

Usenet and the future of `comp.text.tex`

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Abstract

Usenet has served as a venue for announcements and discussions on the T_EX ecosystem for over 40 years, and remains in operation despite the recent shuttering of the Web-to-news gateway on Google Groups. This article (re)introduces readers to Usenet and its `comp.text.tex` newsgroup, discusses the implications of their severance from Google, and explains how users can continue to access them.

1 Introduction

TUGboat recently printed an obituary of sorts for the `comp.text.tex` newsgroup [3], a demise it attributes to Google’s decision to stop accepting posts from Usenet [9]. The present authors, all members of Usenet’s Big-8 Management Board, would like to assure readers that `comp.text.tex` is still alive; the group remains available for anyone who wants to ask a question or talk about anything to do with T_EX. In this article, we introduce Usenet and `comp.text.tex` for those who may not be familiar with them or aware of their history. We also explain what has happened to `comp.text.tex` and describe how to access the group now that Google’s Web-to-news gateway is effectively shuttered.

2 The history of Usenet and `comp.text.tex`

Usenet is a system of forums for discussions and announcements, known as *newsgroups* or simply *groups*, covering almost every imaginable topic. It is similar in purpose to Web forums, mailing lists, or Facebook pages. But unlike these other venues, Usenet has no central server and no central administrators.¹ Instead, it is a worldwide network of servers that forward messages to each other until every server has a copy of each message. (See Figure 1.) These servers might be run by individuals, companies, schools, universities, or other organizations. Users generally have an account on one or more of the servers, and log in to read and post messages. This decentralized nature means that if one Usenet server shuts down, Usenet as a whole still exists. In contrast, if Facebook were to shut down, all its groups would be gone forever.

Usenet was established in 1980 and was initially distinct from the Internet, with separate servers

¹ Despite our lofty-sounding name, the Usenet Big-8 Management Board neither claims nor exerts authority over Usenet. Rather, our role is to facilitate the community and technical processes for the creation and removal of newsgroups in eight of the network’s oldest and largest hierarchies.

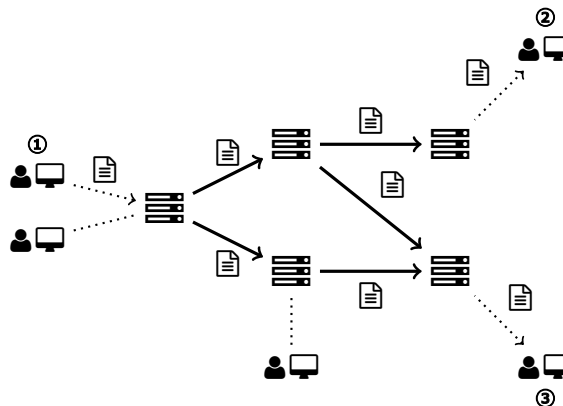


Figure 1: Usenet is a federated network of servers. A user (1) connects to a server and posts a message which then gets propagated to every other server in the network. Interested users (2, 3) can then download and read the message from the servers they use.

and communication protocols. However, links were quickly established via e-mail gateways and mirrors, and by 1986 it became fully integrated into the Internet with its adoption of the Network News Transfer Protocol (NNTP) [7]. By the 1990s, commercial Internet service providers were offering Usenet access as a standard service alongside e-mail and the World Wide Web. With the rise of the latter, a number of “Web-to-news” gateways sprang up allowing users to read and post to Usenet directly from their Web browsers. Perhaps the most popular of these gateways was Google Groups, which we cover in the next section.

Groups on Usenet are arranged into hierarchies according to topic. (See Figure 2.) Some top-level hierarchies are global and are carried by most servers — these include the Big 8 (`comp.*`, `humanities.*`, `misc.*`, `news.*`, `rec.*`, `sci.*`, `soc.*`, and `talk.*`) and the more freely managed `alt.*`. Other hierarchies, such as `europa.*` (Europe), `japan.*` (Japan), and `tor.*` (Toronto), are region- or language-specific and may be carried by only a subset of servers. Still other hierarchies might be carried by only a single server, such as the `panix.*` hierarchy, which contains technical support groups for customers of the Panix ISP.

Groups can be found at any level of the hierarchy except for the top level. For example, the top-level `comp.*` hierarchy contains groups related to computing. The `comp.text` group is for computer document formats, and contains a number of subgroups, including `comp.text.xml`, `comp.text.pdf`, and of course `comp.text.tex`, which is for discussions and announcements of anything related to T_EX and friends.

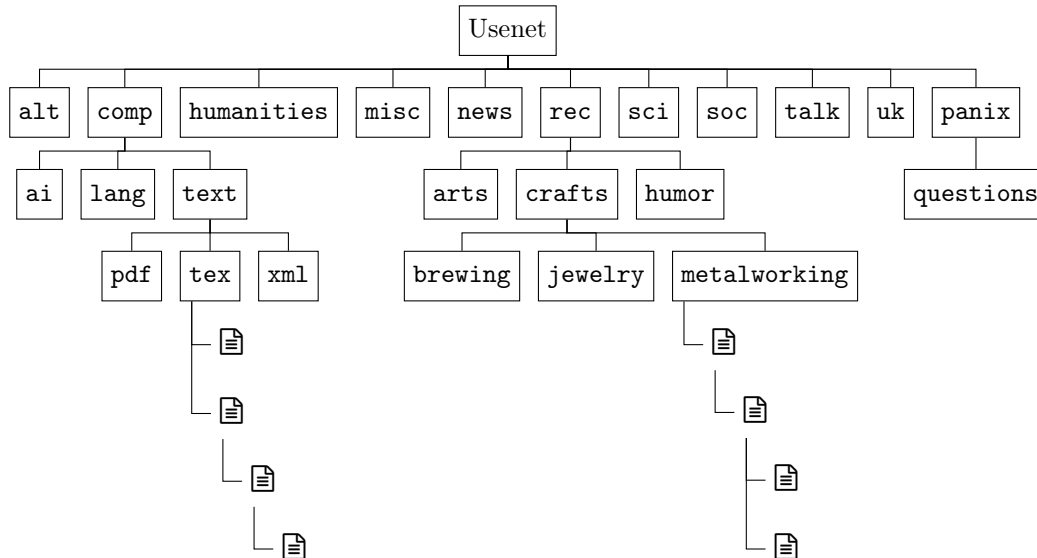


Figure 2: Structure of Usenet newsgroups, showing some of the global, regional, and local hierarchies and some of their individual groups, as well as the threaded posts in two of the groups.

\TeX users and Usenet have had a very long association. `comp.text` was created in 1983 (initially as `net.text`, before the Great Renaming of 1987 [11]) and soon attracted conversations about \TeX . (The earliest example we can find is a March 1984 post by Fritz Benedict of the University of Texas, who made the admittedly unusual request for \TeX drivers for the Diablo 630 ECS daisy-wheel printer [4].) `comp.text.tex` was created in February 1990 at the instigation of Utrecht University’s Piet van Oostrum, who gave the following rationale in his proposal and call for supporting votes [10]:

The newsgroup is for \TeX and \LaTeX related postings. These are now mainly found in `comp.text`, with some Post[\S]cript dvi-driver related postings in `comp.lang.postscript`. About half (or a little bit more) of `comp.text` is devoted to \TeX and \LaTeX , and a lot of \TeX ers rather would not be bothered by `nroff`/`troff` or even `WordPerfect`. This motivates the place in the hierarchy. [...]

The creation of the newsgroup will also make it easier for the \TeX hax Digest told [*sic*] be bi-directionally gatewayed. It is now gatewayed *into* `comp.text`, but for the benefit of those poor people without Usenet access, the other way would also be preferable.

The new group did not escape the notice of *TUGboat*, with which it shared many readers and contributors. Perhaps its first mention here is in a 1991 article by then-TUG president Nelson Beebe [2];

the supplement to the same issue gives a brief write-up of the group in a directory of \TeX resources [1]. `comp.text.tex` quickly established itself as a major source of English-language news and support for the \TeX ecosystem, alongside similar groups in region- or language-specific hierarchies such as `fr.comp.text.tex`, `de.comp.text.tex`, and `es.comp.lenguajes.tex`. It was the home of regular FAQ postings by Bobby Bodenheimer that were later adapted into the (UK) \TeX FAQ [12], and its messages are cited in the source code or documentation of dozens of (\La) \TeX packages.

3 Google Groups and its Web-to-news gateway

Throughout Usenet’s history, a number of one- or two-way gateways have existed allowing users to read and/or post to newsgroups via e-mail, the Web, or other network services. The largest and most popular of the two-way Web-based gateways was Google Groups (`groups.google.com`), which became operational in 2001 following Google’s acquisition of the Deja News service. Google Groups made it comparatively easy to access Usenet, and to search a sizeable archive of posts going back to 1981, through a user-friendly browser-based interface. To its credit, this significantly lowered the barrier to access Usenet’s vibrant communities and high-quality information, particularly for users who first got online after the dominance of the Web in the mid- to late 1990s. However, Google also earned the ire of many established

Usenet users. It did relatively little to curb spam and other abusive posts originating from its servers, and failed to inculcate in its users the social conventions and niceties that Usenet had built up over the preceding decades. This latter problem was exacerbated by Google Groups’s failure to distinguish between its own local forums and the ones gatewayed to Usenet.

Regardless of whether one views Google Groups as a net positive or net negative for Usenet, the fact remains that it became one of the most common ways for users to browse and post to newsgroups, including `comp.text.tex`. As with many of its other services, however, Google gradually let Google Groups fall into disrepair [5, 6, 8], and in 2023, it finally announced that it would stop updating its archive of Usenet groups in February 2024. While historical Usenet content remains visible there, it is not particularly easy to find or to search, and new Usenet posts are being accepted neither from local users nor from peering NNTP servers. Thanks to Usenet’s federated nature, `comp.text.tex` and other newsgroups still exist separately from Google Groups, but Google users must now access them through some other method.

4 Connecting to Usenet today

Would-be visitors to `comp.text.tex` and other newsgroups still have a variety of options for gaining access. These include the following:

From the Web. Perhaps the simplest way to access Usenet is with a Web browser. Google Groups was the best-known way of doing this, but there are other websites that provide a similar free service. One such gateway is Newsgrouper (cmacleod.me.uk/ng): first follow the prompts to register and log in to your account, or else click the “Continue as Guest” button for read-only access; then enter a keyword or the name of a group (such as `comp.text.tex`) in the search box. Another gateway is Rocksolid BBS (www.rocksolidbbs.com): this one presents a list of all available newsgroups on a single page, which you can either scroll through or search using your browser’s “Find” function. As with Newsgrouper, read access is available for all users; for posting access, first use the “register” link in the site’s header. Other uni- or bidirectional Web-to-news gateways can be found on a list that we maintain at www.big-8.org/wiki/Web-to-news_gateways.

With an e-mail app. Some e-mail apps can also access Usenet groups over NNTP. Thunderbird is perhaps the best-known e-mail program that includes support for Usenet. You will first need an account with a Usenet provider. If you access the Internet

through a university, large company, or commercial ISP, it may still run a Usenet server of its own that you can use—check your support documentation to see if this is the case and, if so, to get the connection details. If not, a free and well-regarded service you can use is Eternal September (www.eternal-september.org). You can then add your Usenet account to Thunderbird, in much the same way you would add a new e-mail account. We provide a step-by-step tutorial on how to do this at www.big-8.org/wiki/Getting_Started_with_Usenet.

With a newsreader. There are also dedicated apps, called *news clients* or *newsreaders*, for accessing Usenet. These generally look and work similarly to e-mail software such as Thunderbird, but have useful features specific to reading and posting to newsgroups. As above, you will need to sign up for an account with a Usenet provider first. We maintain a list of newsreader software, including both dedicated Usenet software and dual-purpose mail-and-Usenet apps, at www.big-8.org/wiki/Newsreaders.

5 Other concerns

Those contemplating joining Usenet, or returning to it after a long absence, may harbour certain apprehensions concerning its content and quality. In this section, we address some commonly expressed concerns.

Spam. As a fairly open network, Usenet has (or at least had) a not entirely undeserved reputation for hosting large amounts of spam. Indeed, anyone who used Google Groups will have noticed that many groups there were filled with off-topic commercial solicitations. However, as discussed above, Google Groups had poor spam filtering, and much of the junk was being posted from Google accounts in the first place. Today’s reputable Usenet services have highly effective spam filters, and providers often cooperate to identify and remove spam promptly. This means that users of these servers see comparatively little of the spam that gets posted to Usenet nowadays (and also little of the spam that was historically posted through Google Groups). Most e-mail and newsreader apps will also let you set up your own filters: this means you can filter out any spam that hasn’t already been caught by your provider, and also means you can ignore any topics or individuals that you don’t want to see.

Usenet as a file-sharing service. Usenet has newsgroups for uploading files, often called *binaries* to distinguish them from text-based discussion. These groups have become extremely popular and some commercial Usenet services market themselves

chiefly towards file-sharers. This has created a misconception among certain Internet users that Usenet is nothing more than a shady file-sharing service. However, Usenet has always been a discussion platform at its core, and many of its users are there to participate in communities based around common interests. Free and non-commercial Usenet providers usually do not offer access to the file-sharing groups, as they are much more costly in storage and network capacity than simple text-based groups.

Active and inactive newsgroups. In the days before social media and the Web, many lively communities formed on Usenet. Since then, some newsgroups have fallen into disuse as users have drifted away to other venues, or the group's topic has become obsolete. However, there are still numerous groups with daily activity and regular users. One of them is `comp.text.tex` itself, which gets several new messages on an average day. Here's a selection of subject lines from the group's most recent posts, excluding CTAN announcements:

- manually installing tex package groups in Ubuntu
- pgfplots: link to top of embedded page
- S equation numbering
- Long left right harpoons
- [LaTeX] [PGF/TikZ] Undefined control sequence error for PGF intersections.
- Combination with Hoefler Text
- [LaTeX] How to tell the user that the document wasn't compiled with `-shell-escape` flag?
- TeX's line breaking in the grub sesh
- "Force" location of pictures.

We keep a list of active groups at www.big-8.org/w/images/3/3e/Sample-newssrc.txt; this list is in a standard, text-based format that can be imported as a subscription list by many newsreaders.

6 Conclusion

In short, Usenet and `comp.text.tex` still exist, and new participants are welcome. Please join the group to ask a question, share your own knowledge, or just browse through some of the previous discussions and announcements. We hope to see you there.

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