Procedures for Creating New Newsgroups
A Tutorial Introduction for Usenet Readers

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Introduction

One of the most commonly asked questions on the Usenet system is "how do I create a new newsgroup?". While the actual mechanism of creating a new group is rather simple the network isn't a total anarchy. As a consequence, there is a defined protocol that one must go through to achieve a valid group.

A common misconception with people who want to create a new group is that the existence of a group will justify the need for a group. This is also commonly known as the "we can't prove we need it because no-one knows it's there, therefore there are no relevent postings!". This is NOT a good argument.

Successful groups that are well read, and willingly passed about the network at a cost to the backbones are those that fill a perceived need in the Unix community. (Note that most people view the network as a free entity. In fact it isn't. Backbone sites have phone bills in the thousands of dollars a month to transport news about!) Therefore, a group should meet a perceived need and be viewed with those points in mind.

Without further ado, then, the steps needed to create a new newsgroup;

1. Find a Niche

The first step towards creating a new group is to identify a topic of interest to a reasonable subset of the Unix community (NOTHING is of interest to all, but by the same token groups shouldn't be created so that you and a few of your friends* can play with the news system or with a very limited readership of any sort).

There are two ways to tell if you have a good niche - the first is if there are enough postings about the topic in inappropriate groups (like a car-for-sale article in "net.general"), or articles about the topic tend to be cross-posted to a number of different groups ("net.singles" versus "net.social" and "net.abortion" versus "net.women" are fine examples).

It is rare to find a topic that no-one is posting about simply because an appropriate forum isn't available . If there are no postings somewhere it usually implies that there are not enough people interested enough to post articles on the subject.

2. Start a Mailing List

Once a topic is found that seems likely, *start a mailing list*. People who run mailing lists can relate any number of stories of good ideas that didn't catch on, and creating newsgroups to accomodate them would have been a poor idea. Also, sometimes the number of active readers (e.g. people who submit articles to the group) is a LOT less than the number of readers (this is also known as the "no-one posts!" lament). A mailing list with very little traffic can be gracefully and easily retired, but a news group tends to be much more of an administrative hassle, and therefore is view more askance by administrators (especially backbone administrators).

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* Actually, it would be okay to do this if the group wasn't sent to sites other than those willing to accept the group, but we'll get back to that in a bit...

To create a mailing list, write a paragraph or two about what the list is to cover, post a copy to "net.news.group" and mail (email) a copy to the maintainer of the List of Publicly Accessible Mailing Lists (this list is available through the "mod.announce.newusers" newsgroup) and wait for the flood of mail.

If you only get a few responses, don't despair - just start the mailing list anyway. If it's good and you get good people to write for it, it'll catch on and the transition to a 'real' newsgroup will be easy. If it does catch on and you get over 75 or so requests to be put on the list, then summarize them (tally them) and post a response to your original article in "net.news.group" proposing that a newsgroup be created.

If at any point after about 60 days or so the mailing list starts to become unwieldy, post an article to "net.news.group" proposing that a newsgroup be created. Present REAL NUMBERS of readers and such, too - it helps justify the need.

3. Temporary Newsgroups

One of the problems with the current system is that there is no easy mechanism for creating new newsgroups with a temporary lifespan. Nonetheless, it is recommended that if a discussion 'explodes' (like the discussion of old (classic) versus new coke did a couple of years ago) that a newsgroup for the discussion be created. The name should contain the string "misc" or "temp" and should otherwise be similar to the groupname that spawned the discussion (e.g. "net.misc" spawned off "net.misc.coke" for a while, and "net.movies" spawned "net.movies.sw" [Star Wars]). When the traffic dies down, the group is then removed and the integrity of the network is preserved.

Hopefully in the future this will become easier to do.

4. Transitioning from Mail to News

If a mailing list is sufficiently popular, as discussed above, a suggestion that it be transitioned into a newsgroup should be posted to "net.news.group".

5. People with More Say in the Creation Process

Since the backbone sites (ihnp4, hplabs, seismo, utzoo, gatech, ucbvax, etc) pay real money for newsgroups, the administrators of those sites have more say in the creation of groups that pass through their machines. There is a fine line here - a group can still be created without the approval of the backbone administrators, but they may choose to stop accepting and/or forwarding the new group. The appropriate recourse if this happens is not to publicly or privately attack those administrators who have simply exercised their options on their own machines, but rather to set up a list of alternative feeds.

Most typically, backbone sites are more willing to distribute groups locally, or to machines that poll them, than they are to machines they call long-distance daily. It's a simple matter of economics, really.

To consider an example, someone proposed the creation of a group called "net.rec.drugs" for discussion of various aspects of so-called recreational drugs. A number of backbone site admins stated that they were not willing to allow the group on their machine due to repercussions, and the person wanting the group then responded by creating his own 'sidePa network connectivity group (essentially a parallel backbone). This is the appropriate solution.

To wax philosophical for a moment, it is anticipated by a number of members of Usenet that a set of discrete, overlapping networks will transport all the news in the future, and machines will 'sign up' for those groups that they're interested in only. This is further down the road, though.

6. Actually Creating the New Group

Once it's decided that a group will be created, and the name and such have been settled, and the backbone administrators have either agreed to carry the information or have stated that they'd rather not, the next, and final step, is to issue a 'newgroup' command.

To accomplish this, mail a request to the backbone's 'newsgroups mogul' with the proposed name of the group and such. The current newgroups mogul is Gene Spafford (spaf@gatech.edu). He will process your request with all due speed and send you some sort of indication of completion. He will also be able to confirm that the steps documented herein have been followed.

7. Moderation

It is VERY HIGHLY recommended that all new groups be created as moderated groups. This reduces the occurances of inapropriate postings and duplicate postings, and generally makes the net less painful to read.

Also, moderated groups are much more likely to be followed by backbone sites....

8. Moving from Moderation to Not

Some groups are intrinsicly very high volume, and are most appropriate as non-moderated groups. Much care should be taken before this is changed, though.

9. A Few Other Comments...

There are a number of myths about creating and managing groups that I'd like to explicitly debunk once and for all;

First off, having a lot of people read a group does not equate to having a lot of postings for them to read! This is a very common misconception and is about as far from the truth as is possible. There are any number of causes for this, including lack of writing skills, lack of interest, lack of time, etc. etc., ad infinitum.

Secondly, there is also what Henry Spencer refers to as the ''flash-in-the-pan phenomenon'', where a group starts out fantastically popular, but in the course of a few weeks or so dies out completely. Be on the lookout for this and try to only propose groups that are of lasting interest to the community that will be sending it out. Discussions on topics that will be either resolved or deadlocked in a short period of time can be worse than annoying. Consider a group that was to discuss the relative merits of one religion over another...it would very rapidly collapse into a shouting match and no useful discussion would ensue at all. Please try to avoid this trap!

Next, moderation isn't that much of a hassle. For the most part, accepting the role simply means that you'll briefly peruse the articles to ensure that they are appropriate for the group before posting. It is suggested that you also check for typographical, spelling and gramatical errors (don't change the meaning of the posting, though, or you'll get into trouble mighty quick!). Also recommended is to remove extraneous data, including multiple copies of ''.signatureq file entries and so on. The best policy is to start the group (or mailing list, for that matter) with a note outlining the major topics of interest and also indicating the 'editorial policy'. The role of moderator can be anything from simply content checking to emulating a major magazine publisher - the quality of the group is commensurate to this too, usually.

While we're on the subject, don't hesitate to refuse postings if they are wandering too far off the topic of the group or if they are simply treading on well-trod ground (one advantage of a moderated group is that you can avoid constantly discussing the cyclic topics that most unmoderated Usenet newsgroups seem to go through all too often)

Finally, I hope this hasn't soured you of the idea of creating the group you're thinking of that will fill that one vital niche that is empty in the current system. By all means make the effort! You might be suprised at how popular topics can become!

Finally

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