Reviving Usenet

Usenet Big-8
Management Board
https://www.big-8.org

✉ jsevans@big-8.org

About Me

- Training Engineer for SUSE Linux

- Board Member for B8MB

- Volunteer for Tor Project

- All around nerd

What is Usenet?

Usenet is a worldwide distributed discussion network.

It is the original long-form messaging system that predates the Internet as we know it.

What is Usenet?

"Usenet is like a herd of performing elephants with diarrhea. Massive, difficult to redirect, awe-inspiring, entertaining, and a source of mind-boggling amounts of excrement when you least expect it."

—Gene Spafford, 1992

How does it work?

Users read and send articles (messages) on a News server. That server exchanges articles with other News servers in the network. The collection of servers is known as the Usenet.

Benefits of Usenet

- Open

- Decentralized

- Simplicity

- Owned by no one

- Resilient

- Resistant to censorship

Open: By open, I mean that it can be backed up and archived by anyone. No one owns a central database where the messages are stored.

Decentralized: There is no one core to Usenet

Simplicity: Think of a cross between email and a message board like Reddit except everything is plain text. That means that messages are small and fast and easy to keep.

Owned by no one: Some companies run News servers and even charge admission to use them.

Resilient: I every News server except one where shut down. Usenet would still exist.

Resistant to censorship: Providers have a hard time trying to censor Usenet. They can decide not to carry a controversial group, but the users who want that group with go to another provider. They can decide to delete a message on their server, but they can't delete it from the rest of Usenet

Organization

Usenet is organized into Newsgroups. Each group is generally a topic for discussion for that group.

Newsgroups are organized into hierarchies.

alt.bitcoins is in the alt.* hierarchy

sci.crypt is in the sci.* hiearchy

The Usenet Big-8

comp.*   sci.*

misc.*   soc.*

news.*   talk.*

rec.*   humanities.*

The Big-8 Management Board

- Creates well-named, well-used newsgroups in the Big-8 Usenet hierarchies

- Makes necessary adjustments to existing groups

- Removes groups that are not well-used

- Assists and encourages the support of a canonical Big-8 newsgroup list by Usenet sites

A Little History…

In 1980…

There was no internet

The was only the ARPANET and few had access

Stephen Daniel: We (or at least I) had little idea of what was really going on on the ARPANET, but we knew we were excluded. Even if we had been allowed to join, there was no way of coming up with the money. **It was commonly accepted at the time that to join the ARPANET took political connections and $100,000.** I don't know if that assumption was true, but we were so far from having either connections or $$ that we didn't even try. **The 'Poor man's ARPANET' was our way of joining the Computer Science community and we made a deliberate attempt to extend it to other not-well-endowed members of the community.** It is hard to believe in retrospect," he concludes, "but we were initially disappointed at how few people joined us. We attributed this lack more to the cost of autodialers than lack of desire. (Netizens)

It was commonly accepted at the time that to join the ARPANET took political connections and $100,000.

Better than email

Email had been around for years before Usenet, but it was limited to the people using the same computer

There was no way to directly talk to people outside with the ARPANET

In late 1979, students from Duke and UNC, two schools without ARPANET access, decided that they would like to be able to communicate directly for research purposes even though they lacked access to ARPANET.

https://today.duke.edu/2010/05/usenet.html
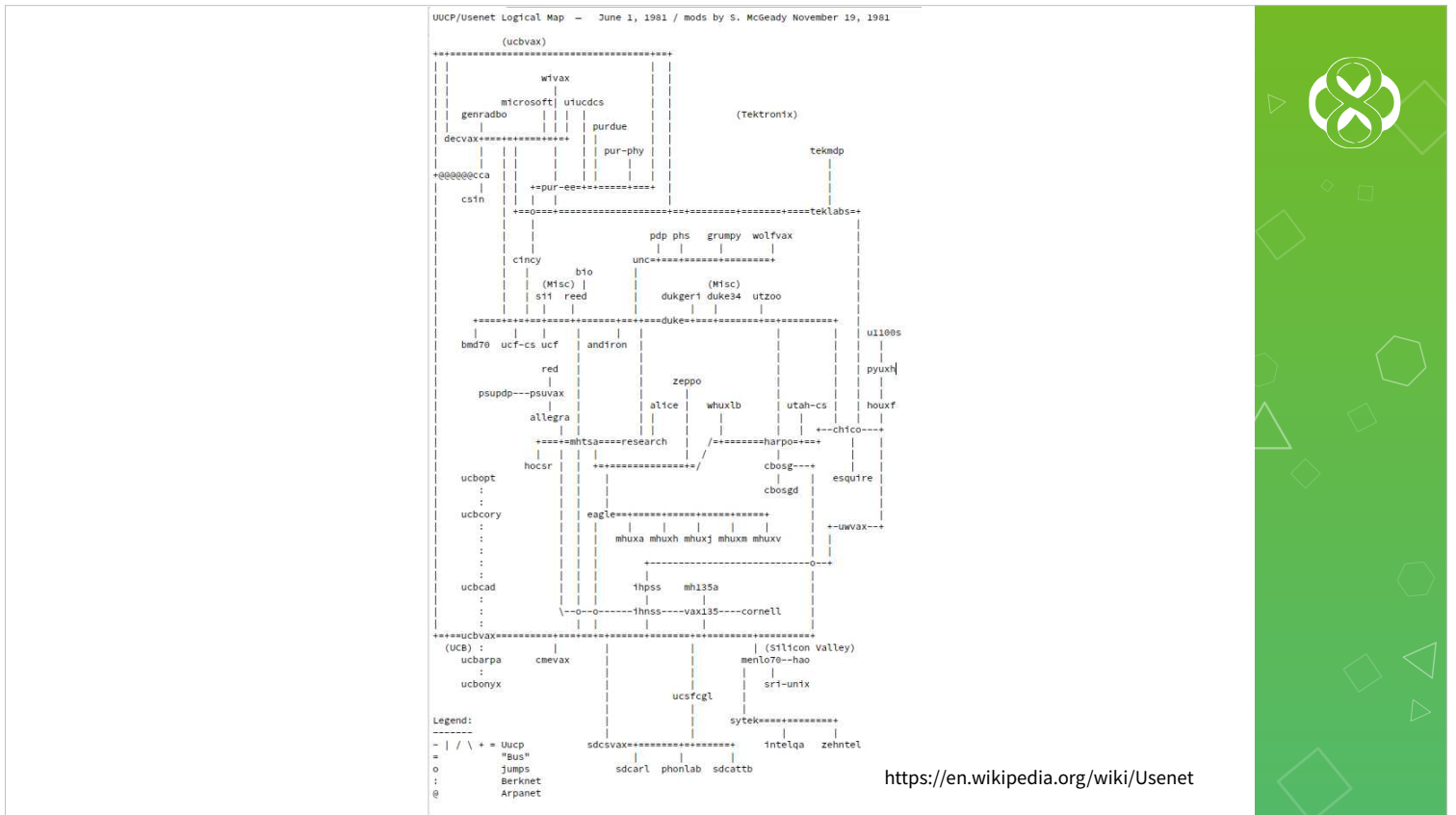

https://www.cs.unc.edu/History/EarlyAdulthood.html

Having installed the new Unix version 7 OS on their PDP-11 minicomputers, they used a new communications protocol called UUCP to make this happen. Anyone with a Unix system and a modem could connect using the Usenet software could connect and send and read messages from anywhere else.
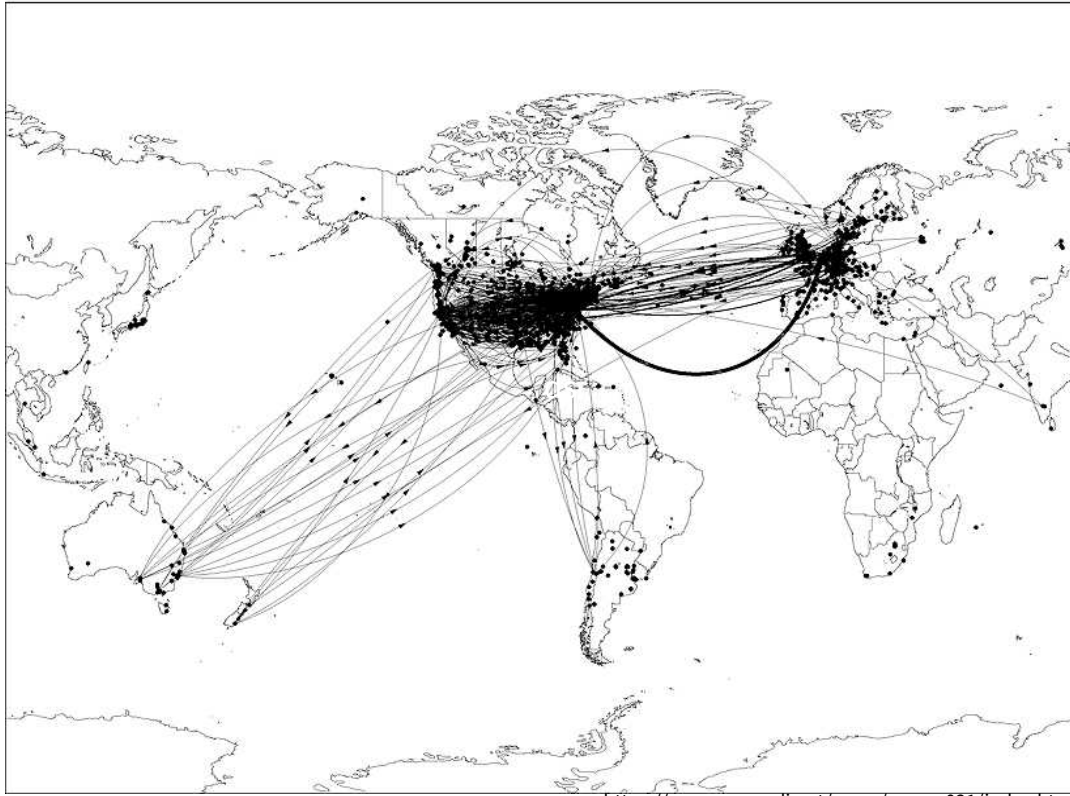
The beginning

Year	Sites (approx)	Articles/Day (average)
1979	3	2
1980	15	10
1981	150	20
1982	400	50
1983	600	120
1984	900	225
1985	1300	375
1986	2500	500
1987	5000	1000
1988	11000	1800

"Managing Usenet" David Lawrence

From the beginning, the Usenet achieved rapid growth. Hundred of new News servers were added yearly. Universities and other institutions wanted to a be a part of the network because they knew that knowledge and communication is everything when it comes to growth.

This is a logical map of the Usenet approximately 2 years after it was first concieved.

Complete aggregate news flow, worldwide
Line width proportional to directional effective flow volume

DECWRL netmap-2.1 by Brian Reid at Thu May 13 13:49:34 1993
Gall Stereographic Projection, Map center: [15 N, 88 W]

https://mappa.mundi.net/maps/maps_021/index.html

This is the Usenet in 1993

The Eternal September

Every September new students would join university campuses and had their first taste of the Usenet. The Usenet had it's own rules for polite behavior called "Netiquette" and each year, this had to be impressed on new users less they turn the Usenet into a free for all.

In 1993, AOL, the largest internet service provider in the US provided their users with free access to the Usenet. Usenet access was no longer restricted to academia. It was now wide open and impossible to control. It was deemed: The Eternal September

In 2001, Google bought Deja's Usenet archives and quickly became one of the largest free Usenet providers in the world.

The service was completely free, easy to use on the web, and completely unfiltered. Including no spam filtering.

Search Groups

[   ] [Google Search]   Usenet Advanced Search
                                           Usenet Help
⦿ Search Groups (Beta)   ○ Search the Web

Browse Groups

alt. (alternative)
Any conceivable topic...

biz. (business)
Business products, services, reviews...

comp. (computers)
Hardware, software, consumer info...

humanities. (humanities)
Fine art, literature, philosophy...

misc. (miscellaneous)
Employment, health, and much more...

More groups...

news. (news)
Info about Usenet news...

rec. (recreation)
Games, hobbies, sports...

sci. (science)
Applied science, social science...

soc. (society)
Social issues, culture...

talk. (talk)
Current issues and debates...

AOL Pulls Plug on Newsgroup Service

By By **Brian McWilliams**, Guest Columnist | Published 16 years ago |

💬 **15 Comments**   👍 Like 0   🐦 Tweet

PERSPECTIVE The world's largest ISP is cutting off direct access to one of the oldest, coolest -- and strangest -- parts of the Internet.

America Online has quietly announced that it will discontinue providing member access to Usenet newsgroups next month. In recent days, AOL subscribers who access keyword "Newsgroups" are greeted with a pop-up message informing them of the change: "Please Note: The AOL Newsgroup service will be discontinued in early 2005."

According to a notice on AOL's Web site, the newsgroup shut-off will occur in February, severing subscribers from the thousands of discussion groups that make up Usenet.

AOL officials weren't immediately available to explain the newsgroup shutdown. The ISP's pop-up message advises subscribers that newsgroup services are available from third-party providers. The message also notes that users with separate high-speed connections may be able to arrange newsgroup access through their broadband provider. AOL users can read newsgroups over the Web using Google Groups, the message said.

3 top ISPs to block access to sources of child porn

Verizon, Time Warner Cable, Sprint also agree to use a quick response system, provide $1.12M to fund further efforts

By Linda Rosencrance

June 10, 2008 12:00 PM ET

Add a comment   + Briefcase

Computerworld - Verizon Communications Inc., Time Warner Cable Inc. and Sprint Nextel Corp. have signed an agreement with New York Attorney General Andrew Cuomo to shut down access to two major sources of child pornography.

This is the first time that three of the world's largest Internet service providers have agreed to eliminate access to child pornography newsgroups, which are major suppliers of the illegal images, according to a statement from Cuomo's office. The ISPs have also agreed to purge their servers of child pornography Web sites identified by the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, the Cuomo said in the statement.

"Our strategy was somewhat of a different strategy than most law enforcement agencies take. Rather than going after the individual user, our strategy was to go toward the supplier side," Cuomo said at a press conference today. "If you have a pool of users and the pool keeps refilling, rather than trying to empty the pool with a bucket, go turn off the faucet and stop the flow of material."

An undercover investigation by the attorney general's office found that "newsgroups" -- online public bulletin boards where users can upload and download files -- are a major source of online child pornography, the statement said. Because users access newsgroups through their ISPs, Verizon, Time Warner Cable and Sprint have agreed to completely block access to all child pornography newsgroups.

A PIECE OF INTERNET HISTORY

Duke to shut Usenet server, home to the first electronic newsgroups

CARA BONNETT

This week marks the end of an era for one of the earliest pieces of Internet history, which got its start at Duke more than 30 years ago.

On May 20, Duke will shut down its Usenet server, which provides access to a worldwide electronic discussion network of newsgroups started in 1979 by two Duke graduate students, Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis.

Working with a graduate student at UNC-Chapel Hill, they came up with a simple program to exchange messages and files between computers at Duke and UNC using telephone modems.
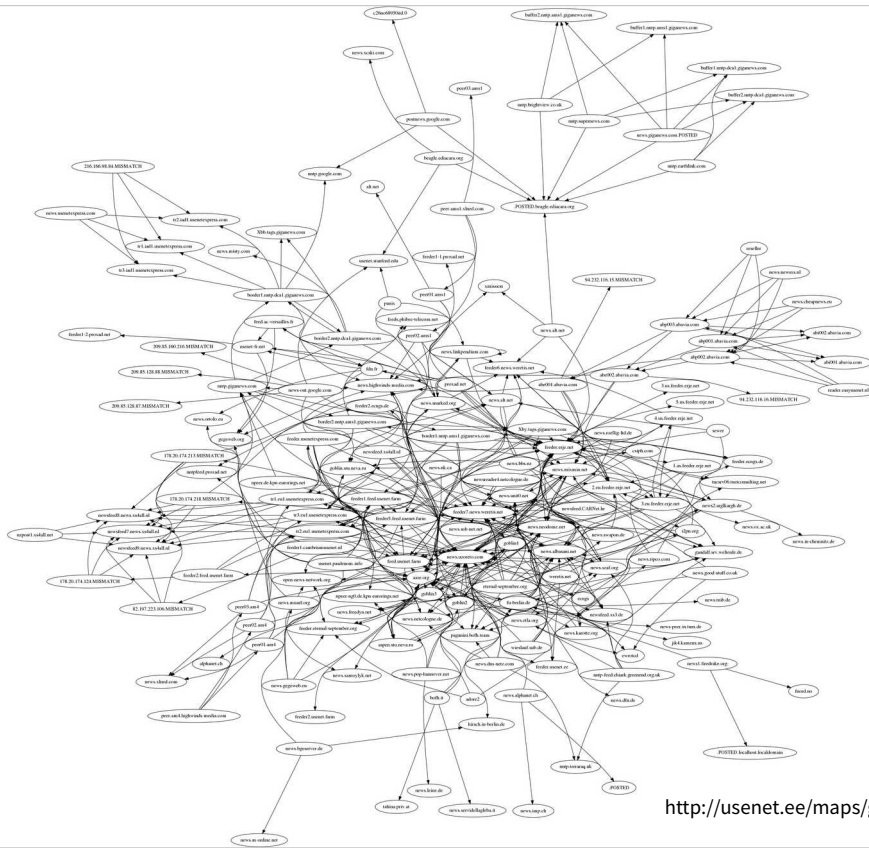
The "Users Network," Usenet for short, grew into an international electronic discussion forum with more than 120,000 newsgroups dedicated to various topics, from local dining to computer programming languages. Each group had a distinctive name such as soc.history or sci.math.

Spam

Subject	Score	Author	Lines	Date
BUY YOUR PRESCRIPTION PILLS WITHOUT PRESCRIPTION 💊 (adderall,hydromorphone,hydrocod...	-9999	#Adderall, #Oxycodone, #vyvanse, #Xanax <keysto...	101	Mar 19 2019
Where to Order Pills :-Lyrica , Vyvanse , OxyContin , Xanax-2mg, Oxycodone , Ritalin, Adderall xr, Dil...	-9999	#Adderall, #Oxycodone, #vyvanse, #Xanax <keysto...	101	Mar 17 2019
Where to Order online :-Lyrica , Vyvanse , OxyContin , Xanax 2mg, Suboxone, Oxycodone , Ritalin, Ad...	-9999	#Adderall, #Oxycodone, #vyvanse, #Xanax <keysto...	102	Mar 16 2019
Best online pharmacy to buy adderall |{ Wickr id: intermeds247 } |Order vyvanse from secured sourc...		#Adderall, #Oxycodone, #vyvanse, #Xanax <keysto...	101	Mar 16 2019
Us congress hearing of maan alsaan Money laundry ... قضية الكونغرس لغسيل الأموال للملیادیر	-9999	lolo sami <loveu4ever.earth@gmail.com>	21	Mar 10 2019
Best online pharmacy to buy adderall |{ Wickr id: intermeds247 } |Order vyvanse from secured sourc...		#Adderall, #Oxycodone, #vyvanse, #Xanax <keysto...	102	Mar 08 2019
PHARMACEUTICAL STORE♥♥♥.♥contact:+1(318)996-1772 ♥♥♥ Whatsapp or Wickr ID: legitvendo...	-9999	"Website / References Available" <johnsonlander11...	124	Mar 08 2019
PHARMACEUTICAL STORE♥♥♥.♥contact:+1(318)996-1772 ♥♥♥ Whatsapp or Wickr ID: legitvendo...		"Website / References Available" <johnsonlander11...	123	Mar 08 2019
STORE♥♥♥.♥contact:+1(318)996-1772 ♥♥♥ Whatsapp or Wickr ID: legitvendor2019 ......⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜⬜ ...		"Website / References Available" <johnsonlander11...	0	Mar 05 2019
The free.* FAQ (version 2.0.1)		tskirvin@killfile.org (Tim Skirvin)	338	Mar 01 2019
New Open Contract Positions------BI Analyst & BI Developer-------NYC, NY & Sunnyvale, CA		kirantoj.1.4.3@gmail.com	54	Feb 27 2019
Best online pharmacy to buy adderall |{ Wickr id: intermeds247 } |Order vyvanse from secured sourc...		Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	81	Feb 24 2019
Best online store to Order painkillers , adhd and xanax online	adderall , Nembutal ,Email: keystone...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	81	Feb 23 2019
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^ where to Order Vyvanse ,Adderall xr, OxyContin , lyrica , concerta , Suboxone , Percs , Ritalin , Xelo...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	82	Feb 23 2019
^ where to Order Vyvanse ,Adderall xr, OxyContin , lyrica , concerta , Suboxone , Percs , Ritalin , Xelo...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	82	Feb 23 2019
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Buy Prescription Drugs Securely online 💊 (adderall,Klonopin,hydrocodone, alprazolam Xanax,Dila...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	75	Feb 16 2019
Norco, Oxymorphone pills and powder morphine, Watson540, Valium, Oxycodone, MDMA, Opana, O...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	76	Feb 15 2019
Order real 💯 OxyContin , vyvanse , HYDROCODONE, concerta, PERCOCET, Seconal , ROXICODONE, o...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	75	Feb 14 2019
Order Vyvanse ,Adderall xr, OxyContin , lyrica , concerta , Suboxone , Percs , Ritalin ,Xeloda, Advair ...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	76	Feb 14 2019
Discreet & Reliable Services 💯 . # Buy Painkillers |Anti-Anxiety |Anti-Depression |Weight-loss |Pain...	-9999	Painkillers - Stimulants - AntiAnxiety pills <keysto...	75	Feb 13 2019
Us congress hearing of maan alsaan Money laundry ... قضية الكونغرس لغسيل الأموال للملیادیر	-9999	lolo sami <loveu4ever.earth@gmail.com>	16	Feb 11 2019
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http://usenet.ee/maps/graph3-n-20200402.png

Dead Board

Sometime in 2014, all of the members of the Big-8 Management board stepped down or had their memberships lapse without anyone to take up the mantle

Dead Board

Without the Big-8 board, no new newsgroups could be created, old ones could not be removed, and changes could not be made to existing newsgroups.

Dead Board

Groups that had once been moderated were now completely silent without a moderator.

It looked like the death of much of the Usenet was finally at hand.

A Thread from Reddit

r/usenet · Posted by u/Capitan_Picard 8 months ago

Big 8 Management Board

I thought some of you might be interested in this. This is an email that I wrote earlier today. I will post again if I get a reply.

Dear Big 8 board,

I was interested in created a new comp.* newsgroup. However, the latest message in the news.groups.proposals mailing list is from 2018.

I would like to know what is the status of the Big 8 board. Has this organization been decommissioned? If not, I will submit a new RFD, possibly the first in nearly 2 years, and I would like to blog about my experience and try to garner new curiosity about Usenet on Reddit and other places.

Thank you for your time.

Last winter, I wrote to the official email address for the B8MB and I actually got some replies. I then created a post on Reddit about what I had been doing.

I got a few replies, and one person, Tristan Miller, who is also an OpenSUSE member, had also been trying to reach the board with little success.

A Glimmer of Hope

Shortly after contacting former board members, we were asked by them if we could tell a little about ourselves with the goal of taking over the board.

My Goals for the B8MB

- See the B8MB staffed with active volunteers.

- Make contacts with current Usenet providers to ensure that the canonical list of Big-8 newsgroups is observed and used.

- Begin accepting RFD's for new newsgroups. Growth is life!

- Begin auditing unused, outdated newsgroups

- Make contacts with journalists, YouTubers, and others in the IT world to get the word out that Usenet is in fact alive and well and to drive new users to it.

Handing over the Keys

Subject: Status of the Big 8 Management Board
From: board@big-8.org (Big 8 Management Board)
Date: Thu, 30 Apr 2020 01:06:49 EDT
User-Agent: MacSOUP/2.8.5 (ea919cf118) (Mac OS 10.14.6)
Followup-To: news.groups

This is an official communication from the Big-8 Management Board. Please note that followups are set to news.groups.

After a careful review of the Big 8 Management Board's activity and process, all remaining members of the Big 8 Management Board opted not to consider re-election and instead have voted to install two new volunteers as the new members of the Big 8 Management Board. These two volunteers are:

Tristan Miller Jason Evans

We believe these volunteers have the technical and social skills necessary to maintain the Big-8. Please give them your support while they develop their vision for the future mission and goals of the Big 8 Board.

Kathy Morgan, Chairperson Emeritus Bill Horne, former Chairperson

On April 25, 2020 Tristan and I joined a video conference with 3 former board members and officially became the new board.

Work...

Over the next few weeks, I set up a new web and mail server for our own needs.

And then the web server where the website had been hosted crashed before we were able to access it.

Waiting

This is a temporary page.

Please follow this link.

It took weeks to get access to the server with the failed website because the former owner wouldn't reply to us directly and only to the former board members

Another Member

Subject: Status of the Big-8 Management Board
From: Jason Evans <jsevans@big-8.org>
Date: Wed, 22 Jul 2020 08:43:37 EDT
Newsgroups: news.announce.newgroups,news.groups
User-Agent: Pan/0.146 (Hic habitat felicitas; 8107378 git@gitlab.gnome.org:GNOME/pan.git)
Followup-To: news.groups

This is an official communication from the Big-8 Management Board. Please note that followups are set to news.groups.

After a careful review of the Big-8 Management Board's activity and process, on May 8, 2020, a new member was voted in to the Board:

      Rayner Lucas

We believe that he has the technical and social skills necessary to help maintain the Big-8. Please give him your support while we continue the vision, mission, and goals of the Big-8 Board.

Jason Evans, Co-chair Tristan Miller, Co-chair

During this time, we brought on a third board member, Rayner Lucas, to help with some of the work and to have another voice in case there were disagreements.

Progress and Successes

On June 28th, the new website was finally online.

Shortly after that we began publishing all meeting minutes online for transparency

We also took over management of one of the most popular moderation software packages and are in the process of adding it to the FSF source repository.

Questions to be Answered

Why are we doing this?

Does anyone even care about Usenet anymore?

Should anyone care?

Why are we doing this?

Usenet is important. It's important as a piece of our internet heritage and history and it also has a future but too many people have forgotten about it or they never knew about it in the first place. And yet it's not as dead as it might seem. In the past few weeks, I've found surprising amounts of activity in newsgroups that might be assumed to be dead and gone. In my opinion, the B8MB can be more than just people who create and delete newsgroups. They should be working with others to educate and show what Usenet has to offer.

Does anyone even care about Usenet anymore?

Yes, there are still people who have active lively conversations on Usenet every day.

Should anyone care?

We've already talked about the pros of Usenet. It is owned by no corporate entity. It has no central authority. It is resistant to censorship. It is also relatively anonymous.

We also admit that it's not for everybody. In the Eternal September days, the flood gates were opened and Usenet was inundated with users who had no idea what it was or how to use it. Chaos reigned, dogs and cats living together, etc. Etc. The Usenet grew and was quickly burned out after over a decade of dedicated use.

What we are looking for are people who care more about unfiltered, decentralized communication than just about ease of use.

Usenet can not replace Facebook, Twitter, or any other social media sites. However, it can provide an alternative.

The Future

- Spread the word

- Keep on being a normal and stable board

A Grad Student in Finland

In 1991, a Finnish grad student by the name of Linus Torvalds was interested in designing his own operating system. At the time, some hobbyists were using a closed source OS that was based on Unix called Minix.

Linus wanted his OS to be free, but he promised that it wouldn't be and professional.

a (free) operating system

I'm doing a (free) operating system (just a hobby, won't be big and professional like gnu) for 386(486) AT clones.

…

I've currently ported bash(1.08) and gcc(1.40), and things seem to work.

This implies that I'll get something practical within a few months, and I'd like to know what features most people would want. Any suggestions are welcome, but I won't promise I'll implement them :-)

Subject: LINUX is obsolete

As most of you know, for me MINIX is a hobby, something that I do in the evening when I get bored writing books and there are no major wars, revolutions, or senate hearings being televised live on CNN. My real job is a professor and researcher in the area of operating systems.

As a result of my occupation, **I think I know a bit about where operating are going in the next decade or so**.

Advertisement

Do you pine for the nice days of minix-1.1, when men were men and wrote their own device drivers? Are you without a nice project and just dying to cut your teeth on a OS you can try to modify for your needs? Are you finding it frustrating when everything works on minix? No more all-nighters to get a nifty program working? Then this post might be just for you :-)

Kremvax
From Russian with Love

Well, today, 840401, this is at last the Socialist Union of Soviet Republics joining the Usenet network and saying hallo to everybody.

--

   K. Chernenko, Moscow, USSR

This isn't funny. I hope you get so much mail in response to this that you're reading it for a week straight. F**k you.

get out of our network!!!

If your net contact is used as another channel for government-authored propaganda, not too many of us will be interested in reading your messages.

Wow!

Is this for real? Honest-to-god Russia? Gee. I never thought that I'd see it. Does this imply that Unix is behind the Iron curtain?

I want to voice my support of those who feel that the "April Fool's" joke about the USSR on the USENET was bad form. Particularly when it appeared in what many of us had come to rely on as the authoritative source for nuews about the network.

Welcome! [From an isolated CIA outpost]

Does anyone seriously doubt that Chernenko, who has no expertise in foreign policy, and probably can't speak, let alone write, in another language, would post something to the net? That joke was in good taste. Anyone who feels taken in by that joke should ask him/herself **why the net is so central to his/her life**.

Cypherpunks

Untraceable Digital Cash

A copy of my paper "Untraceable Digital Cash, Information Markets, and BlackNet is now at this URL: www.law.miami.edu/~froomkin/articles/tcmay.htm

This is my position paper for the panel discussion "Governmental and Social Implications of Digital Money" at the upcoming Computers, Freedom, and Privacy (CFP) Conference in San Francisco, March 11-14, 1997.

This paper summarizes several of the ideas I often focus on. A much longer version of this paper is slated to appear later this year in the new Vernor Vinge re-issue of "True Names." My paper, "True Nyms and Crypto Anarchy," deals with the issues of pseudonyms, digital money, and crypto anarchy at length.

–Tim May

Communities

The point is this: communities are islands which cause their members to adapt their own interests to the dominant interests, or to change those interests through argumentation.

– Tim May

Anarchy

So, what can be meant by saying the Cypherpunks list was an "anarchy"? What most of us meant, surely, was that there was no leadership save that of leading through one's words. No ruling board of directors, no elections, no voting process, no "top." ("no top," "no arch," anarchy)

--Tim May

If we bring this back to Usenet, is Usenet anarchy? Yes, but it's also structured from within. Usenet has no governance, Usenet needs no governance.

alt.tasteless vs rec.pets.cats

alt.tasteless was 4chan before there was 4chan. At the time, Usenet access was available in most universities and as students came back for the fall, they would get their first tastes of Usenet.

Students get bored and sometimes they get mean. One user who called himself "Trashcan Man" decided to go to a rec.pets.cats and play a little prank.

I have two cats - Sootikin (Sooti for short) a 2-year old female, and Choad.

Choad (stupid name) is a neutered tom who was dumped on me by my scumbag ex-roommate (he had been given it by one of the two women he was dating at the time).

I'm not what you would call a real studly type guy (although I have a lot of women friends), so when I date it's really important to me. Anyway, Sooti goes into heat something fierce (sometimes it seems like it's two weeks on, two weeks off). I had a date a while back, when she was really bad. Yowling and presenting all the time - not the most auspicious setting for a date. While dinner was cooking, I tried to stimulate her vagina with a Q-tip because I had heard that one can induce ovulation that way. My date came into the bathroom while I was doing this, and needless to say I don't think she bought my explanation. The date was a very icy experience after that.

Choad's problem is that he has really stinky shits (paint peelers).

During my most recent date - I don't know if this was a jealousy thing - he shit in the bathtub. I live in a loft, and the bathroom is open for ventilation, so in a few seconds we were gasping for air. Another date ruined, I'm getting desperate.

What should I do. I love my cats, so I don't want to get rid of them, but I can't go on like this any more. It's my love life, or them. Please help!!!

Moby

"A lot of people don't understand how pet owners feel about their pets."

"Suppose someone went around in a park putting up posters of your kid getting mutilated. This is what it was like." (1994)

Special thanks to

- Tristan Miller
- Rayner Lucas
- Todd M. McComb
- r/Usenet

- Steven Bellovin
- Kathy Morgan
- Bill Horne

Big-8 Management Group

https://www.big-8.org