

R.I.P Usenet: 1980-2008



by [Sascha Segan](#), 07.31.08

Child-porn investigations have doomed one of the last remnants of a smaller, kinder Net.

Before the [Eternal September](#), but after the [Great Renaming](#), I learned about sex on Usenet. A few years later, on a Mac SE in a college basement, I met friends I still have today. We "spewed" about our teenage lives in ways that would be familiar to any [MySpace](#) blogger circa 2008, but that were radical, strange, and comforting in 1993. We made faraway friends, burned yearbooks to CDs and mailed them to Finland with way too many stamps. We were the first Net kids, really.

In a way inconceivable in today's Web-fragmented marketplace, Usenet was where you went to talk. Conceived back in the idealistic, non-profit days of the Internet, it was—well, it is, but it mostly was—a series of bulletin boards called "newsgroups" shared by thousands of [computers](#), which traded new messages several times a day.

On the text-only Usenet of my memory, nobody knew whether you were a dog, or a kid, or Finnish—only what you wrote. There wasn't the obsession with photos and video that overruns today's social [networking](#) sites. Yeah, I know that sounds like "get off my lawn you darn kids" crotchettiness, but there's something really nice about just talking to people and not caring what they look like.

Serious conversations went on in forums like comp.sys.atari.8bit; more frivolous chatter appeared in groups whose names started with "alt," a freewheeling free-for-all that nobody owned, nobody managed, and nobody policed. It was a more innocent time on the Net, before most of the spammers, the crooks, or even the general public showed up. People hewed to a loosely agreed-upon set of net.manners enforced by self-appointed cops. The society worked—at least for a while.

Usenet was what the Web is missing nowadays: a genuinely public space, with unclear ownership. While different people hung out in different groups, everyone accessed the same group list and there was plenty of cross-fertilization. Control came down to a bickering cabal of scattered [IT administrators](#) who generally preferred to leave well enough alone. Compared to chat systems like IRC (and later, instant messaging and texting), Usenet encouraged thoughtful, long-form writing with lots of quotation and back-and-forth.

Usenet has been dying for years, of course. Some people date Usenet's decline as early as 1993, when millions of [AOL](#) users dropped into what was previously a geek paradise. As the '90s went on, the eye candy of the Web and the marketing dollars of Web site owners helped push people over to profit-making sites. Usenet's slightly arcane access methods and text-only protocols have nothing on the glitz and glamour of MySpace.

The Web also gave Usenet a new life through the mid-90s as a searchable database of questions and answers, via DejaNews and [Google](#). But searchability also killed off some of Usenet's social functions. More chaotic and ad-hoc groups functioned through a sort of security in obscurity; as long as nobody bothered to click on them, nobody would know what people were talking about. With Google Groups, every word you wrote became enshrined and eternally searchable.

Meanwhile, as [multimedia](#) became popular over the past ten years, Usenet started to become a way for pirates and pornographers to distribute massive quantities of binary files in a decentralized, untraceable manner; in other words, it became a proto-BitTorrent. That was likely when Usenet became truly doomed. Newsgroups had exchanged code along with text for years, but by the late '90s the "binaries" groups began taking up huge amounts of space and Net traffic, and since Usenet libraries reside on each ISP's server, service providers sensibly started to wonder why they should be reserving big chunks of their own disk space for pirated movies and repetitive porn.

It's the porn that's putting nails in Usenet's coffin. AOL dropped Usenet in 2005, but many other large ISPs kept carrying newsgroups. Now major providers are dropping the full alt. hierarchy, and even Usenet entirely, as part of a New York State government crusade against child pornographers who've been using the alt.binaries groups to distribute their wares. Dropping all of Usenet to lose alt.binaries.videos.of.criminal.acts is definitely throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but at the same time I don't have much pity for the binaries crowd. Usenet is a hideously inefficient way to distribute binary file—you end up making thousands of unused copies on various servers and encoding your files in inefficient ways. And way too much of the binaries traffic consists of piracy and warez.

It's hard to completely kill off something as totally decentralized as Usenet; as long as two servers agree to share the NNTP protocol, it'll continue on in some fashion. But the Usenet I mourn is long gone, anyway, or long-transformed into interlocking comments on LiveJournals and the forums boards on tech-support Web sites. Obviously, people lead lives, converse, and learn on the Internet far more broadly than they did in 1993. But give me a moment's nostalgia for a Net that had one place to go, that everybody knew about, but nobody owned.