Federation and Moderation
Usenet as the Original Decentralized Social Network

Rayner Lucas & Tristan Miller
Usenet Big-8 Management Board
https://www.big-8.org/

What is this talk about?

- What is Usenet?

- How does Usenet work?

- How does it compare to centralized social media?

- How does it compare to federated social media?

- What are Usenet's strengths? What are its weaknesses?

- What can we learn from Usenet?

What is Usenet?

- A distributed system of discussion groups ("newsgroups")

- Covers thousands of topics

- Text-based, with messages in a similar format to e-mail

- Sometimes called "netnews" or simply "news"
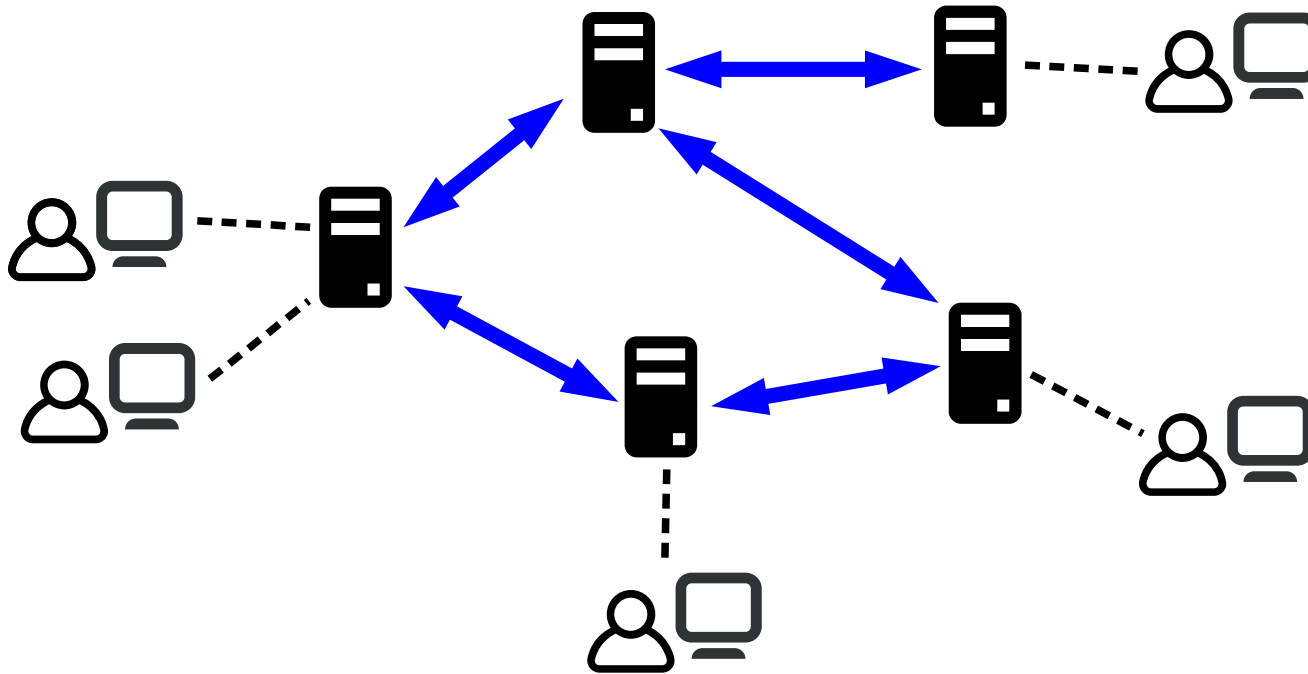
- Also used as a file sharing platform

Usenet Architecture

- No central server
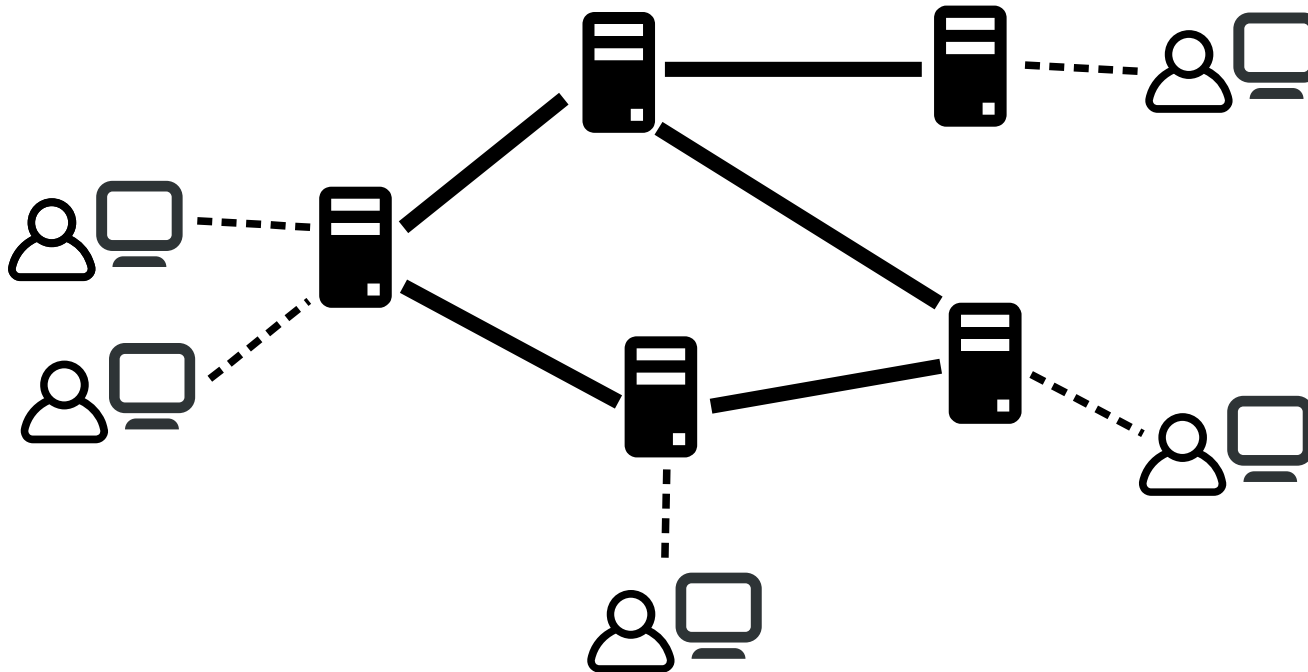- Network consists of many news servers
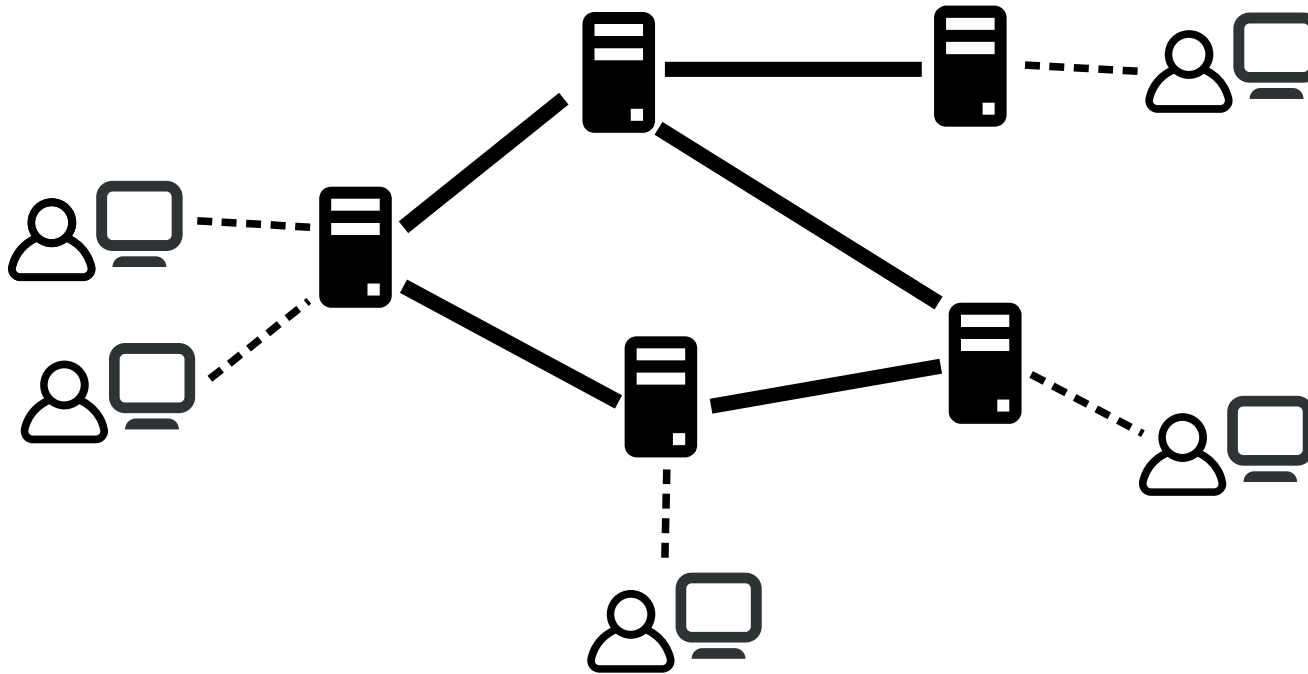
Usenet Architecture

- Server admins arrange to forward posts to each other
- This is called a peering agreement
- Admins decide which groups to carry

Usenet Architecture

- Users connect to a news server to read and post messages
- Messages propagate through the network to other servers

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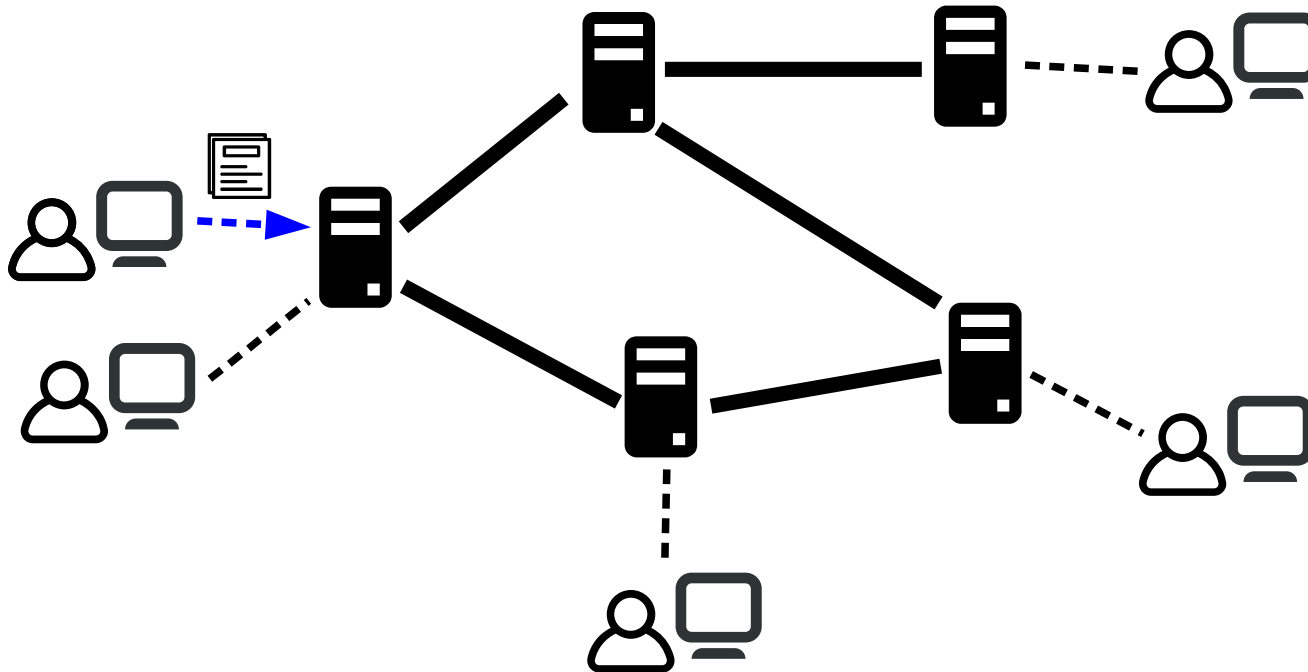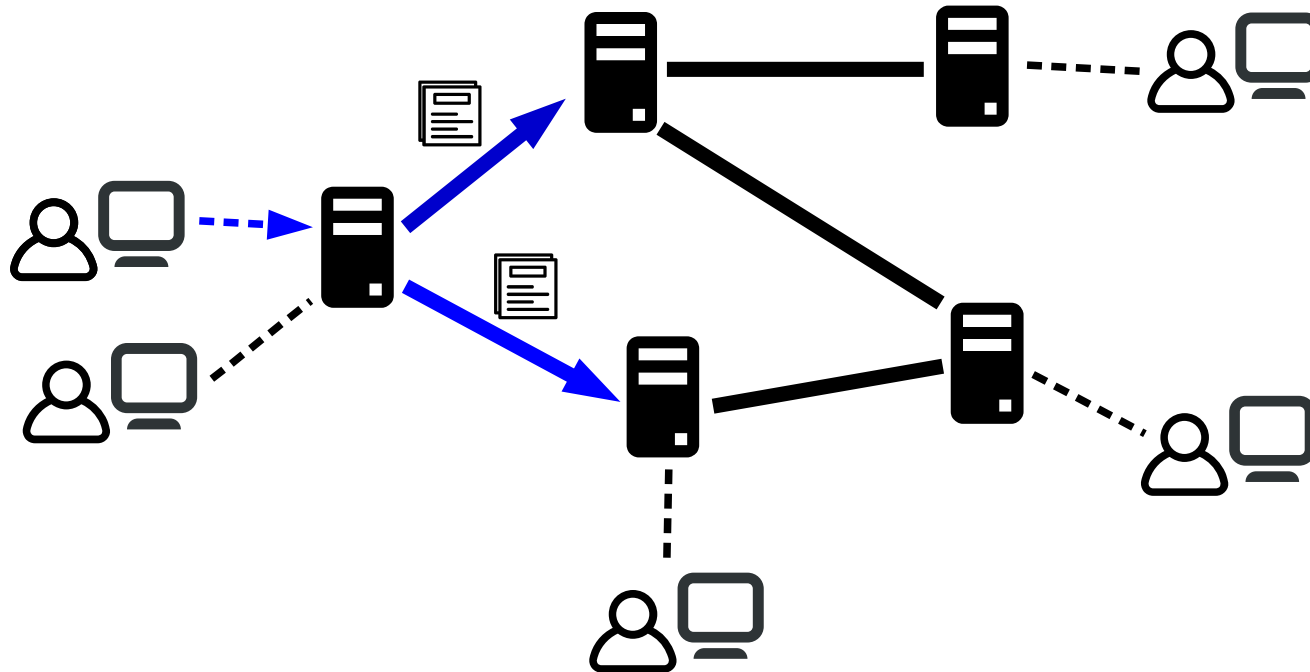- Messages propagate through the network to other servers

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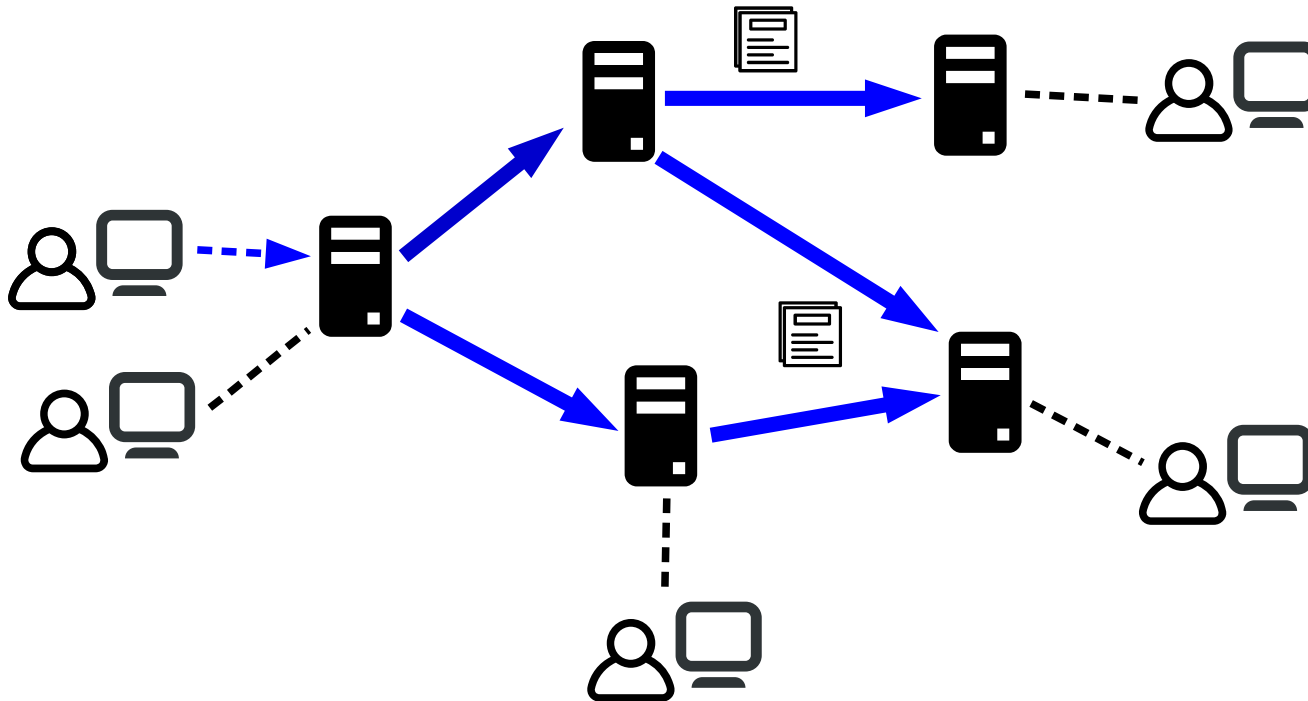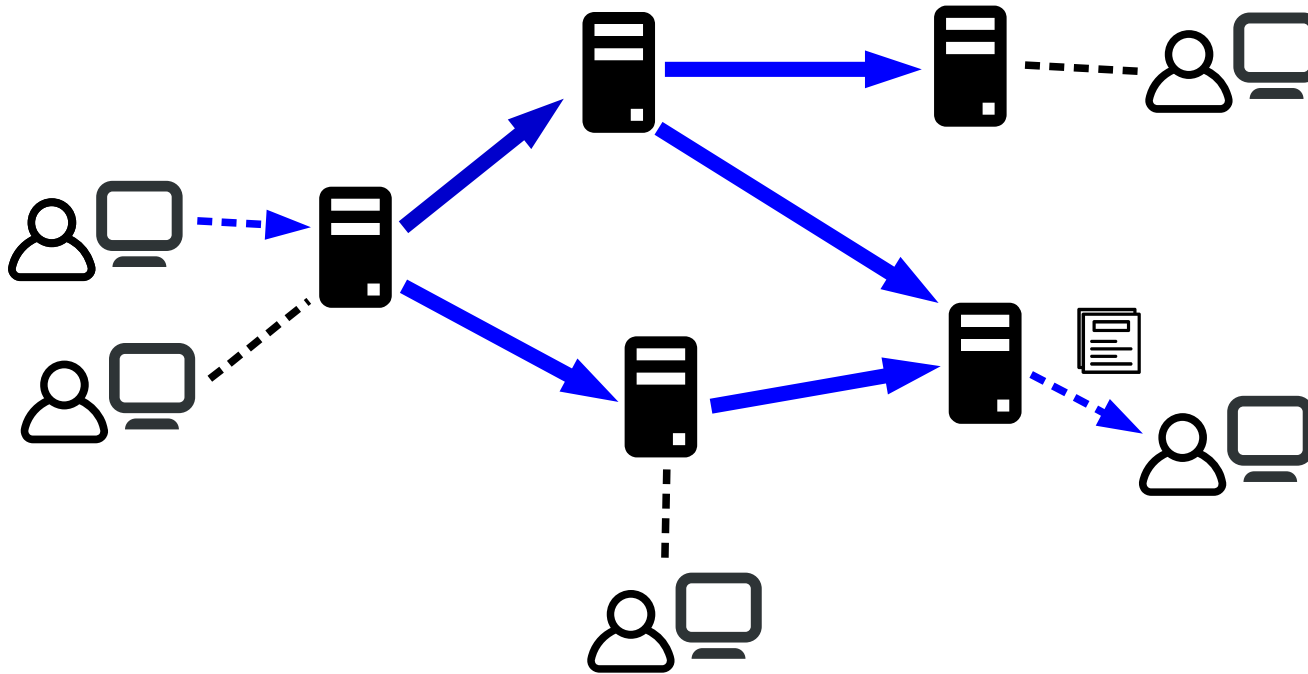
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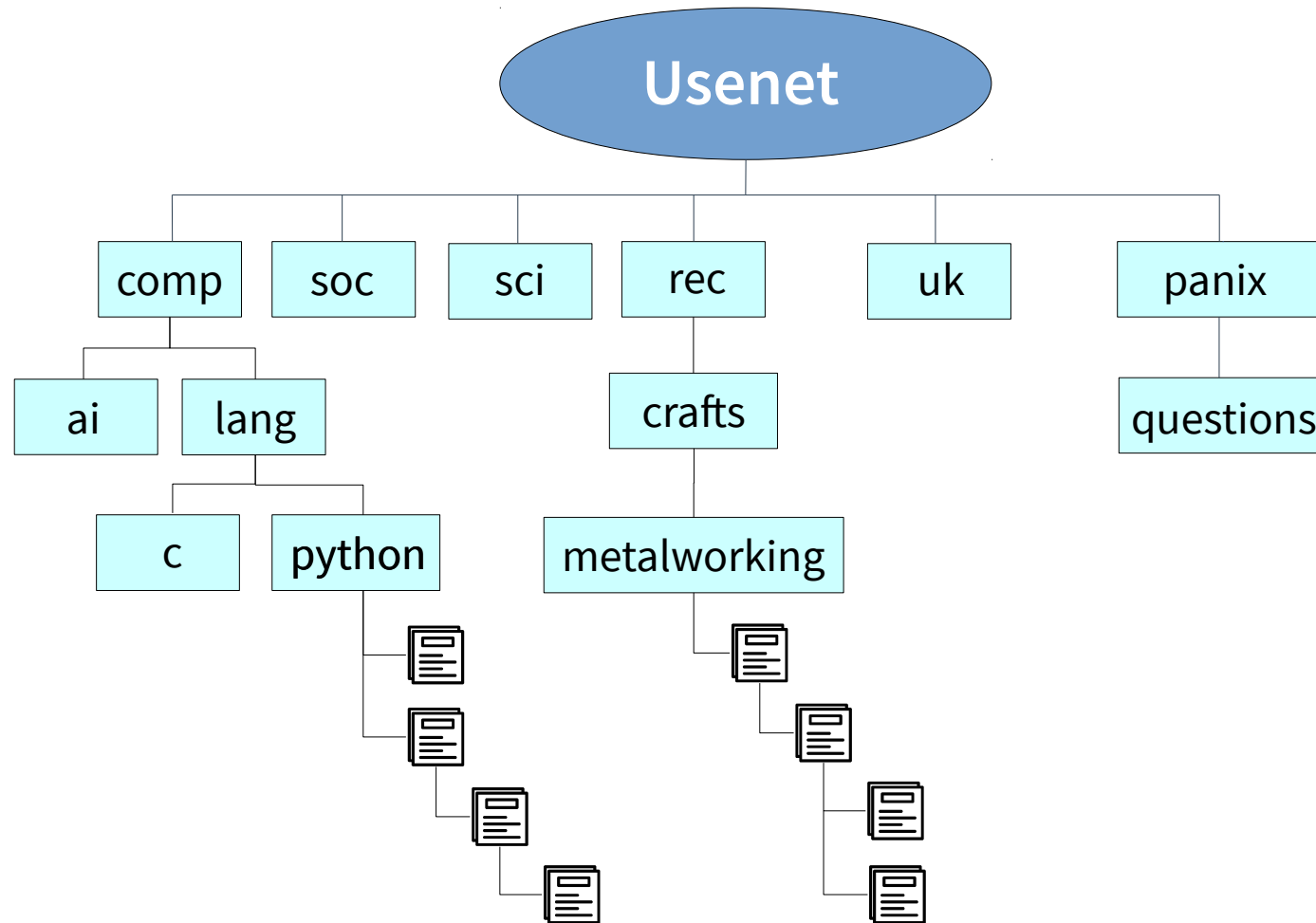
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Usenet Groups
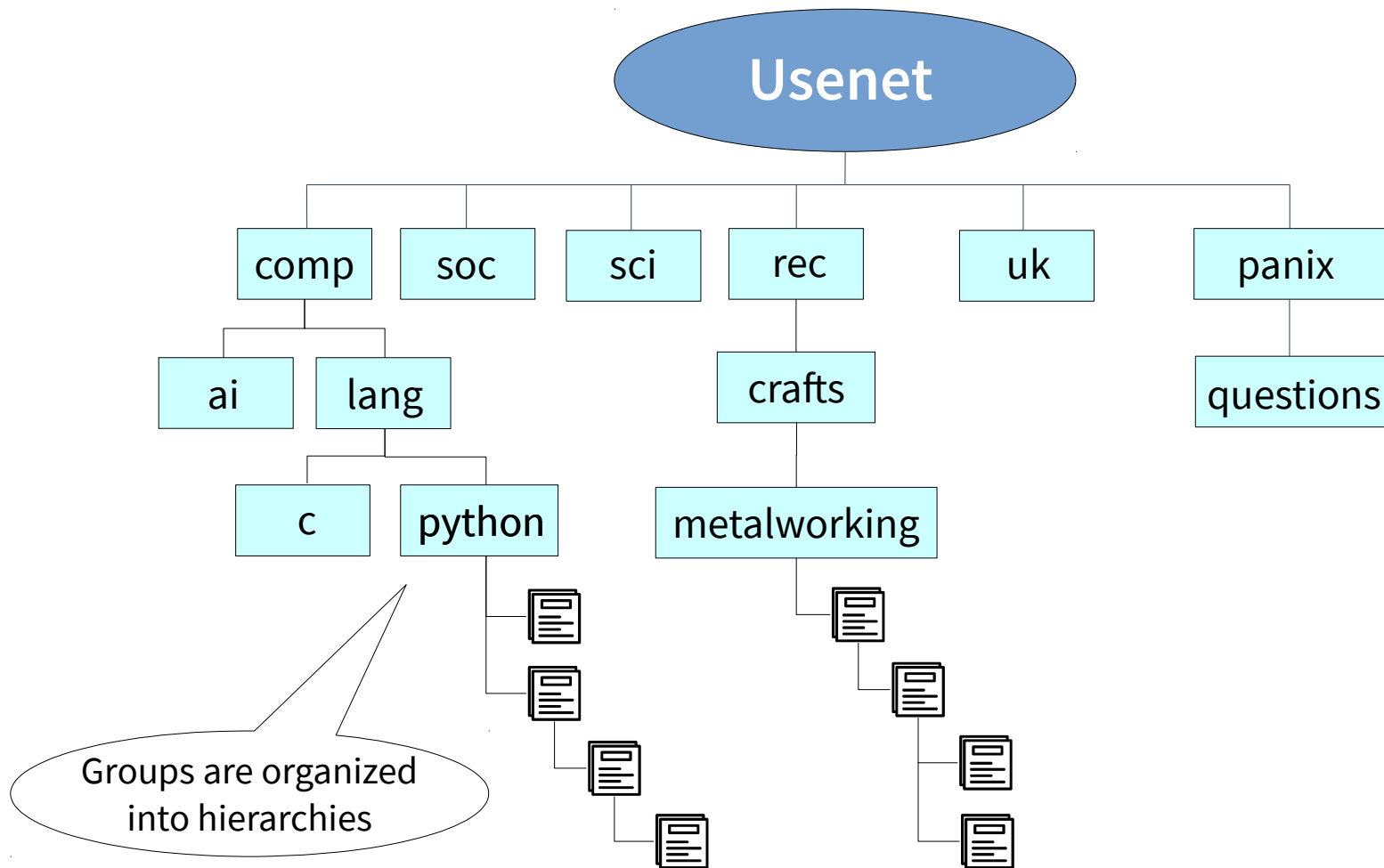
Usenet Groups

Usenet Groups

Some hierarchies are global and carried by most servers

Usenet

comp | soc | sci | rec | uk | panix

ai | lang

c | python

crafts

metalworking

questions

Groups are organized into hierarchies

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Local hierarchies

Groups are organized into hierarchies

Groups contain posts, arranged into threads

Usenet Users

- **Identity all client-side.**

- **Upside: Can post from anywhere, and move providers easily**

- **Downside: Forgery is possible (like with email)**

Usenet Protocols

- NNTP (Network News Transfer Protocol)

- Formerly, batch copying using UUCP

- ...or sometimes even an airmailed magtape!

Usenet Moderation

- Most groups are unmoderated

- Moderated groups require approval for all posts

- Posts go to a moderator by email; the moderator must then send them to a news server

- Huge reduction in spam and abuse

- But needs responsive moderators, or preferably a team

How does Usenet compare to other social media?

Centralized Social Media:

- Top-down control

- Proprietary platforms

- Acts as "town square" - but actually privately owned

- Platform lock-in: people want to be where other people are

- Owner can change your user experience

- If server shuts down, your account and posts are gone
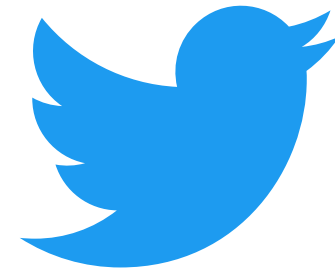
How does Usenet compare to other social media?

Usenet:

- Federated network of servers

- Open protocols (NNTP)

- Free software (e.g. Thunderbird, INN)

- Anyone can set up a server

- You can talk to anyone from any other server (as long as other admins will peer with your server)

- User experience is under your control - use any client you like, or write one

- If one server shuts down, use another. Your old posts will exist anywhere with a long enough retention.
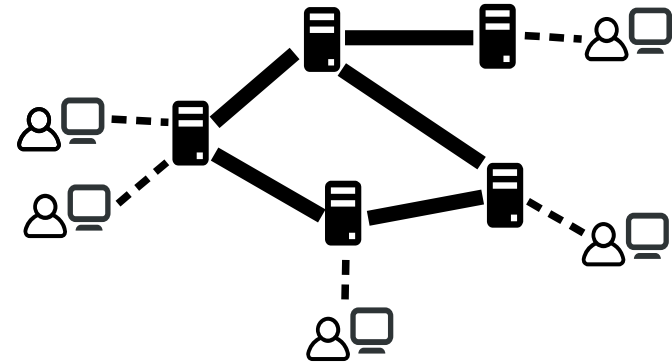
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The Fediverse:

- Federated network of servers

- Open protocols

- Free software

- Anyone can set up a server

- You can talk to anyone from any other server (unless they defederate you)

- User experience is under your control - use any client you like, or write one

- If one server shuts down, join another

- Most existing Fediverse servers are oriented towards personal (micro)blogging and media sharing

How does Usenet compare to the Fediverse?

Some differences:

- On Usenet you follow groups, not people

- Usenet uses email for direct messaging

- Usenet works best for discussions rather than personal blogging

What are Usenet's strengths?

- Highly resistant to censorship

- High degree of anonymity is possible

- Forms lively communities around common interests

- Well-established culture and social conventions

- Largely compatible with tools that process e-mail

What are Usenet's weaknesses?

- No reliable way to edit or delete a post

- Poor support for multimedia

- Moderators can disappear

- Hard for new users to find it

- Hard to search

Abuse on Usenet

- Spam and flooding

- Forgery

- Rogue cancels

- Organized disruption

Dealing with abuse

User level:

- **Killfiles to hide unwanted posts**
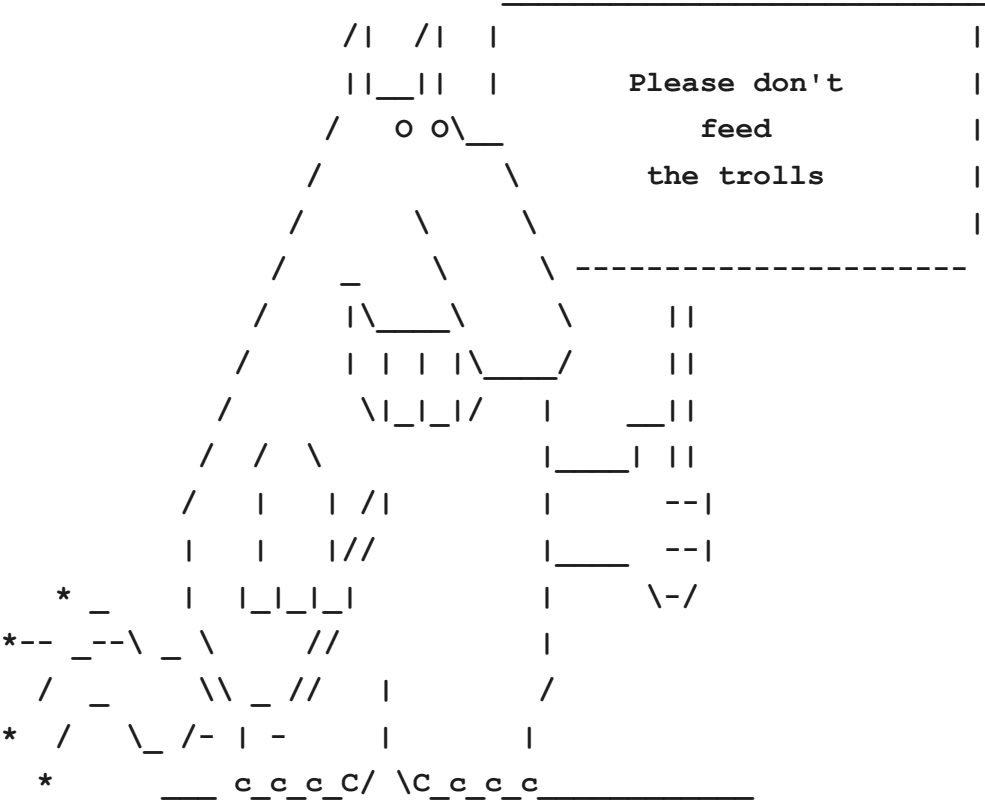
- **PGP signing as an anti-forgery measure**

Dealing with abuse

Admin level:

- Spam filtering (e.g. Cleanfeed)

- Ignoring cancels/supersedes
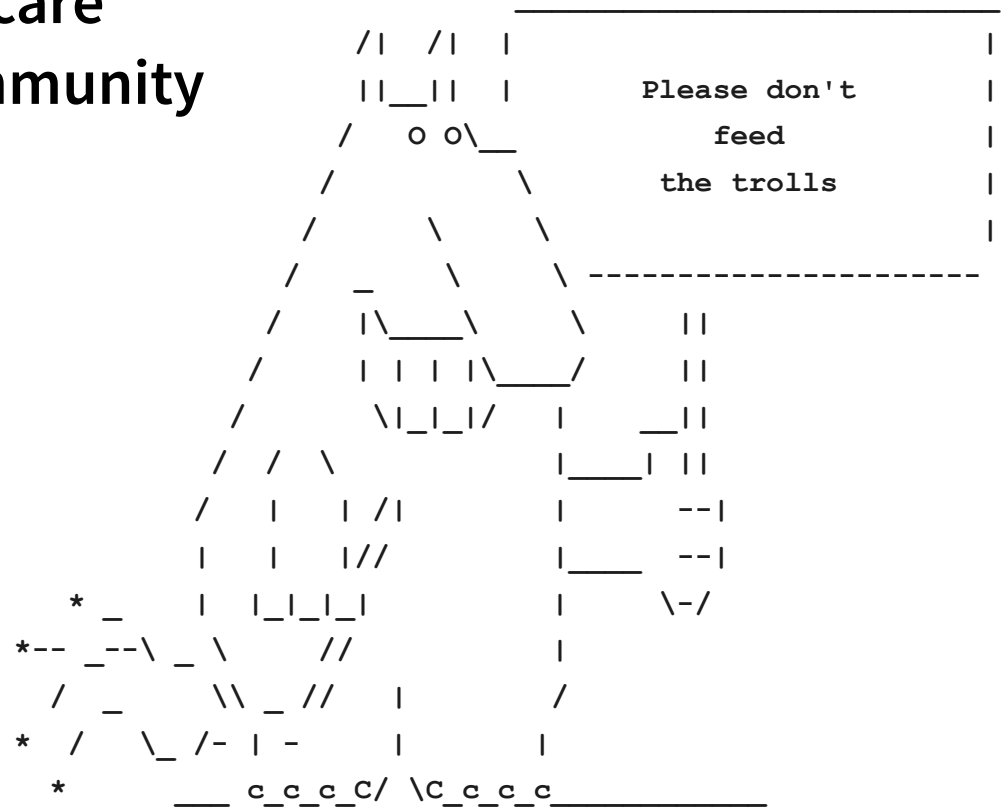
- Banning users

- De-peering

- Usenet Death Penalty

- **Don't feed the trolls?**

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What can we learn from Usenet?

- Don't feed the trolls?
- Only works on people who care about being part of the community

```
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    ||__||   |            Please don't       |
    /   o o\__   |                feed       |
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What can we learn from Usenet?

Ignoring abuse doesn't work

- Many trolls will escalate, or go after other targets

- Community members give up and leave

- New users get discouraged even more quickly

Ignoring abuse doesn't work

- Spammers don't give up either

- New users see wall-to-wall garbage

What can we learn from Usenet?

If you're running a social media site, you don't owe anyone a platform.
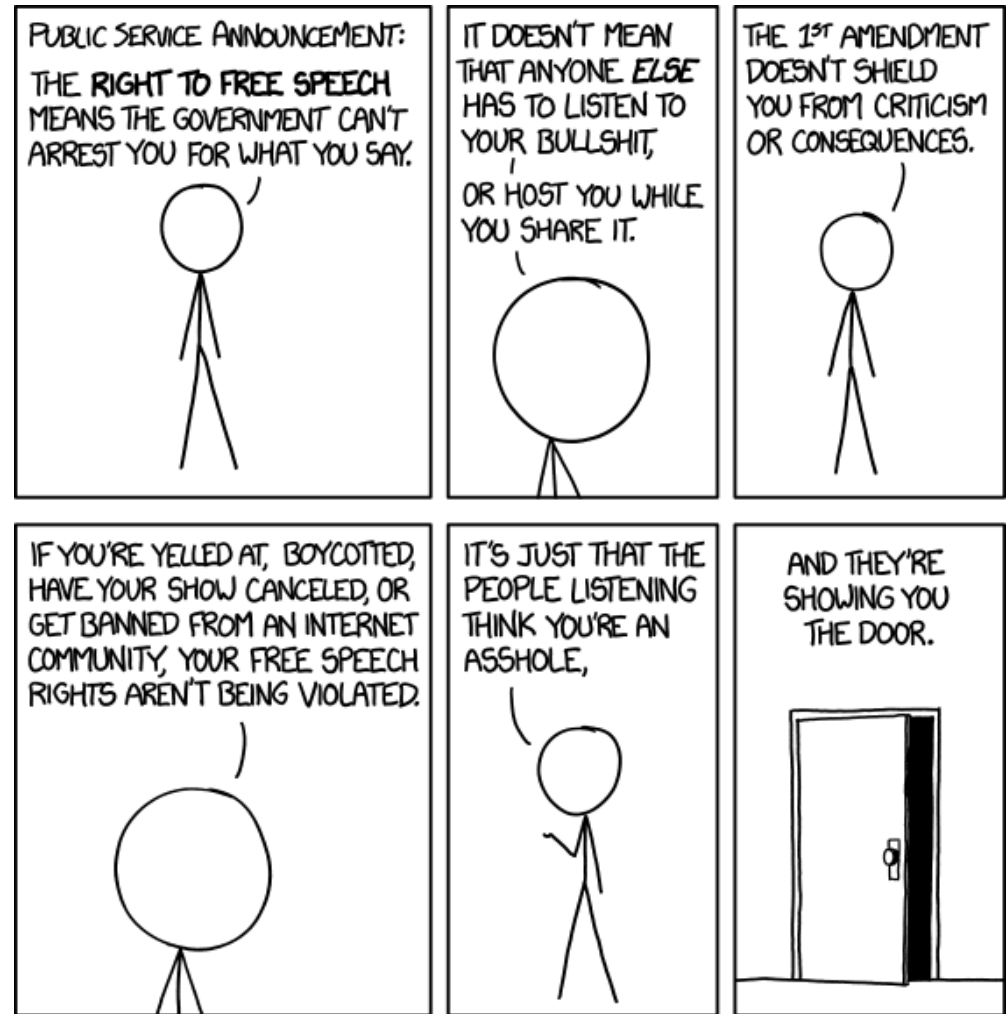
https://xkcd.com/1357/

What can we learn from Usenet?

Server admins must be proactive in fighting abuse

- Have a usage policy

- Enforce it consistently and swiftly

What can we learn from Usenet?

Server admins must be proactive in fighting abuse

- Have a usage policy

- Enforce it consistently and swiftly

- Persistent abuse kills communities

- Reputation is hard to recover once lost

What can we learn from Usenet?

Problems scale up as your user base does

- Large providers need an abuse team

What can we learn from Usenet?

Be prepared for legal issues

- Copyright

- Child protection (e.g. COPPA)

- Privacy regulations (e.g. GDPR)

What can we learn from Usenet?

Be prepared for misuse from the start

- Usenet was designed in a high-trust environment

- How could a bad actor use a feature for spam or harassment?

- Don't assume that users, or even admins, will be trustworthy

What can we learn from Usenet?

Federation is a viable model

- Usenet has existed for over 40 years

- A highly relevant online social space for ~20 of those years

- A long and thriving future ahead for decentralized social media