social, people are built to make the conservative error: When in doubt, treat it as human. Consequently, any medium that is close enough will get human treatment, even though people know it's foolish and even though they likely will deny it afterward.

Observing Polite Interactions with Computers

To determine whether our predictions were accurate, we conducted several laboratory experiments. In all respects possible, they were similar to the experiments done by psychologists who study politeness in human-human interaction. The only difference was that participants in our studies worked with a *computer* rather than a person.

Here is how the first experiment worked. We invited twenty-two people to a laboratory and told them they would be working with a computer to learn about various topics. We told them that at the end of the work session we would ask them to evaluate the computer that they used. They would have to tell us how they felt about the computer and how well they thought the computer had performed during the session.

One person at a time sat down in front of the computer to be tutored about various statistical profiles of Americans. The computer, a black NeXT computer with a 21-inch black-and-white monitor, was placed on an office desk in front of each person. The only thing that the computer displayed was text and graphical buttons: no pictures, no voices, not even an icon.

Twenty facts were presented in each session. Here is an example: "According to a Harris Poll, 30% of all American teenagers kiss on the first date." After the presentation of each fact, the computer asked the users if they knew anything about the fact they had just read. Using a mouse for input to the computer, participants indicated whether they knew "a great deal," "somewhat," or "very little." Participants were told that the computer would provide some additional facts based on how much they said they already knew. In reality, however, everyone received the same information presented in the same order.

After participants finished hearing the facts, the computer gave them a test and then told the participants which answers were right and which were wrong. Then the computer told each user what it thought of its own performance; in all cases, the computer said that it had done a great job.

The participants were divided into two groups to evaluate the computer's performance. Half were assigned to answer the evaluation questions on the same computer that had just praised itself. The other half answered the identical questions on a different computer located on the other side of the room.

In the evaluation, participants were asked how well different adjectives described their session with the computer. The adjectives were chosen to capture how well each person thought the computer performed, as well as how much they liked the interaction. Twenty-two adjectives were used to evaluate the computer, including *accurate, analytical, competent, fair, friendly,* and *helpful.*

People Are Polite to Computers, Too

If machines don't deserve our positive regard, there should be no differences in evaluations of the computers based on which one asked the questions. If computers are social actors, however, then participants who responded to the *same* computer that taught them should be polite, and uniformly so, just as if the machine were a real person with real feelings.

What happened? As predicted, the participants who answered questions on the same computer gave significantly more positive responses than did participants who answered on a different computer. The computers got the same treatment that people would get. The respondents who interacted with the same computer throughout the experiment rated it more positively on twenty of the twenty-two adjectives presented. Based on statistical tests, we can be confident that these results did not occur by chance.

The variance in responses also conformed to the prediction. Evaluations made on the same computer had a significantly smaller range of responses than did evaluations made on the other computer. Participants felt freer to be honest when an independent computer asked the questions, and this increased the variance in evaluations of the computer's performance.

What did the participants themselves think about these results? When we told them what we predicted (after the experiment was over, of course), all of them said confidently that they did not, and never would, change their evaluations just to be polite to a computer. From these comments, we concluded that social responses to media were unconscious and automatic.

When research results are first discussed, colleagues often ask tough questions. The questions in this case were about alternative explanations for these social responses. One issue was the definition of "other." In the first experiment, the "other" asking the questions was a different computer, set up on the other side of the room from the first computer. Could there have been something about the particular placement of the computers that caused the differences, rather than a perception on the part of users that a computer was a social entity that warranted polite treatment?

To test this, we decided to see if the same results would occur if we made the "interviewer" something other than a computer. We did the experiment again, and this time we made the "other" a paper-and-pencil questionnaire instead of a computer.

The participants who used a paper-and-pencil questionnaire to evaluate the tutoring sessions were less favorable in their evaluations of the

computer than the participants who completed the same questionnaire on the computer that had just instructed them. The questionnaire elicited significantly more varied responses as well, as had the second computer in the first study. The conclusion: The paper-and-pencil questionnaire, like a different computer, was perceived as an "other" that did not require a polite response.

Both studies used computers that showed only text. We wondered what would happen if the social presence were more explicit. What if the computers were fancier and even more suggestive of human presence? To answer this question, we decided to repeat the experiment using voices rather than text. We wanted to find out whether voices would accentuate politeness when compared with text.

In the voice experiment, the facts and other information were presented with human speech coming from a small speaker attached to the computer. All participants heard a single voice on a single computer that tutored and then praised itself. One group of participants heard the same voice on the same computer ask for an evaluation. A second group heard a different voice on a different computer request the evaluation. A third group gave their evaluation with pencil and paper.

We found the exact same differences with voices as we did in the earlier studies that used only text. When a voice on a computer asks about itself, people are more positive and less honest than when they are questioned by a different voice on a different computer or when they give their responses on a questionnaire. The conclusion: Users are polite to computers whether they use text *or* voices.

One final result tells something about how impressed we should be with the newer capabilities of media. The result is actually a *lack* of differences. Voices did not make the interaction any more social than text. The presence of voices was apparently no big deal, at least as far as creating a social presence. It doesn't take virtual reality to create the sense that another person is present; people don't need much of a cue to respond socially.

How Should One Think About Media?

People were polite to computers. Not only were the computers in these experiments tools for learning new information, they were social actors that people reacted to with the same polite treatment that they would give to another human. This certainly adds a new dimension to an understanding of human-media relationships.

Before radically altering how we think about media, however, a reasonable question is whether there is a chance that this conclusion is wrong. Several questions about the research could be raised, and our answers to the questions are particularly important because they apply not just to the present studies, but to virtually all of the research in the book. Here are some things to keep in mind.

First, it's important to remember that all participants did exactly the same things in the lab. Everyone received the same facts, the same test, and the same evaluation, and they used identical interfaces on identical machines. The only difference was which computer asked the questions. So the results must be attributable to that one difference.

In laboratory experiments, there is also a danger that participants will figure out what is being studied and then try to help by telling the experimenters what they want to hear rather than what they really think. This didn't happen in the computer experiments, however. When asked, none of the respondents guessed that the number of computers had anything to do with the experiment, and no one guessed that the experiment had anything to do with politeness. Everyone believed that the study was about how people use computers to learn.

What if participants believed that computers *really did* have human capabilities? To make sure this wasn't true, we selected subjects who would be least likely to hold this opinion—everyone in the experiments had extensive experience with computers. They all were daily users, and many even did their own programming. If anyone should have known that computers don't have feelings, they should have. Old brains, however, have not yet caught up with new media.

Another possibility is that people were merely impulsive. Many people occasionally yell at a newscaster or quarterback on television, or plead with a computer to give back a disk. These responses, however,

are instantaneous, and they are rarely sustained. In our experiments, the social responses lasted much longer than an instant—they characterized an entire learning session. Polite responses were related to the entire experience. Hence, social responses to media are more than impulses that punctuate more thoughtful moments.

Another question about the experiments is familiar in the humanities. Maybe people *willingly suspend disbelief* when they encounter media. Perhaps people make a conscious decision to "make believe," in this case, pretending that a computer is a person. In exchange, a user might be better able to understand a presentation (or in the case of entertainment, have a better experience). However, no one said that they were making believe that the computer was real just for fun or because it was helpful. So if there was a suspension of disbelief, it certainly wasn't *willing* or conscious. Indeed, it is *belief*, not *disbelief*, that is automatic.

One of the most interesting responses to the politeness studies is this: "I'd be polite to a computer, but I'm not thinking of the computer as a person, I'm merely responding to the person who wrote the computer program. And that person *is* real!" Perhaps the use of social rules is reasonable because the technologies are created by humans, and hence, they warrant human treatment.

This explanation can be ruled out for two reasons. First, no one in the experiments said that they were using social rules for *any* reason. Moreover, when asked specifically about whether they had considered the programmer when they made their evaluations, not one person said they had.

Is it then possible that people were *subconsciously* thinking about the programmer? This is not likely the case either. If there were a subconscious orientation to a programmer, then the people who used two computers would have had to think about two *different* programmers, one for each machine. However, when the people who used two computers were questioned about whether they thought the machines were programmed by the same person or different people, they all said that they assumed there was a single programmer (and they were right).

What Do Polite Responses to Media Mean?

We think that these experiments demonstrate, against the intuition of many scholars, and counter to the verbal reports of the participants, that social rules apply to media. In this case, the medium was a computer, but not one capable of virtual reality or any other obvious display of social presence. The computer showed plain text on a plain black-and-white screen. It is not necessary to have artificial intelligence or full-motion video to be social. The nerdiest of media, a computer that looks like it came from NASA control, is close enough to being human to trigger rich scripts for social interaction. Computers are social actors.

Social responses to media are not obvious, however, to those who exhibit them. The participants in the experiments denied that they had been intentionally polite to a computer, and we believed them. Instead, the responses occurred without conscious awareness. They were automatic and mindless. A significant part of the human brain works on unconscious responses, and that work is often completed without the results being available for analysis by those parts of the brain responsible for thoughtfulness and introspection.

At the broadest level, these studies demonstrate the viability of the media equation. Findings and experimental methods from the social sciences can be applied directly to human-media interaction. It is possible to take a psychology research paper about how people respond to other people, replace the word "human" with the word "computer," and get the same results.

Designing Polite Media

Initially, it may seem that these studies have more implications for what humans do with machines than for what machines should do with humans. Actually, the two are quite related. The reason is that polite behavior, as well as many other social behaviors, is part of an *interaction*. Social behaviors are not accomplished in isolation from the responses to them—social means reciprocal. This is pivotal for the design of interactive media, because the biggest reason for making machines that are

polite to people is that people are polite to machines. Everyone expects reciprocity, and everyone will be disappointed if it's absent.

When media violate social norms, such as by being *im*polite, the media are not viewed as technologically deficient, a problem to be resolved with a better central processing unit. Rather, when a technology (or a person) violates a politeness rule, the violation is viewed as social incompetence and it is offensive. This is why we think that the most important implication of the politeness studies is that media themselves need to be polite. It's not just a matter of being nice; it's a matter of social survival.

Grice's Maxims for Politeness

How can designers ensure that computers are polite? Again, our answer is to borrow from the researchers who study politeness—the social scientists. Perhaps the most general and powerful politeness rules that media could obey are *Grice's Maxims*. H. Paul Grice, a philosopher and psychologist, viewed conversation as an exercise in which people try to be helpful. Grice argued that *all* people feel that conversations should be guided by four basic principles that constitute the rules for polite interaction: quality, quantity, relevance, and clarity.

Quality. Speakers should say things that are true. This is the one Gricean maxim that computers obey pretty well. They may be insensitive in delivery or too quick to disappoint, but at least they tell the truth. It is important to remember, however, that accuracy is a shield and not a sword. Accuracy can breed frustration because of a perceived lack of cooperation. If someone stops his or her car to ask, "Where am I?," the answer "in a car" is accurate but quite impolite. In Grice's terms, the driver is annoyed not because the answer was inaccurate, but because the comment wasn't cooperative.

Quantity. Each speaker in an interaction should contribute only what the conversation demands, not too much or too little. This rule is frequently violated by interactive media. For example, most menu systems present a single word or at most two words for each option, and this is true no matter how complex the action. The result is that users

often feel that the program is not cooperating. Why is that computer not giving me the whole story? The outcome is frustration.

Can icons, the favorite exemplar of brevity, solve the problem of quantity? Not all the time. A single icon that represents a complex task can be just as frustrating as a single word. The use of plain English (full sentences or at least multiple words in logical phrases) would make an enormous difference in understanding and satisfaction. The success may be traded against time, but almost by definition, politeness takes time. In real life, most of us would choose politeness over brevity, even at work, and even in our most productive moments.

Another way to solve the problem of quantity is to use people's ability to elaborate abbreviated messages with information that they already have. Messages are often too much or too little for *someone*, but over time, people can learn that a short message stands for a larger response. As two people get to know each other, there are times when politeness can be abbreviated (e.g., "Hi" substitutes for "Hello, how are you today?" once people get acquainted). Familiarity can also bring opportunities to elaborate (e.g., "I've been meaning to tell you..." substitutes for a stifled "Fine"). A polite system will give information at a level of detail that matches the user's social expectations.

In the same vein, providing users with technical abbreviations (e.g., "Drive Error: Abort, Retry, Fail?") or pages and pages of detail violates the quantity rule. Much better are systems that allow users to set a level of sophistication that determines the amount of information that they would like. With a tracking system on the computer (i.e., a function that counts various occurrences), a computer could know how often a particular message has been delivered, for example, and adjust the quantity of information accordingly.

Relevance. What people (and media) say should clearly relate to the purpose of the conversation. A good example of this rule is the disabling of menu options, depending on context. An interface shouldn't say anything about things it can't do at the moment. Icons that represent possible actions could be highlighted, for example, and the icons for impossible actions dimmed or removed from the screen.

One aspect of relevance that is ignored in interfaces is response to user *goals*. The early days of television provide an excellent example of the consequences of this mistake. In early television, producers assumed that people watched the news to gather information. They thought that viewers were civic-minded, and consequently, the news was presented as seriously and efficiently as possible. However, research began to show what now seems obvious: People turn on the news for all kinds of reasons. These reasons include the desire to be entertained or merely to feel socially connected. The recognition that viewers had several different goals initiated several new concerns: the attractiveness of anchors, design of the news set, and enough "happy talk" to maintain interest.

The same thing is likely true for computers. Someone writing a letter, even on the most sophisticated word processing package, is likely to have multiple goals. One goal may be to complete a task; that is, write the letter. But it's hard to imagine writing a letter and not also doing some combination of the following: blowing off steam, clarifying feelings, impressing the boss, avoiding boredom, and so on. Why shouldn't computers modify interactions in relation to these goals? Interfaces that provide a *single* way of presenting information, without taking into account multiple goals of users, risk violating the rule of relevance. Anger and frustration could be the result.

Clarity. Contributions to an interaction should not be obscure. Designers often remove ambiguity so that a message can have only one meaning. This is desirable, but it comes at a price. To avoid ambiguity, highly technical language is often necessary, and much of that language is obscure. In an example close to home, one of us is ashamed to admit authorship of the following sentence: "The coercive, mimetic, and normative forces in the institutional environment homogenize the garbage-can decision processes." One might argue that several paragraphs would have been required to achieve the same precision with more commonplace words. But that's silly. There wasn't a single reader who wouldn't have gladly traded precision for simplicity.

The upshot of this rule is that it would be better to have a statement

with even three meanings than to have one that is precise but unknowable. This is especially true if the ambiguity can be resolved in later exchanges. It would be worrisome if the user consistently resolved the ambiguity incorrectly, because the computer would then seem incompetent. User testing, however, can determine the most common way that ambiguity is understood; if most users resolve it incorrectly, it can certainly be rewritten. Furthermore, highly technical language, even if precise, can actually lead to *more* guesswork for users. Interactive media should not be obscure *or* ambiguous; but too often, interfaces have opted for the former.

A key point about Grice's maxims is that people will assume that violations have social meaning. If a speaker violates any of the rules, the listener will assume that the speaker is not paying attention, or is being sarcastic, or is being intentionally unpleasant. All of these conclusions lead to negative consequences for media, because people will ascribe meaning to failure, whether the entity that fails is a person or a machine.

It's Impolite to Reject

Media increasingly provide the ability to change how they look and work during an interaction. When you change something, however, you reject one option in favor of another. If the rejection is aimed at socially meaningless features, such as changing the color of the computer desktop, this is no problem. But when you change features that are more obviously social (e.g., a voice or a picture that represents a helper), the rejection is also more social. In the social world, rejection is significant; it is impolite.

Although it seems a bit weird, people can feel the same inhibitions when rejecting social representations on a screen as they would rejecting a real person. For example, imagine that you have been working with software that uses a character to help complete tasks on the computer. After a while, you become tired of the character, and you're aware that the software offers an option to change characters. Our research suggests that it is difficult to simply replace the old character

with a new one. People don't want to be impolite by making the current character feel bad.

What to do? Use the tried and true solution that works in real life. A polite invitation for change might go like this: "It's been really fun working with you, but some people like to change characters on occasion. Would you like to do that?" There are three advantages of this statement, and the accompanying question: (1) The statement legitimates the change, (2) it makes the decision impersonal, thereby limiting the need for a polite response, and (3) it doesn't reveal the feelings of the character asking the question.

Rules of Etiquette

There are many more popular sources for politeness rules than the psychology literature we have discussed so far. We recommend them all highly. We have both laughed mightily thinking about a bunch of computers dutifully taking notes while listening to Dale Carnegie or reading Emily Post and Miss Manners. But humor aside, that is exactly our prescription. If mediated and real-life conversations are more on a par than previously imagined, then media should be judged by their *social* as well as *technical* sophistication. Consider the following simple rules, even though they seem more suited to a handbook of etiquette than to a Computer Science 101 course.

It's Polite to Say Hello and Good-bye

How do you enter or leave a social situation? In any face-to-face conversation, people don't turn around and leave. First, they indicate intent and then ask permission to leave, at least implicitly. The opportunity to break this rule in media is legendary. In a famous interface project, a character suddenly disappeared from the screen due to a bug in the program. Users became disturbed, the designers noted, because they felt that the character was angry and had left as a result. Users did not view the disappearance as a problem with the technology. Characters that leave the screen should always take leave by saying

"good-bye" or at least making a sound or gesture. They shouldn't evaporate into the digital ether.

It's Polite to Look at People When Speaking

Humans, as well as many other animals, are sticklers for eye contact. Eyes are the number one place to look to size up a partner, understand his or her feelings, or predict what will come next. When people look at faces, half their time is spent watching eyes. When we can't see someone's eyes, we get worried, and this is likely why it is impolite not to show your face. The same is true for faces on a screen. Dan Rather and Mr. Rogers understand this well. They never turn their backs, and instead stare right into the camera. Their counterparts in computing, however, often do not make eye contact.

A media character should never turn its back without an announcement, especially during an interaction. For example, in a prototype for a children's multimedia product, a character turned away from the user whenever it wanted to "see" something on the screen. This seemed reasonable to the designers, who intended the character to appear to look *with* the user at something important. But it was also impolite. To allay the user's discomfort, the character could have said, "Let's see what else we can find" before turning. Admittedly, this is another action in a domain where the fewest lines of code carry the day, but here as always, politeness does have some cost. The gain is more important: The user didn't have to wonder what the character was doing.

It's Polite to Match Modality: Answer a Letter with a Letter

It is polite to respond to friends using the same method that they used to contact you. A letter gets a letter in return, a phone call gets another call, and so on. We suspect that this applies to human-computer interaction as well. It is the rule of "matched modality."

There is asymmetry when a user receives information in one medium but answers in another, but in computing there often is no way to circumvent this mismatch. For example, some computer products ask questions verbally but accept only text or mouse input. This can be uncomfortable because the computer actually forces an impolite response.

What to do? If an interface accepts only text input, perhaps it should produce only text output. If the user can respond with voice, then a voice-based interface might work better. In any case, the criterion for choosing an appropriate way to respond should not merely be the most sophisticated mode available; it should be the one that allows for politeness between user and machine.

Politeness and Product Testing: Eliminating Positive Bias

The politeness studies also apply to product testing. One implication is that the same computer should not present products and then ask for evaluations. People who give opinions to the same computer that just demonstrated a product will likely react more positively than they really feel. It would be better either to use a paper-and-pencil questionnaire or simply to have another computer ask the questions.

A second implication extends the results of the politeness studies to real people associated with a product during testing. If an interviewer helps a person use a media product, the user will want to be polite to the interviewer as well. There is a good solution, however. First, two products can be presented, and the interview can focus on the differences between them. Not only is this a good measurement idea, since people are great at comparing things, but when focusing on the comparison, respondents are not thinking about what the polite response should be. This should encourage truthfulness.

A final point about product testing is that we should be suspicious of verbal responses. Many of the most important reactions and responses of users are those that are not conscious, and hence not available for verbalization. The people in our experiments assure us that they are not being polite to computers—but our data say otherwise. Subjects often do not know how they really feel or how they really will behave in a given situation. If what people said they wanted was what they actually liked, all of network television might look like public broadcasting. This ignorance is not necessarily a human deficiency; it is simply a human fact.

Politeness across Cultures: Differences and Similarities

Most guides to good manners caution readers about cross-cultural differences in politeness, and international consultants earn a good living offering insurance against major *faux pas*. Cultural differences are certainly no secret to the companies that have a multinational business. They know that language translation is not the whole story. People also have to negotiate interpersonal space, wait the appropriate amount of time before talking, address each person in a proper manner—and the rules vary from country to country and from culture to culture. It is interesting, therefore, that the translation of language is often the *only* consideration for internationalizing media products. Mistakes in manners are a frequent result.

This point, while important, is not novel. What is not well understood, however, is how much importance we should attach to cultural differences. We think they are a bit overrated (which *doesn't* mean we think they are irrelevant). The differences are overrated mostly because they focus attention away from what is common to all human beings: *Everyone* is polite. This certainly does not mean that the specific behaviors that constitute politeness are exactly the same in every culture; they are not. But it does mean that everyone recognizes politeness, everyone tries to obey politeness rules, and everyone feels bad when they are broken. In a rush to celebrate cultural differences, we are often too quick to concentrate exclusively on those differences.

As children are taught by adults, being polite costs very little, and the benefits are enormous. Should we ask less of media and their makers?