

CHAP4

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	<i>TITLE :</i> CHAP4		
<i>ACTION</i>	<i>NAME</i>	<i>DATE</i>	
WRITTEN BY		August 31, 2024	
<i>SIGNATURE</i>			

REVISION HISTORY

NUMBER	DATE	DESCRIPTION	NAME

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Chapter 1

CHAP4

1.1 Chapter 4: USENET CUSTOMS & MYTHS

Like any community, Usenet has customs and some who ignore them. It has developed its own mythos. You will discover many of those customs and myths as you explore, but it's worthwhile to know what to expect.

Flames and blather. Film at 11
Usenet hints.
Cross posting
Brain-tumor boy & the modem tax
The Big Sig.
Killfiles.
Usenet history.

FYI:

Leanne Phillips periodically posts a list of frequently asked questions (and answers) about use of the rn killfile function in the news.newusers.questions and news.answers newsgroups on Usenet. Bill Wohler posts a guide to using the nn newsreader in the news.answers and news.software newsgroups. Look in the news.announce.newusers and news.groups newsgroups on Usenet for "A Guide to Social Newsgroups and Mailing Lists," which gives brief summaries of the various soc. newsgroups.

"Managing UUCP and Usenet," by Tim O'Reilly and Grace Todino (O'Reilly & Associates, 1992) is a good guide for setting up your own Usenet system.

1.2 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (1 of 7) -- FLAME, BLATHER AND SPEW

Something about online communications seems to make some people particularly irritable. Perhaps it's the immediacy and semi-anonymity of it all. Whatever it is, there are whole classes of people you will soon think seem to exist to make you miserable.

Rather than pausing and reflecting on a message as one might do with a letter received on paper, it's just so easy to hit your R key and tell

somebody you don't really know what you really think of them. Even otherwise calm people sometimes find themselves turning into raving madmen. When this happens, flames erupt.

A flame is a particularly nasty, personal attack on somebody for something he or she has written.

Periodically, an exchange of flames erupts into a flame war that begin to take up all the space in a given newsgroup (and sometimes several; flamers like cross-posting to let the world know how they feel). These can go on for weeks (sometimes they go on for years, in which case they become "holy wars," usually on such topics as the relative merits of Macintoshes and IBMs). Often, just when they're dying down, somebody new to the flame war reads all the messages, gets upset and issues an urgent plea that the flame war be taken to e-mail so everybody else can get back to whatever the newsgroup's business is.

All this usually does, though, is start a brand new flame war, in which this poor person comes under attack for daring to question the First Amendment, prompting others to jump on the attackers for impugning this poor soul... You get the idea.

Every so often, a discussion gets so out of hand that somebody predicts that either the government will catch on and shut the whole thing down or somebody will sue to close down the network, or maybe even the wrath of God will smote everybody involved. This brings what has become an inevitable rejoinder from others who realize that the network is, in fact, a resilient creature that will not die easily: "Imminent death of Usenet predicted. Film at 11."

Flame wars can be tremendously fun to watch at first. They quickly grow boring, though. And wait until the first time you're attacked!

Flamers are not the only net.characters to watch out for.

Spewers assume that whatever they are particularly concerned about either really is of universal interest or should be rammed down the throats of people who don't seem to care -- as frequently as possible.

You can usually tell a spewer's work by the number of articles he posts in a day on the same subject and the number of newsgroups to which he then sends these articles -- both can reach well into double digits. Often, these messages relate to various ethnic conflicts around the world. Frequently, there is no conceivable connection between the issue at hand and most of the newsgroups to which he posts. No matter. If you try to point this out in a response to one of these messages, you will be inundated with angry messages that either accuse you of being an insensitive racist/American/whatever or ignore your point entirely to bring up several hundred more lines of commentary on the perfidy of whoever it is the spewer thinks is out to destroy his people.

Closely related to these folks are the Holocaust revisionists, who periodically inundate certain groups (such as soc.history) with long rants about how the Holocaust never really happened. Some people attempt to refute these people with facts, but others realize this only encourages them.

Blatherers tend to be more benign. Their problem is that they just can't get to the point -- they can wring three or four screenfuls out of a thought that others might sum up in a sentence or two. A related condition is excessive quoting. People afflicted with this will include an entire message in their reply rather than excising the portions not relevant to whatever point they're trying to make. The worst quote a long message and then add a single line:

"I agree!"

or some such, often followed by a monster .signature.

There are a number of other Usenet denizens you'll soon come to recognize. Among them:

Net.weenies. These are the kind of people who enjoy Insulting others, the kind of people who post nasty messages in a sewing newsgroup just for the hell of it.

Net.geeks. People to whom the Net is Life, who worry about what happens when they graduate and they lose their free, 24-hour access.

Net.gods. The old-timers; the true titans of the Net and the keepers of its collective history. They were around when the Net consisted of a couple of computers tied together with baling wire.

Lurkers. Actually, you can't tell these people are there, but they are. They're the folks who read a newsgroup but never post or respond.

Wizards. People who know a particular Net-related topic inside and out. Unix wizards can perform amazing tricks with that operating system, for example.

Net.saints. Always willing to help a newcomer, eager to share their knowledge with those not born with an innate ability to navigate the Net, they are not as rare as you might think. Post a question about something and you'll often be surprised how many responses you get.

The last group brings us back to the Net's oral tradition. With few written guides, people have traditionally learned their way around the Net by asking somebody, whether at the terminal next to them or on the Net itself. That tradition continues: if you have a question, ask.

THE FIRST AMENDMENT AS LOCAL ORDINANCE

Usenet's international reach raises interesting legal questions that have yet to be fully resolved. Can a discussion or posting that is legal in one country be transmitted to a country where it is against the law? Does the posting even become illegal when it reaches the border? And what if that country is the only path to a third country where the message is legal as well? Several foreign colleges and other institutions have cut off feeds of certain newsgroups where Americans post what is, in the U.S., perfectly legal discussions of drugs or alternative sexual practices. Even in the U.S., some universities have discontinued certain newsgroups their administrators find offensive, again, usually in the alt. hierarchy.

1.3 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (2 of 7) -- SOME USENET HINTS

Today, one of the places you can look for help is in the news.newusers.questions newsgroup, which, as its name suggests, is a place to learn more about Usenet. But be careful what you post. Some of the Usenet wizards there get cranky sometimes when they have to answer the same question over and over again. Oh, they'll eventually answer your question, but not before they tell you should have asked your host system administrator first or looked at the postings in news.announce.newusers.

Case counts in Unix -- most of the time. Many Unix commands, including many of those used for reading Usenet articles, are case sensitive. Hit a d when you meant a D and either nothing will happen, or something completely different from what you expected will happen. So watch that case!

In nn, you can get help most of the time by typing a question mark (the exception is when you are writing your own message, because then you are inside the text-processing program). In rn, type a lower-case h at any prompt to get some online help.

When you're searching for a particular newsgroup, whether through the l command in rn or with nngrep for nn, you sometimes may have to try several keywords. For example, there is a newsgroup dedicated to the Grateful Dead, but you'd never find it if you tried, say, l grateful dead, because the name is rec.music.gdead. In general, try the smallest possible part of the word or discussion you're looking for, for example, use "trek" to find newsgroups about "Star Trek." If one word doesn't produce anything, try another.

1.4 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (3 of 7) -- CROSS-POSTING

Sometimes, you'll have an issue you think should be discussed in more than one newsgroup. Rather than posting individual messages in each group, you can post the same message in several groups at once, through a process known as cross-posting.

Say you want to start a discussion about the political ramifications of importing rare tropical fish from Brazil. People who read rec.aquaria might have something to say. So might people who read alt.politics.animals and talk.politics.misc.

Cross-posting is easy. When you get ready to post a message (whether through Pnews for rn or the :post command in nn), you'll be asked in which newsgroups. Type the names of the various groups, separated by a comma, but no space, for example:

```
rec.aquaria,alt.politics.animals,talk.politics.misc
```

and hit enter. After answering the other questions (geographic distribution, etc.), the message will be posted in the various groups (unless one of the groups is moderated, in which case the message goes to the moderator, who decides whether to make it public).

It's considered bad form to post to an excessive number of newsgroups, or inappropriate newsgroups. Chances are, you don't really have to post something in 20 different places. And while you may think your particular political issue is vitally important to the fate of the world, chances are the readers of rec.arts.comics will not, or at least not important enough to impose on them. You'll get a lot of nasty e-mail messages demanding you restrict your messages to the "appropriate" newsgroups.

1.5 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (4 of 7) -- BRAIN-TUMORS & MODEM TAXES

Net users sometimes like to think they are smarter or somehow better than everybody else. They're not. If they were, nobody on the Net would ever have heard of Craig Shergold, the Brain-Tumor Boy, or the evil FCC's plan to tax your modem. Alas, both of these online urban legends are here to stay. Just when they seem to have died off, somebody

posts a message about one or the other, starting a whole new round of flame wars on the subject.

For the record, here are the stories on both of them:

CRAIG SHERGOLD

There once was a seven-year-old boy in England named Craig Shergold who was diagnosed with a seemingly incurable brain tumor. As he lay dying, he wished only to have friends send him postcards. The local newspapers got a hold of the tear-jerking story. Soon, the boy's wish had changed: he now wanted to get into the Guinness Book of World Records for the largest postcard collection. Word spread around the world. People by the millions sent him postcards.

Miraculously, the boy lived. An American billionaire even flew him to the U.S. for surgery to remove what remained of the tumor. And his wish succeeded beyond his wildest dreams -- he made the Guinness Book of World Records.

But with Craig now well into his teens, his dream has turned into a nightmare for the post office in the small town outside London where he lives. Like Craig himself, his request for cards just refuses to die, inundating the post office with millions of cards every year. Just when it seems like the flow is slowing, along comes somebody else who starts up a whole new slew of requests for people to send Craig post cards (or greeting cards or business cards -- Craig letters have truly taken on a life of their own and begun to mutate). Even Dear Abby has asked people to stop!

What does any of this have to do with the Net? The Craig letter seems to pop up on Usenet as often as it does on cork boards at major corporations. No matter how many times somebody like Gene Spafford posts periodic messages to ignore them or spend your money on something more sensible (a donation to the local Red Cross, say), somebody manages to post a letter asking readers to send cards to poor little Craig.

THE MODEM TAX

In 1987, the Federal Communications Commission considered removing a tax break it had granted CompuServe and other large commercial computer networks for use of the national phone system. The FCC quickly reconsidered after alarmed users of bulletin-board systems bombarded it with complaints about this "modem tax."

Now, every couple of months, somebody posts an "urgent" message warning Net users that the FCC is about to impose a modem tax. This is NOT true. The way you can tell if you're dealing with the hoax story is simple: it ALWAYS mentions an incident in which a talk-show host on KGO radio in San Francisco becomes outraged on the air when he reads a story about the tax in the New York Times.

Another way to tell it's not true is that it never mentions a specific FCC docket number or closing date for comments.

Save that letter to your congressman for something else.

1.6 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (5 of 7) -- BIG SIG

There are .sigs and there are .sigs. Many people put only bare-bones information in their .sig files -- their names and e-mail

cascade. The only thing you can do is ignore them, by setting up a killfile.

There are also certain newsgroups where killfiles will come in handy because of the way they are organized. For example, readers of rec.arts.tv.soaps always use an acronym in their subject: line for the show they're writing about (AMC, for example, for "All My Children"). This way, people who only want to read about "One Life to Live" can blank out all the messages about "The Young and the Restless" and all the others (to keep people from accidentally screening out messages that might contain the letters "gh" in them, "General Hospital" viewers always use "gh:" in their subject lines).

Both nn and rn let you create killfiles, but in different ways.

To create a killfile in nn, go into the newsgroup with the offending messages and type a capital K. You'll see this at the bottom of your screen:

```
AUTO (k)ill or (s)elect (CR => Kill subject 30 days)
```

If you hit return, nn will ask you which article's subject you're tired of. Chose one and the article and any follow-ups will disappear, and you won't see them again for 30 days.

If you type a lower-case k instead, you'll get this:

```
AUTO KILL on (s)ubject or (n)ame (s)
```

If you hit your S key or just enter, you'll see this:

```
KILL Subject: (=/)
```

Type in the name of the offending word or phrase and hit enter. You'll then be prompted:

```
KILL in (g)roup 'eff.test' or in (a)ll groups (g)
```

except that the name of the group you see will be the one you're actually in at the moment. Because cascaders and other annoying people often cross-post their messages to a wide range of newsgroups, you might consider hitting a instead of g. Next comes:

```
Lifetime of entry in days (p)ermanent (30)
```

The P key will screen out the offending articles forever, while hitting enter will do it for 30 days. You can also type in a number of days for the blocking.

Creating killfiles in rn works differently -- its default killfile generator only works for messages in specific groups, rather than globally for your entire newsgroup list. To create a global killfile, you'll have to write one yourself.

To create a killfile in rn, go into the newsgroup where the offending messages are and type in its number so you get it on your screen. Type a capital K. From now on, any message with that subject line will disappear before you read the group. You should probably choose a reply, rather than the original message, so that you will get all of the followups (the original message won't have a "Re: " in its subject line). The next time you call up that newsgroup, rn will tell you it's killing messages. When it's done, hit the space bar to go back into reading mode.

To create a "global" kill file that will automatically wipe out articles in all groups you read, start `rn` and type `control-K`. This will start your whatever text editor you have as your default on your host system and create a file (called `KILL`, in your News subdirectory).

On the first line, you'll type in the word, phrase or name you don't want to see, followed by commands that tell `rn` whether to search an entire message for the word or name and then what to do when it finds it.

Each line must be in this form

```
/pattern/modifier:j
```

"Pattern" is the word or phrase you want `rn` to look for. It's case-insensitive: both "test" and "Test" will be knocked out. The modifier tells `rn` whether to limit its search to message headers (which can be useful when the object is to never see messages from a particular person):

```
a:    Looks through an entire message
h:    Looks just at the header
```

You can leave out the modifier command, in which case `rn` will only look at the subject line of messages. The "j" at the end tells `rn` to screen out all articles with the offending word.

So if you never want to see the word "foo" in any header, ever again, type this:

```
/foo/h:j
```

This is particularly useful for getting rid of articles from people who post in more than one newsgroup, such as `cascaders`, since an article's newsgroup name is always in the header.

If you just want to block messages with a subject line about `cascades`, you could try:

```
/foo/:j
```

To kill anything that is a followup to any article, use this pattern:

```
/Subject: *Re:/:j
```

When done writing lines for each phrase to screen, exit the text editor as you normally would, and you'll be put back in `rn`.

One word of caution: go easy on the global killfile. An extensive global killfile, or one that makes frequent use of the `a:` modifier can dramatically slow down `rn`, since the system will now have to look at every single word in every single message in all the newsgroups you want to read.

If there's a particular person whose posts you never want to see again, first find his or address (which will be in the "from:" line of his postings) and then write a line in your killfile like this:

```
/From: *name@address\.all/h:j
```

1.8 Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (7 of 7) -- USENET HISTORY

In the late 1970s, Unix developers came up with a new feature: a system to allow Unix computers to exchange data over phone lines.

In 1979, two graduate students at Duke University in North Carolina, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, came up with the idea of using this system, known as UUCP, to distribute information of interest to people in the Unix community. Along with Steve Bellovin, a graduate student at the University of North Carolina and Steve Daniel, they wrote conferencing software and linked together computers at Duke and UNC.

Word quickly spread and by 1981, a graduate student at Berkeley, Mark Horton and a nearby high school student, Matt Glickman, had released a new version that added more features and was able to handle larger volumes of postings -- the original North Carolina program was meant for only a few articles in a newsgroup each day.

Today, Usenet connects tens of thousands of sites around the world, from mainframes to Amigas. With more than 3,000 newsgroups and untold thousands of readers, it is perhaps the world's largest computer network.

Also see [Internet history](#)