Take a number, pal

Web etiquette goes wacky when ranking friends becomes an exercise in lifeboat ethics.

By Steven Barrie-Anthony, Times Staff Writer

LET'S begin with an exercise. First, name the eight most important people in your life — friends, family, rock stars. These are your Top 8. Now rank those people in order of importance. Finally, send a copy of this list to everybody you know, including people who didn't make the cut. Be careful not to hurt the wrong feelings, or you may end up getting bumped from other people's Top 8s.

Go ahead and bite your nails. Realize the magnitude of these decisions.

OK, so, you're either lost in terrifying flashbacks of middle-school cruelty — or you've already made such a list, already showed it to all your friends, and since you didn't make all their Top 8s, you've already deleted the offenders from your list (and prayed they noticed). In other words, you're already on MySpace.com or one of the many other social networking websites such as Facebook.com or Friendster.com, doing your best to navigate this complex new world of friends-of-friends-of-friends-etc. with as few social casualties as possible.

If the Internet was once ungoverned by etiquette, those days are gone; MySpace and its siblings, by many accounts the future of the Net, are rife with discussions of good manners versus unforgivable faux pas. There isn't an aristocratic class, just yet, but you can see the lines forming in the sand, renegades and bad boys posting bulletins pell-mell, uploading risque pictures, collecting "friends" as if it's all some big popularity contest — while mannered netizens look on disapprovingly. Screw up and you just might get dumped, online and off.

J.D. Funari is hoping that clarity prevents offense. A week after logging onto MySpace, the 24-year-old TV editor from Studio City posted a disclaimer above his Top 8: "Since this 'preferred' listing of friends can quickly become unnecessarily political, I'd like to briefly explain my sorting technique," he wrote.

"The first spot will always be my brother (for obvious reasons) and the second spot will always be my friend Katie (for reasons obvious to Katie and I). The third and fourth spots are reserved for music and movies of interest. Five and six are wild-cards which may be related to how well I know the person and/or if I'm dating them (opposite sex only) and/or if they've paid me for inclusion. The final two spots are, to be perfectly honest, the two most attractive current female photos from my list of friends."

The posted explanation sent ripples through Funari's 97 interconnected friends. "It's very flattering," says Katie Rose Houck, 23, an actress in Los Angeles who occupies slot No. 8, reserved for attractive females. "We've only known each other for a couple of months, and we have a flirting banter going on between the two of us. This reaffirms that I'm pretty, that I know that he thinks I'm pretty, and all of his extended friends know that he thinks I'm pretty." Houck admits laughingly that she has browsed through Funari's other friends to see whom she bested. Then again, she is No. 8 on the list, while No. 7 went to Amy Vo, a 25-year-old receptionist from Maryland, who happens to be wearing a bikini in her MySpace picture. "I have an outfit on, so of course Amy is going to get the first spot," says Houck. "Naked wins over pretty."

Vo has never actually met Funari in person; the two connected through Funari's No. 1 friend, Katie. It went like this: Funari clicked on Katie's picture and was whisked to her profile, where he spied Vo in spot No. 3. He clicked over to Vo's profile and sent her a message. "He said, 'Oh, you're so pretty,' " remembers Vo. "And I said, 'Oh, you're so nice.' " Then Funari requested Vo as a friend, she accepted, and soon she rose to spot No. 7 on his page. (Alas, Funari, you're absent from Vo's Top 8.) These, the newfangled dances we dance.

At first it seems as if Funari's strategy might just work. Play the honesty card, let people know where they stand, watch them celebrate or nurse their wounds and then move on. But life threatens to throw a monkey wrench into his beautiful absolutes. "The first spot will always be my brother," his rules explain. Problem is, Funari has two younger siblings who will soon be logging on themselves. What then? And what if he gets serious with a girl — will she be happy at sixth place?
"If he was my boyfriend, and he didn't put me in the top 5, I would be a little offended," Houck says. "And if he kept his best girlfriend at No. 2 — and she's pretty! — I would be a little offended. Maybe that's why he's still single."

Well, he is single. It says so right on his page: "Status: Single." MySpace profile pages are customizable in many ways; you can add pictures, music, write blogs, list your interests or skip all this entirely. You can allow friends to jot comments directly onto your page, viewable by all, or you can retain absolute control. But try as you might, you can't avoid classifying your relationship status, which isn't always easy to do.

After the Top 8, relationship status causes the most ire in the MySpace world.

"It gets highly dramatic," says Danah Boyd, a doctoral student at UC Berkeley who is studying the culture of social networking. "Sometimes one person thinks they're single while the other person thinks they're dating.... You can't have your status be, 'I'm in a relationship that I'm not entirely thrilled with, I'm waiting for something better, come talk to me.'"

What results is an inordinate amount of "swingers," an allowed choice that's sufficiently deviant for teens, ironic for adults (minus actual swingers) and has quickly become socially acceptable within the MySpace mainstream. Still, there remain many conventionalists who choose "single" or "in a relationship," and watch their physical and digital worlds intertwine.

Five months ago, 27-year-old James was "in a relationship," according to his MySpace page. Then James, a New York public relations executive who declined to provide his last name, broke up with his girlfriend and switched to "single."

In the real world and online, James and his ex remained friends, so when James started dating another woman, he didn't want to ruffle it in his ex's face. He delicately broached the MySpace topic with the new girlfriend, and they agreed not to switch their designation to "in a relationship" just yet. So: single online, together off.

It was four months of limbo before James and his girlfriend decided the time was right. "I was at her Easter family dinner," James remembers, "and that pretty much constitutes a relationship."

They went online, made the change and all's well — unless things go sour. "There's a tension that never existed before," James says.

In this case, James and his girlfriend were making the same assumption that their exes engage in "MySpace stalking," the practice of secretly keeping tabs on friends, lovers, co-workers, celebrities or complete strangers by reading their profiles.

If stalking in the real world implies some dangerous psychological imbalance, on MySpace it's essentially the norm, although etiquette suggests that you keep your stalking to yourself. Mention so-and-so's dating status too loudly in the wrong context or without the required I'm-just-kidding jocularity and you risk being judged a stalker in the regular sense.

Where there's stalking, there's reverse stalking. After all, wouldn't you want to know who's watching you? To watch them watch you without them knowing they're being watched? Um, of course you would. At first. And then you realize that if you watch whoever's watching you, then you'll also be unveiled to everybody you're stalking, which puts a real damper on the initial voyeuristic enterprise.

Some social networking sites, such as Friendster, allow users to view who has visited their profiles; MySpace does not. Which simply means that MySpacers are more desperate than ever to unearth a reverse-stalking technique and then hide it from everyone they know.

In February, James hit gold. He came across a website, Whospyme.com, which gave users the ability to watch the watchers. Unlike the dozens of hoaxes circulating throughout MySpace, this one actually worked. "It showed who visited my page and the exact time they visited. One girl, an old friend, checked it almost every hour." James was omniscient for nearly two weeks until MySpace blocked Whospyme, returning him to darkness.

Tom Anderson, president of MySpace and its most beloved member — he regularly receives marriage proposals among the thousands of comments on his profile — explains: "We can't allow somebody to create a service like that, which reveals who's looking at your page. That's a violation of privacy." If MySpace were to unveil such a feature, Anderson says, each user would get to make an individual decision about whether to be traceable. Yet another decision fraught with online and offline complications.

There are plenty of other decisions to make in the meantime:

**Number of friends:** Too many, you're deemed a "MySpace whore," too few, a loser. (Caveat: If you're in a band, or you're a middle-school kid who lied about your age to get on MySpace and are competing with friends to see who's most popular, "too many" is a good thing.)

**Profile picture:** Posing in your skivvies opens you to scorn, but, depending on your friends, it may also increase the probability that you'll score some Top 8 spots. "I can't stand it when people put pictures up, trying to look all sexy," says Lori Carter, 25, a Salt Lake City office manager. More specifically, Carter can't stand it when her husband accepts such photos as his friends.

**Grammar:** "I am not a grammar Nazi," says Michael Block, 23, an L.A. search engine marketer who uses MySpace and Tagworld.com. "But I do feel terrible for words like 'probably' and 'someone' that are constantly bastardized into 'prolly' and sumone."

**Bulletins:** These are messages that users post to virtual bulletin boards. Perhaps the most common social networking pet peeve are posted versions of the chain letters of yore, the "if you don't send this on you'll never fall in love again and then you'll die a horrible death" variety.

If you've steered clear of social networking so far, enjoy that simple existence while you're able. Sooner or later friends will ask — then demand — that you migrate toward multidimensionality. There are more than 76 million people on MySpace (about 270,000 join daily), and Anderson wants to expand the MySpace experience until the entire Net rests...
within it. "Anything you do on the Internet, I want you to be able to do on MySpace," he says. "That's the goal and ambition. Almost all the things you can do online can be enhanced by the social structure of MySpace."
Which suggests that the Top 8 will become only more central to the human experience, more dizzyingly complex.
"It's the Seinfeldian Speed Dial Dilemma of our generation," says Sarah Ciston, 22, a page designer at the Long Beach Press-Telegram. "I love it. But I think you should also get a Bottom 8, or a Bottom 20. A hall of shame of sorts."

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.