Rude comments online are a reality we can't get away from

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Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

Any verbal exchange – whether a scientific panel discussion, lovers quarrelling in a hallway, or the political hard-talk of a live interview – is a very sophisticated human activity.

Besides the intricate relationship between syntax, semantics and

phonetics of the language used – itself something that takes years to master – there are all the unwritten conversational rules about turn-taking and reading body language that need to be understood and practiced in order for any exchange of opinion to work effectively.

But on social media most of this other stuff is gone, and is part of the reason why the tone online is frequently so rough and unforgiving. This doesn't make for platforms that are conducive to constructive and reflective deliberation, decision and action. Social media may not just increase asocial behaviour and feelings of loneliness, it may also promote or amplify anti-social behaviour.

Subtle cues

A verbal exchange between physically present people is not only facilitated by what is being said but also by what is not being said. For example, looking into each other's eyes while talking is an important gesture in establishing what may be considered common knowledge among the interlocutors. Reading the facial expressions of the participants determine whether they get the point, whether they agree to it, disagree, are agnostic, angry, sad, concerned, disconcerted about what is being said.

The same goes for body language which is being deciphered while discussing, quarrelling or debating. One step towards another may be considered a threat, an invitation, or some other expression – it depends on the context, on what is actually being said, what that implies, and so forth. Taking one step back and putting your hands up may mean that you surrender, give up, withdraw, need a break to collect your thoughts, or perhaps a suggestion to the effect that other interlocutors should do same.

Some ten years ago we were presented with new mediums through which

to conduct conversations, namely blogs, comment sections, social media, and other virtual platforms for exchanging opinions.

It's not just that we can't physically see the people we are communicating with; they may also not reveal their identity. It's possible to not know who you are talking to, or whether they mean whatever they may seem to be saying. It's not always possible to check who they are as they may have multiple profiles of which the details may not be verifiable. You can't really assess whether they mean what they say, because you can't look them in the eye, nor whether they accept this premise and not another, nor gauge their sincerity, and so on.

There is no opportunity to read gestures, body language or phonetics to align the conversation and keep it on track. There is only what is left on the wall, subject to multiple interpretations and misunderstandings, and every one of the participants are left hanging accordingly.

If you are in doubt as to whether you are being heard, what do you do? It is like in kindergarten, you shout louder and perhaps say things you don't really mean just to get a response. And when you do, you have already set the tone and standard. Thus, if you say something rough and tough, chances are you going to receive the same and it is hard to paddle back to something more amenable now that is in writing. That's how polarisation often starts.

The conversation game

When conversation partners are physically present they are continuously playing the stimulus-response game of conversation. I ask a question, you answer. If I'm unclear about what you mean, I may ask again from a different angle, you pick up and answer accordingly.

That game is difficult to maintain online – threads are often derailed

after a few posts because it is hard to focus, commit and coordinate the number of people that are present virtually, since so large a number would never occur in physical conversation. And even so some troll may deliberately sidetrack the discussion all the same. These days everyone has a bullhorn to the world, so offering your opinion online is pretty much cost neutral anyway.

In the virtual world, we have lost gestures and substituted them with poor alternatives – such as "likes" and emoticons such as smiley or unhappy faces. Likes are often ambiguous and may aggregate in unfortunate ways. Emoticons cannot compete with the full human emotional register. They may even be considered as non-committal, and empty of meaning. Suppose you meet some some stranger at a party and after only a few words he sticks his tongue out for you to see. And yet the very same person, meeting under similar circumstances but instead online, could write :P and no one would think anything of it.

The rule of thumb for conversation online should be: if you wouldn't say it physically around the dinner table at home or among friends – don't say it online either. That way we all become wiser from exchanging opinions independently of whether we agree or disagree, are online or offline.

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