

Usenet and the Proactive Ombudsman

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INTRODUCTION

There is hardly any interest in Usenet in governmental circles at the moment. That is not surprising, given that the government's task is to organize society, while for Usenet, spontaneity is extremely important. However, it is still worth investigating whether government and Usenet can grow toward one another. Usenet can become a "public city park" of the Internet, as suggested by Stewart, Gil-Equi, and Pileggi (2004). They overlook this possibility, although Usenet meets a number of the basic conditions. It is an open, non-purposive space and "provides a place where different people cross paths, without necessarily interacting all the time" (Stewart, 2005, p. 356). The conversations in that city park can contribute to democratic decision-making or to administrative objectives, if they lead to anything. A system of order imposed from above will be suffocating. This article outlines a method of ensuring that those conversations are given a focus. Government itself can then ensure that Usenet conversations have a focus by providing and collecting information, while respecting other users, as an ordinary user.

BACKGROUND

According to Hauben and Hauben (1997), "Usenet was born in 1979 when Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis, graduate students at Duke University in North Carolina, conceived of creating a computer network to link together those in the Unix community." (p. 39). Their idea was for computers to automatically call one another to see whether there were any changes in their Usenet databases. If there were any changes, they would be downloaded to the caller computer. Any user would be able to post a message somewhere within the Usenet system; that message would then be distributed throughout that system. In other words, people would reply to one another.

Usenet, in fact, went on to become the poor man's ARPANET (later: World Wide Web). In order to access ARPANET at that time, one needed about \$100,000 and some political connections; in other words, ARPANET/World Wide Web was a system for use by large institutions. Unlike ARPANET/World Wide Web, Usenet is available to any user, as both consumer and producer of

information. Moreover, Usenet allows the recipient to determine what he or she wants to receive, whereas ARPANET determines centrally what is displayed. A Usenet recipient also selects the postings he or she wishes to download and determines the format in which he or she wishes them to appear; in order to do this, he or she makes use of a "newsreader." The various contributions in response to postings can be categorised into "threads," meaning that one can see in graphic form how a particular interchange is progressing.

Initially, new communication techniques are used by the relevant experts and are only discovered by the general public at a later date. Usenet was no exception: the experts were pioneering computer users and it was not until the late twentieth century that the general public began to make use of the system. Hauben and Hauben (1997) and many others were extremely enthusiastic about the communicative power of Usenet, identifying a new democratic élan within it that created a lively and creative community. Hauben and Hauben's book was written shortly before a deterioration set in in that respect. The poor man's World Wide Web became the scene of a kind of warfare. The absence of an institutional framework was celebrated as anarchy, at the cost of the exchange of actual substance. However, a number of "old boys behind closed doors" (Lovink, 2003, p. 258) continued to believe in the communicative value of Usenet and—despite the impending "information overload" (Durlak, O'Brien, & Yigit, 1987)—made great efforts to preserve the good manners developed in the period when Usenet had been the preserve of the experts (Moreas, 1998).

FLAME-WARS

Early users of Usenet were still building up the Usenet community, and everyone involved could make his or her contribution. The later Usenet, by contrast, is seen as a finished technical infrastructure. A number of "netiquette" rules, both written and unwritten, specify how one is meant to behave. There is no institution where further sanctionment can take place and there are no effective sanctions if one breaches the rules.

In contrast to the community spirit of the early Usenet, participants now feel that they are at liberty to express

themselves freely, with no obligations and without being held accountable. In such a climate, it is easier for “flame wars” to get started and to rage for longer. This climate of misunderstanding and quarrelling makes Usenet useless for governmental purposes.

“Flaming” means verbally abusing someone by posting angry or derogatory messages. A “flame war” is an interchange of such postings; it may go on for weeks. Such conflicts are encouraged by the fact that there are no longer any accepted bounds of behaviour, because one is dealing here with contact that takes place without the other person or persons actually being present (Köhler, 1999, p. 150; Schroth, 2002, p. 129). If one’s interlocutor is in fact present, one takes account of him, either consciously or unconsciously. A Usenet poster is only required to qualify his remarks if the urge to do so comes from within himself (Hauben & Hauben, 1997, p. 25). Some posters clearly enjoy starting a flame war and then keeping it going; in some cases this leads to their bringing about the demise of an interesting newsgroup (Lovink, 2003, p. 124).

Methods are being conceived to prevent flaming. Hauben and Hauben (1997, p. 25) and Shirky (2004), for example, think that the solution is improved software. Shirky refers to a number of initiatives and ideas to set up the software in such a way as to prevent disruptive action by individuals. He calls for experimentation with such techniques so as to find a balance between the freedom of the individual and the interests of the group which that individual has joined.

Slashdot (a “virtual community” concerned with technical aspects of the Internet) makes use of a technique whereby an appeal is made to the actual group processes as a means of keeping individual behaviour within the desired bounds: “Instead of assuming that all users are alike, the Slashdot designers created a karma system, to allow them to discriminate in favor of users likely to rate comments in ways that would benefit the community” (Shirky, 2004). Slashdot allows a specially selected group of users to indicate the value of contributions for the group as a whole. Jordan, Hauser, and Foster (2003) seek the solution in constructing the World Wide Web in such a way as to restore trust between people. They hope to achieve this by taking measures to prevent the increasing fragmentation of the Web (stable identity, increased accessibility of virtual communities).

Lee (2005) notes that “... there seems to be the regular’s inclination to accept relativism in online debates and flaming.” O’Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) also point out that what a third party may consider to be a clear case of “flaming” can in fact be of value to the recipient of the message.

According to Millard (in Lee, 2005), the realisation that others do not want to be convinced will not mean that

people will avoid clashes because “... the desire to achieve persuasion provides the initial and constant motivation for rhetoricians to perform.”

THE THREAD PRESIDENT

Flaming is a case of using improper means to get people to concede that one is right. It is in fact a kind of battle for the pulpit, a struggle to get people’s attention for the fact that one is right. One tried-and-tested method of settling such a dispute is to give each speaker a certain amount of time to speak. On each occasion, each of the “truths” is dealt with separately and ultimately the listeners decide what appeals to them. This technique revolves around the chairperson who apportions the attention. Something like this can also be developed for Usenet, but suitable agreements need to be made. Within the culture of Usenet, however, there is a fear that there will be a loss of spontaneity if such agreements are indeed made. In my opinion, that fear is groundless. There will still be a lot of spontaneous ideas on Usenet; the only difference will be that they will be assigned a place in the subjective and definitely not coercive order imposed by the thread president.

In order for the system to function, the president must be in a position that is visible for all and he must have certain instruments at his disposal. Whether a thread president stifles spontaneity depends on those instruments. He (the “TP”) would be allowed to assess postings by other individuals in a clearly visible manner. In this way, he would indicate the level at which he was managing “his” thread, and what he wanted to talk about. Spontaneity would not be stifled because the TP would only give directions. Despite the existence of the TP function, all the participants would continue to be involved in drawing up and enforcing the rules. Kollock (1996) believes that such involvement is vital for a community.

Each posting responding to another posting would constitute one vote in favour of a particular TP. Each member of the group would be able to become a candidate for the position of TP by simply starting a discussion. This too would allow everyone to continue to act spontaneously. The TP would not be carrying out an assignment from the group and it would be his own ambition that determined how much energy he wanted to put into his thread. In the course of his thread presidency, someone may stand out from the rest. This makes possible a greater social presence (Köhler, 1999 p. 147). The TP would influence the presentation of the postings and in that way a second channel—even a superior one—would be introduced containing evaluative information (even directed towards the person) but in an indirect and non-aggressive

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