CHAP4

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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
addresses, perhaps their phone numbers. Others add a quotation they
think is funny or profound and a disclaimer that their views are not
those of their employer. Still others add some ASCII-art graphics. And
then there are those who go totally berserk, posting huge creations with
multiple quotes, hideous ASCII "barfics" and more e-mail addresses than
anybody could humanly need. College freshmen unleashed on the Net seem
to excel at these.   You can see the best of the worst in the
alt.fan.warlord newsgroup, which exists solely to critique .sigs that go
too far, such as:

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 _____
|#####################################################################|
|#|                                                                 |#|
|#|    *****   *    *   *****     *    *   *****  *****  *****        |#|
|#|      *     *    *   *   *     **  **   *        *    *   *        |#|
|#|      *     ******  ***      * * *  ***     *   **  *****  *****   |#|
|#|      *     *    *  *   *     *    *   *     *   *   *   *  *       |#|
|#|      *     *    *  *****     *    *  *****  *****  *   *          |#|
|#|                                                                 |#|
|#|    ****   *****  *****      *****  *****  *****    *****  *****   |#|
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|#|   ****    *****  *****      **   *****  *****  *****    *****  *****  |#|
|#|                                                                 |#|
|#|          T-H-E  M-E-G-A  B-I-G  .S-I-G  C-O-M-P-A-N-Y            |#|
|#|              ~---------------------------~                      |#|
|#|   "Annoying people with huge net.signatures for over 20 years..."  |#|
|#|                                                                 |#|
|#|----------------------------------------------------------------- |#|
|#| "The difference between a net.idiot and a bucket of shit is that at |#|
|#|  least a bucket can be emptied.  Let me further illustrate my point |#|
|#|  by comparing these charts here. (pulls out charts)  Here we have a |#|
|#|  user who not only flames people who don't agree with his narrow- |#|
|#|  minded drivel, but he has this huge signature that takes up many |#|
|#|  pages with useless quotes.  This also makes reading his frequented |#|
|#|  newsgroups a torture akin to having at 300 baud modem on a VAX. I |#|
|#|  might also add that his contribution to society rivals only toxic |#|
|#|  dump sites."                                                     |#|
|#|                      -- Robert A. Dumpstik, Jr                   |#|
|#|                         President of The Mega Big Sig Company     |#|
|#|                         September 13th, 1990 at 4:15pm            |#|
|#|                         During his speech at the "Net.abusers     |#|
```

```
|#|                        Society Luncheon" during the              |#|
|#|                        "1990 Net.idiots Annual Convention"        |#|
|#|_____|#|
|#|                                                                   |#|
|#| Thomas Babbit, III: 5th Assistant to the Vice President of Sales  |#|
|#|      __                                                           |#|
|#|   ==========    _____        Digital Widget Manufacturing Co.    |#|
|#|         \    /                1147 Complex Incorporated Drive      |#|
|#|       )-=======               Suite 215                           |#|
|#|                               Nostromo, VA 22550-1147             |#|
|#| #NC-17 Enterpoop Ship :)      Phone # 804-844-2525                |#|
|#|    ----------------           Fax # 804-411-1115                  |#|
|#| "Shut up, Wesley!"            Online Service # 804-411-1100        |#|
|#|              -- Me            at 300-2400, and now 9600 baud!      |#|
|#|                               PUNet: tbabb!digwig!nostromo        |#|
|#| Home address:                 InterNet: dvader@imperial.emp.com   |#|
|#| Thomas Babbit, III            Prodigy: Still awaiting author-      |#|
|#| 104 Luzyer Way                         ization                    |#|
|#| Sulaco, VA 22545              "Manufacturing educational widget   |#|
|#| Phone # 804-555-1524           design for over 3 years..."        |#|
|#|===================================================================|#|
|#|                                                                   |#|
|#|  Introducing:                                                     |#|
|#|                                                                   |#|
|#|                              _____                               |#|
|#|  The  |\  /|                      /                               |#|
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|#| 50Megs Online!  The k00l BBS for rad teens!  Lots of games and many|#|
|#| bases for kul topix!  Call now and be validated to the Metelhed Zone|#|
|#|                       -- 804-555-8500 --                          |#|
|#|\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\\V//////////////////////////////////|#|
|#| "This is the end, my friend..."      -- The Doors                 |#|
|###################################################################|
-----------------------------------------------------------------------
Hit "b" to continue

Hahahha... fooled u!
```

1.7   Chapter 4: Usenet customs & myths (6 of 7) -- KILLFILES

     As you keep reading Usenet, you are going to run across things or
people that really drive you nuts -- or that you just get tired of seeing.
     Killfiles are just the thing for you. When you start your
newsreader, it checks to see if you have any lists of words, phrases or
names you don't want to see. If you do, then it blanks out any messages
containing those words.
     Such as cascades.
     As you saw earlier, when you post a reply to a message and include
parts of that message, the original lines show up with a > in front of
them. Well, what if you reply to a reply? Then you get a >> in front of
the line. And if you reply to that reply? You get >>>. Keep this up, and

soon you get a triangle of >'s building up in your message.
     There are people who like building up these triangles, or cascades.
They'll "respond" to your message by deleting everything you've said,
leaving only the "In message 123435, you said:" part and the last line of
your message, to which they add a nonsensical retort. On and on they go
until the triangle has reached the right end of the page. Then they try
to expand the triangle by deleting one > with each new line. Whoever gets
to finish this mega-triangle wins.
     There is even a newsgroup just for such folks: alt.cascade.
Unfortunately, cascaders would generally rather cascade in other
newsgroups. Because it takes a lot of messages to build up a completed
cascade, the targeted newsgroup soon fills up with these messages. Of
course, if you complain, you'll be bombarded with messages about the
First Amendment and artistic expression -- or worse, with another
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