What is Usenet

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AN APPROXIMATE DESCRIPTION

Usenet is a world-wide distributed discussion system. It consists of a set of "newsgroups" with names that are classified hierarchically by subject. "Articles" or "messages" are "posted" to these newsgroups by people on computers with the appropriate software ± these articles are then broadcast to other interconnected computer systems via a wide variety of networks. Some newsgroups are "moderated"; in these newsgroups, the articles are first sent to a moderator for approval before appearing in the newsgroup. Usenet is available on a wide variety of computer systems and networks, but the bulk of modern Usenet traffic is transported over either the Internet or UUCP.

WHY IS USENET SO HARD TO DEFINE?

The first thing to understand about Usenet is that it is widely misunderstood.   Every day on Usenet, the "blind men and the elephant" phenomenon is evident, in spades.   In my opinion, more flame wars arise because of a lack of understanding of the nature of Usenet than from any other source.   And consider that such flame wars arise, of necessity, among people who are on Usenet. Imagine, then, how poorly understood Usenet must be by those outside!

Any essay on the nature of Usenet cannot ignore the erroneous impressions held by many Usenet users.   Therefore, this article will treat falsehoods first.   Keep reading for truth.   (Beauty, alas, is not relevant to Usenet.)

WHAT USENET IS NOT

TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not an organization.** No person or group has authority over Usenet as a whole.   No one controls who gets a news feed, which articles are propagated where, who can post articles, or anything else.   There is no "Usenet Incorporated,"

nor is there a "Usenet User's Group." You're on your own.

Granted, there are various activities organized by means of Usenet newsgroups. The newsgroup creation process is one such activity. But it would be a mistake to equate Usenet with the organized activities it makes possible. If they were to stop tomorrow, Usenet would go on without them.

924171_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a democracy.** Since there is no person or group in charge of Usenet as a whole ± i.e. there is no Usenet *government* ± it follows that Usenet cannot be a democracy, autocracy, or any other kind of *-acy*. (But see "The Camel's Nose?" below.)

754462_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not fair.** After all, who shall decide what's fair? For that matter, if someone is behaving unfairly, who's going to stop him? Neither you nor I, that's certain.

865741_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a right.** Some people misunderstand their local right of "freedom of speech" to mean that

they have a legal right to use others' computers to say what they wish in whatever way they wish, and the owners of said computers have no right to stop them.

Those people are wrong.   Freedom of speech also means freedom not to speak.   If I choose not to use my computer to aid your speech, that is my right.   Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one.

956854_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a public utility.** Some Usenet sites are publicly funded or subsidized.   Most of   them, by plain count, are not.   There is no government monopoly on Usenet, and little or no government control.

772534_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not an academic network.** It is no surprise that many Usenet sites are universities, research labs or other academic institutions.   Usenet originated with a link between two universities, and the exchange of ideas and information is what such institutions are all about.   But the passage of years has changed Usenet's character.   Today, by plain count, most Usenet

sites are commercial entities.

476378_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not an advertising medium.** Because of Usenet's roots in academia, and because Usenet depends so heavily on cooperation (sometimes among competitors), custom dictates that advertising be kept to a minimum. It is tolerated if it is infrequent, informative, and low-hype.

The "comp.newprod" newsgroup is **not** an exception to this rule: product announcements are screened by a moderator in an attempt to keep the hype-to-information ratio in check.

If you must engage in flackery for your company, use the "biz" hierarchy, which is explicitly "advertising-allowed", and which (like all of Usenet) is carried only by those sites that want it.

59794_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not the Internet.** The Internet is a wide-ranging network, parts of which are subsidized by various governments.   It carries many kinds of traffic, of which Usenet is only one.   And the Internet is only one of the various networks

carrying Usenet traffic.

172715_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a UUCP network.** UUCP is a protocol (actually a "protocol suite," but that's a technical quibble) for sending data over point-to-point connections, typically using dialup modems.   Sites use UUCP to carry many kinds of traffic, of which Usenet is only one.   And UUCP is only one of the various transports carrying Usenet traffic.

645284_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a United States network.** It is true that Usenet originated in the United States, and the fastest growth in Usenet sites has been there.   Nowadays, however, Usenet extends worldwide.

The heaviest concentrations of Usenet sites outside the U.S. seem to be in Canada, Europe, Australia and Japan.

Keep Usenet's worldwide nature in mind when you post articles. Even those who can read your language may have a culture wildly different from yours.   When your words are read, they might not

mean what you think they mean.

524336_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not a UNIX network.** Don't assume that everyone is using "rn" on a UNIX machine.   Among the systems used to read and post to Usenet are Vaxen running VMS, IBM mainframes, Amigas, Macintoshes and MS-DOS PCs.

794901_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ **Usenet is not an ASCII network.** The A in ASCII stands for "American".   Sites in other countries often use character sets better suited to their language(s) of choice; such are typically, though not always, supersets of ASCII. Even in the United States, ASCII is not universally used: IBM mainframes use (shudder) EBCDIC.   Ignore non-ASCII sites if you like, but they exist.

796483_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ Usenet is not software. There are dozens of software packages used at various sites to transport and read Usenet articles.   So no one program or package can be called "the Usenet software."

Software designed to support Usenet traffic can be (and is) used for

other kinds of communication, usually without risk of mixing the two. Such private communication networks are typically kept distinct from Usenet by the invention of newsgroup names different from the universally-recognized ones.

Well, enough negativity.

WHAT USENET IS

Usenet is the set of people who exchange articles tagged with one or more universally-recognized labels, called "newsgroups" (or "groups" for short).   There is often confusion about the precise set of newsgroups that constitute Usenet; one commonly accepted definition is that it consists of newsgroups listed in the periodic "List of Active Newsgroups" postings which appear regularly in news.lists and other newsgroups.

(Note that the correct term is "newsgroups"; they are not called areas, bases, boards, bboards, conferences, round tables, SIGs, echoes, rooms or usergroups!   Nor, as noted above, are they part of

the Internet, though they may reach your site over it.   Furthermore, the people who run the news systems are called news administrators, not sysops.   If you want to be understood, be accurate.)

DIVERSITY

If the above definition of Usenet sounds vague, that's because it is. It is almost impossible to generalize over all Usenet sites in any non-trivial way.   Usenet encompasses government agencies, large universities, high schools, businesses of all sizes, home computers of all descriptions, etc, etc.

(In response to the above paragraphs, it has been written that there is nothing vague about a network that carries megabytes of traffic per day.   I agree.   But at the fringes of Usenet, traffic is not so heavy. In the shadowy world of news-mail gateways and mailing lists, the line between Usenet and not-Usenet becomes very hard to draw.)

CONTROL

Every administrator controls his own site.   No one has any real control over any site but his own.

The administrator gets her power from the owner of the system she administers.   As long as her job performance pleases the owner, she can do whatever she pleases, up to and including cutting off Usenet entirely.   Them's the breaks.

Sites are not entirely without influence on their neighbors, however. There is a vague notion of "upstream" and "downstream" related to the direction of high-volume news flow.   To the extent that "upstream" sites decide what traffic they will carry for their "downstream" neighbors, those "upstream" sites have some influence on their neighbors' participation in Usenet.   But such influence is usually easy to circumvent; and heavy-handed manipulation typically results in a backlash of resentment.

PERIODIC POSTINGS

To help hold Usenet together, various articles (including this one) are periodically posted in newsgroups in the "news" hierarchy. These articles are provided as a public service by various volunteers. They are few but valuable.   Learn them well.

Among the periodic postings are lists of active newsgroups, both "standard" (for lack of a better term) and "alternative."   These lists, maintained by David Lawrence, reflect his personal view of Usenet, and as such are not "official" in any sense of the word. However, if you're looking for a description of subjects discussed on Usenet, or if you're starting up a new Usenet site, David's lists are an eminently reasonable place to start.

PROPAGATION

In the old days, when UUCP over long-distance dialup lines was the dominant means of article transmission, a few well-connected sites had real influence in determining which newsgroups would be carried where. Those sites called themselves "the backbone."

But things have changed.   Nowadays, even the smallest Internet site has connectivity the likes of which the backbone admin of yesteryear could only dream.   In addition, in the U.S., the advent of cheaper long-distance calls and high-speed modems has made long-distance Usenet feeds thinkable for smaller companies.

There is only one pre-eminent site for UUCP transport of Usenet in the U.S., namely UUNET.   But UUNET isn't a player in the propagation wars, because it never refuses any traffic.   UUNET charges by the minute, after all; and besides, to refuse based on content might jeopardize its legal status as an enhanced service provider.

All of the above applies to the U.S.   In Europe, different cost structures favored the creation of strictly controlled hierarchical organizations with central registries.   This is all very unlike the traditional mode of U.S. sites (pick a name, get the software, get a feed, you're on).   Europe's "benign monopolies," long uncontested, now face competition from looser organizations patterned after the U.S. model.

NEWSGROUP CREATION

The document that describes the current procedure for creating a new newsgroup is entitled "How To Create A New Newsgroup."   Its common name, however, is "the guidelines."

If you follow the guidelines, it is probable that your group will be created and will be widely propagated.

However: Because of the nature of Usenet, there is no way for any user to enforce the results of a newsgroup vote (or any other decision, for that matter).   Therefore, for your new newsgroup to be propagated widely, you must not only follow the letter of the guidelines; you must also follow its spirit.   And you must not allow even a whiff of shady dealings or dirty tricks to mar the vote.   In other words, don't tick off system administrators; they will get their revenge.

So, you may ask: How is a new user supposed to know anything about the "spirit" of the guidelines?   Obviously, he can't.   This fact

leads inexorably to the following recommendation:

906080_TaskArrowSm.tiff ¬ If you are a new user, don't try to create a new newsgroup.

If you have a good newsgroup idea, then read the "news.groups" newsgroup for a while (six months, at least) to find out how things work.   If you're too impatient to wait six months, then you really need to learn; read "news.groups" for a year instead.   If you just can't wait, find a Usenet old hand to help you with the request for discussion.   (All votes are run by neutral third-party Usenet Volunteer Votetakers).

Readers may think this advice unnecessarily strict.   Ignore it at your peril.   It is embarrassing to speak before learning.   It is foolish to jump into a society you don't understand with your mouth open.   And it is futile to try to force your will on people who can tune you out with the press of a key.

THE CAMEL'S NOSE?

As was observed above in "What Usenet Is Not," Usenet as a whole is not a democracy.   However, there is exactly one feature of Usenet that has a form of democracy: newsgroup creation.

A new newsgroup is unlikely to be widely propagated unless its sponsor follows the newsgroup creation guidelines; and the current guidelines require a new newsgroup to pass an open vote.

There are those who consider the newsgroup creation process to be a remarkably powerful form of democracy, since without any coercion, its decisions are almost always carried out.   In their view, the democratic aspect of newsgroup creation is the precursor to an organized and democratic Usenet Of The Future.

On the other hand, some consider the democratic aspect of the newsgroup creation process a sham and a fraud, since there is no power of enforcement behind its decisions, and since there appears little likelihood that any such power of enforcement will ever be given it. For them, the appearance of democracy is only a tool used to keep proponents of flawed newsgroup proposals from complaining

about their losses.

So, is Usenet on its way to full democracy?   Or will property rights
and mistrust of central authority win the day?   Beats me.

IF YOU ARE UNHAPPY...

Property rights being what they are, there is no higher authority on
Usenet than the people who own the machines on which Usenet
traffic is carried.   If the owner of the machine you use says, "We will
not carry alt.sex on this machine," and you are not happy with that
order, you have no Usenet recourse.   What can we outsiders do,
after all?

That doesn't mean you are without options.   Depending on the
nature of your site, you may have some internal political recourse.
Or you might find external pressure helpful.   Or, with a minimal
investment, you can get a feed of your own from somewhere else.
Computers capable of taking Usenet feeds are down in the $500
range now, UNIX-capable boxes are going for under $1000 (that

price is dropping fast, so by the time you read this, it may already be out-of-date!) and there are several freely-redistributable UNIX-like operating systems (NetBSD, FreeBSD, 386BSD and Linux from ftp sites all around the world, complete with source code and all the software needed to run a Usenet site) and at least two commercial UNIX or UNIX-like systems in the $100 price range.

No matter what, though, appealing to "Usenet" won't help.   Even if those who read such an appeal are sympathetic to your cause, they will almost certainly have even less influence at your site than you do.

By the same token, if you don't like what some user at another site is doing, only the administrator and owner of that site have any authority to do anything about it.   Persuade them that the user in question is a problem for them, and they might do something ± if they feel like it, that is.

If the user in question is the administrator or owner of the site from which she posts, forget it; you can't win.   If you can, arrange for

your newsreading software to ignore articles from her; and chalk one up to experience.

WORDS TO LIVE BY #1: USENET AS SOCIETY

Those who have never tried electronic communication may not be aware of what a "social skill" really is.   One social skill that must be learned, is that other people have points of view that are not only different, but *threatening*, to your own.   In turn, your opinions may be threatening to others.   There is nothing wrong with this.   Your beliefs need not be hidden behind a facade, as happens with face-to-face conversation.   Not everybody in the world is a bosom buddy, but you can still have a meaningful conversation with them. The person who cannot do this lacks in social skills.

Ð Nick Szabo

WORDS TO LIVE BY #2: USENET AS ANARCHY

Anarchy means having to put up with things that really piss you off.

Ð Unknown

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