Federation and Moderation

Usenet as the Original Decentralized Social Network

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What is this talk about?

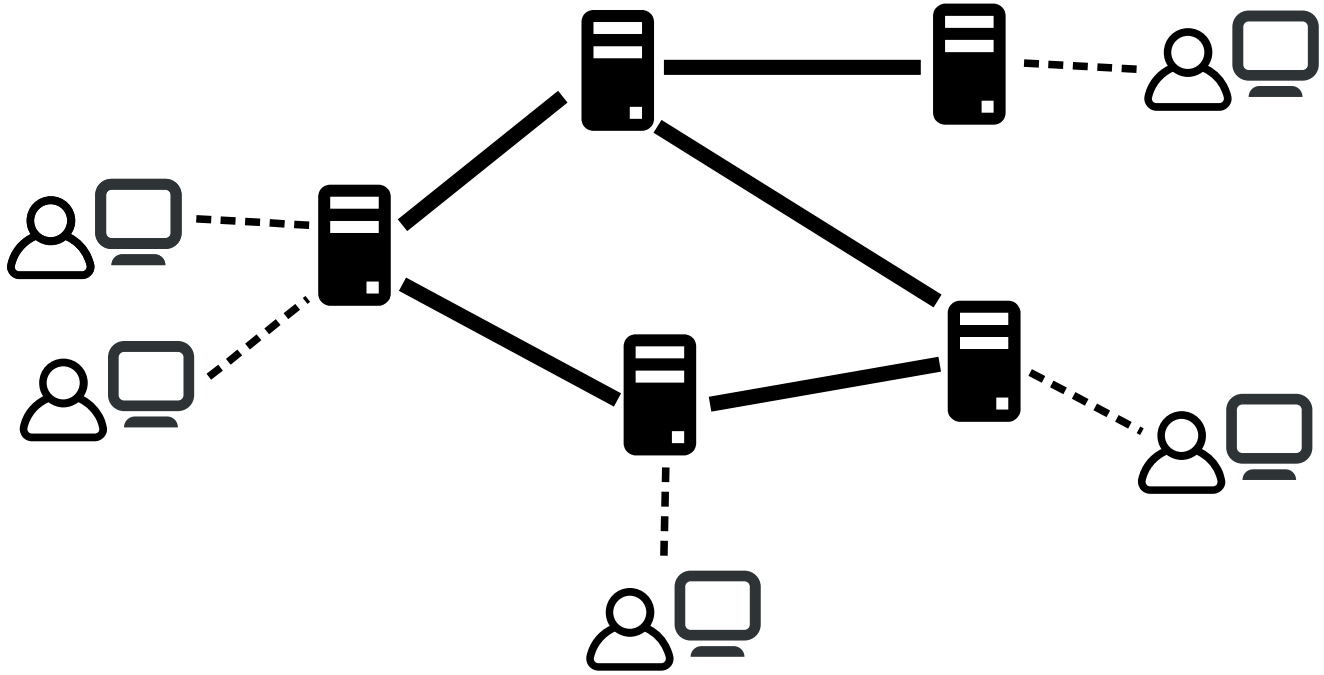
- What is Usenet?
- How does Usenet work?
- How does it compare to centralized social media?
- How does it compare to federated social media?
- What are Usenet's strengths? What are its weaknesses?
- What can we learn from Usenet?

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

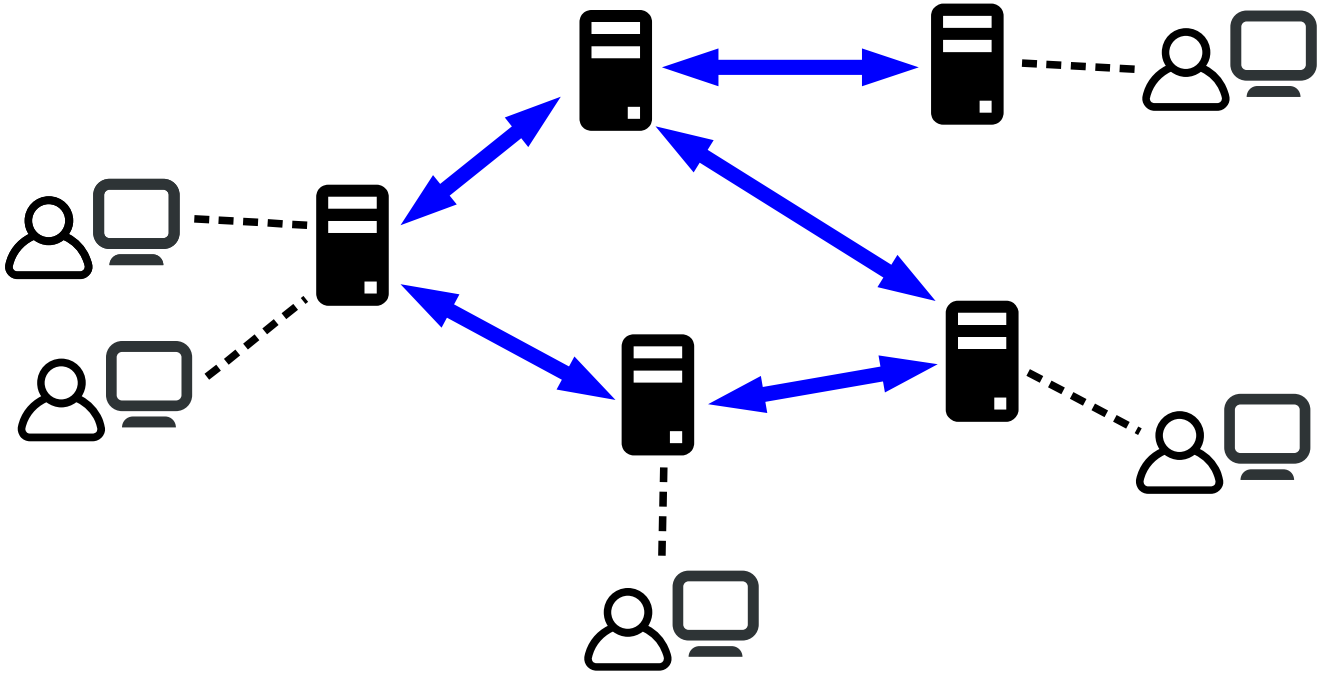
Usenet Architecture

- No central server
- Network consists of many news servers



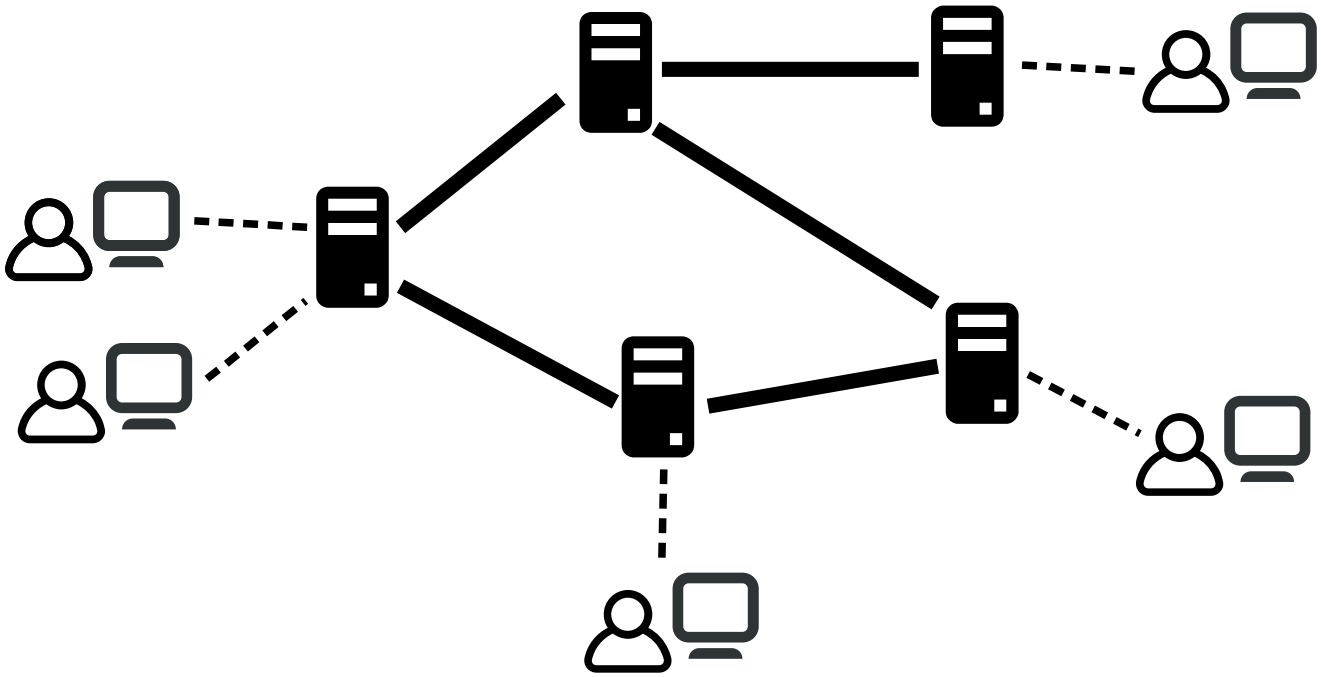
Usenet Architecture

- 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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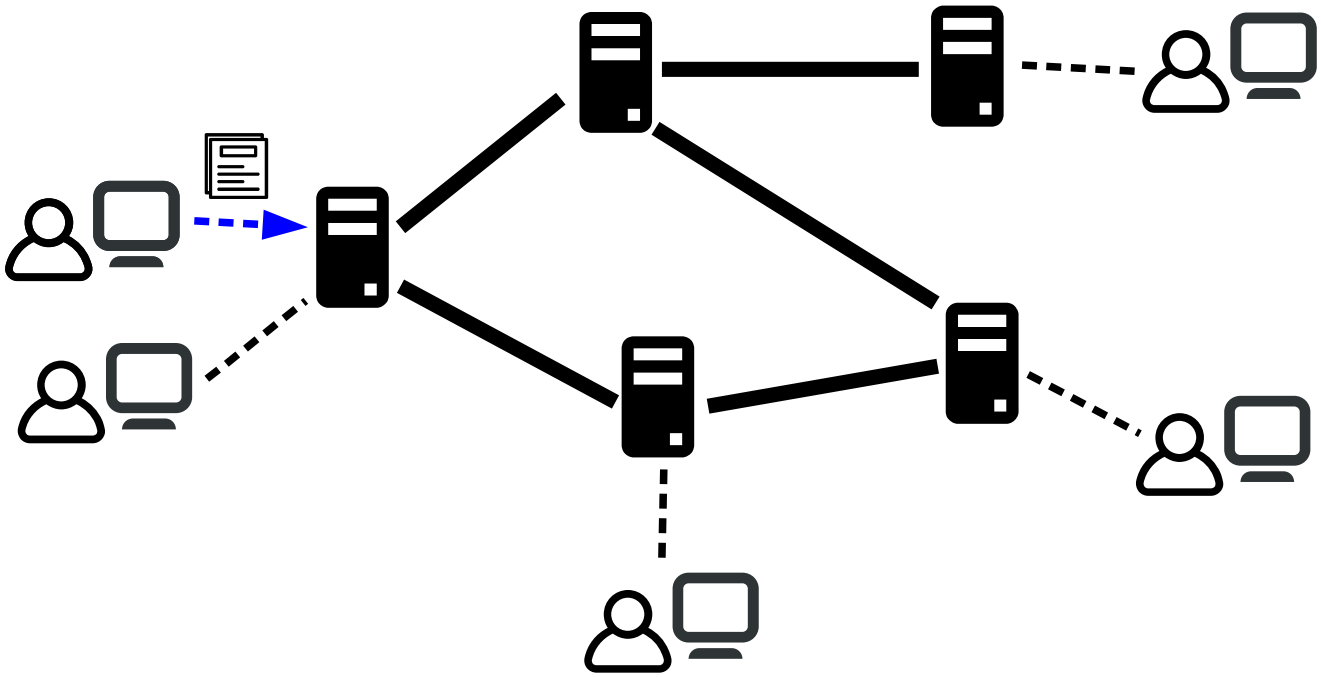

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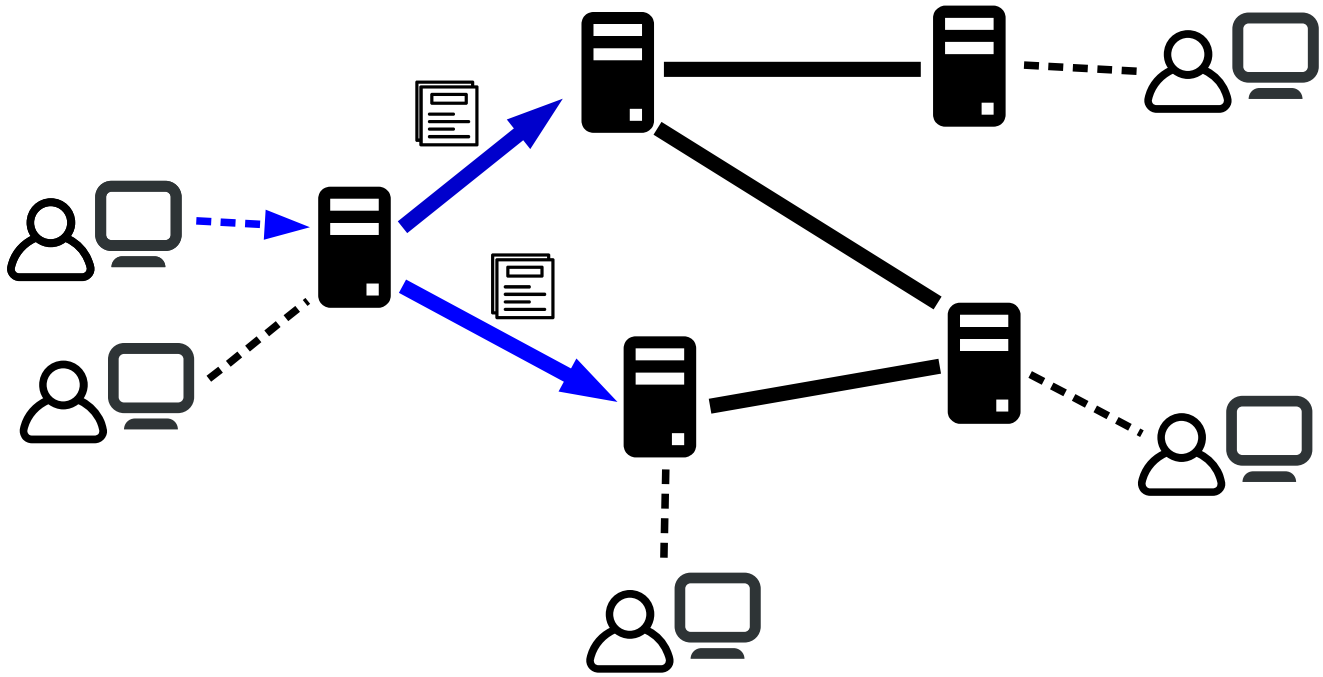

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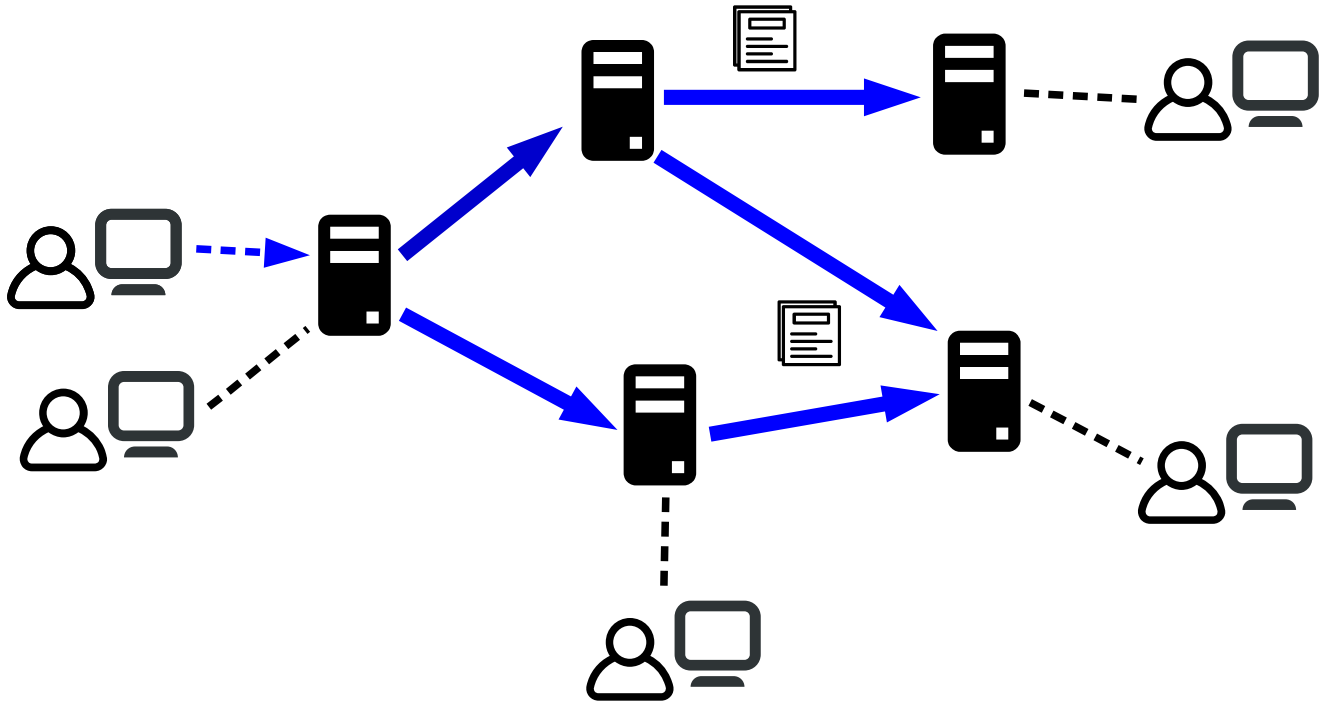

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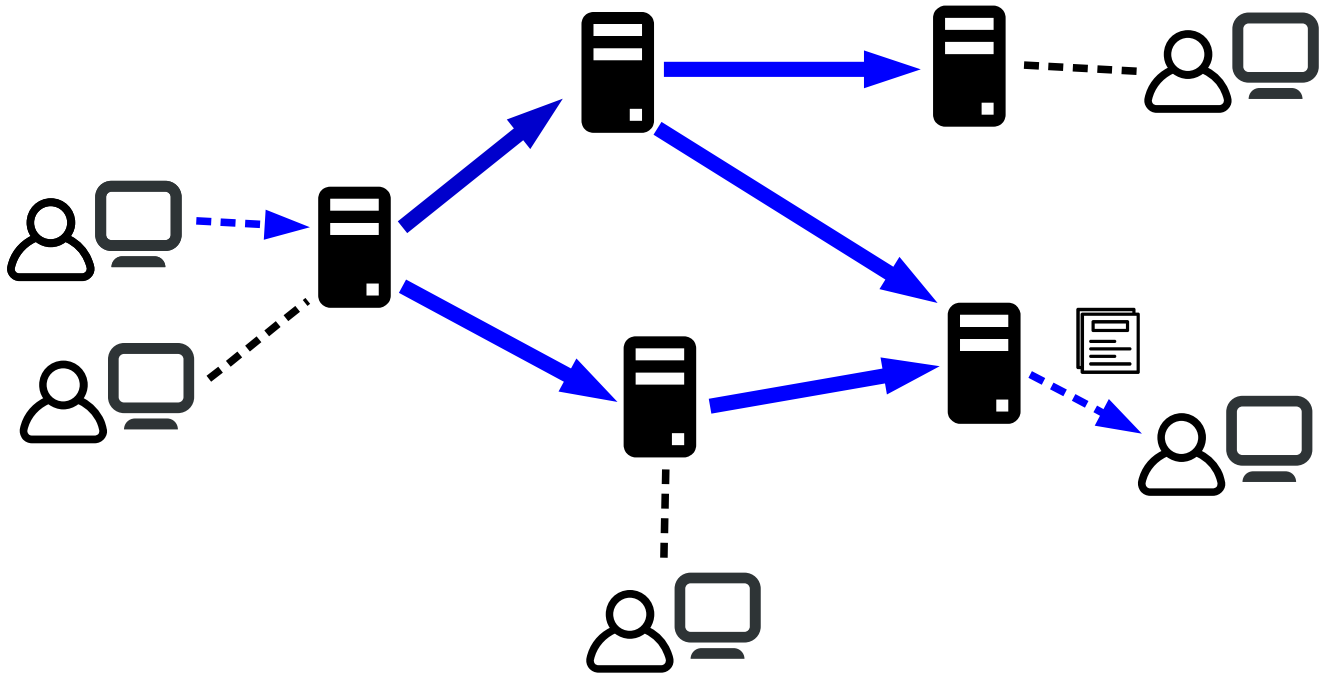
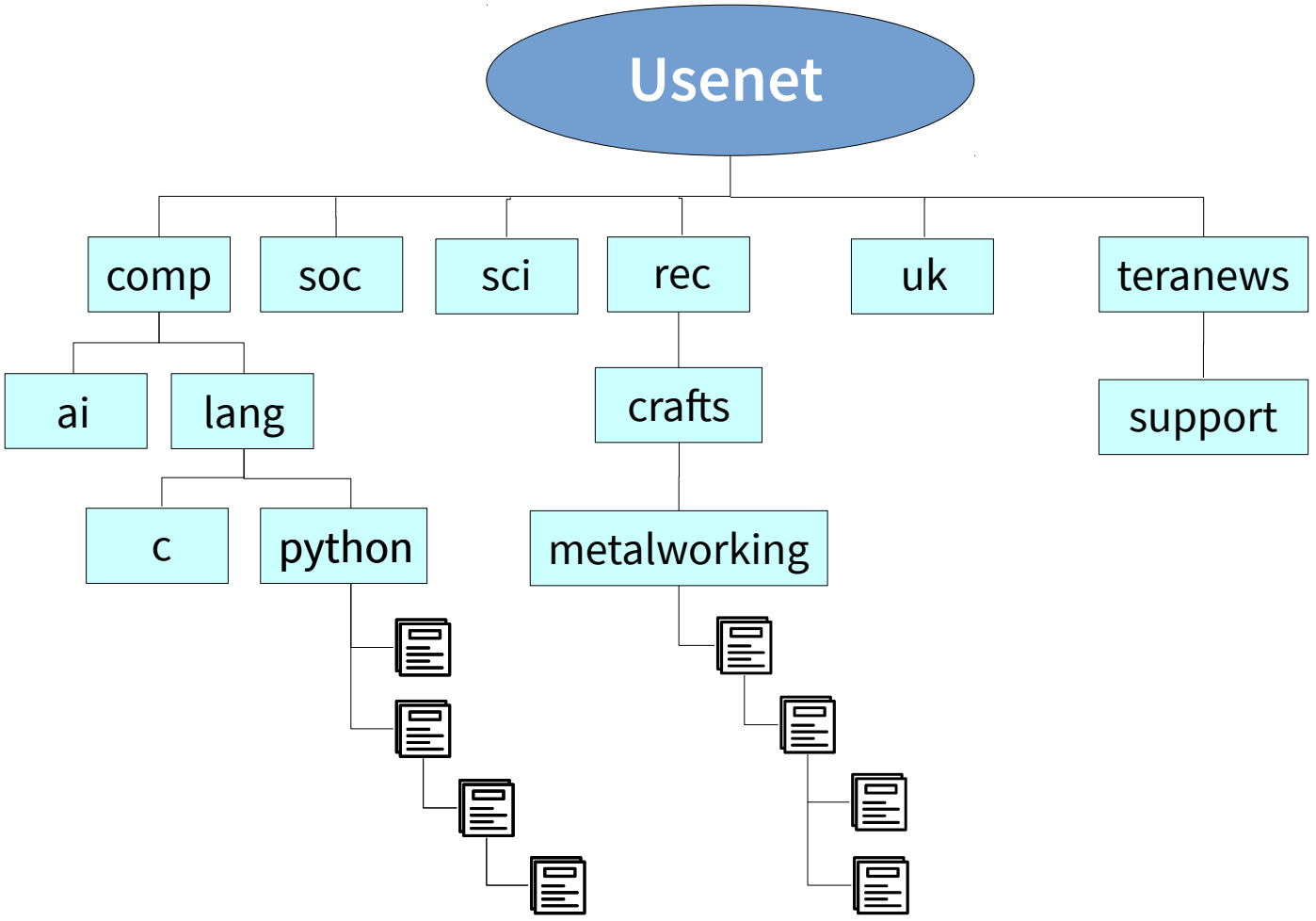


Usenet Groups



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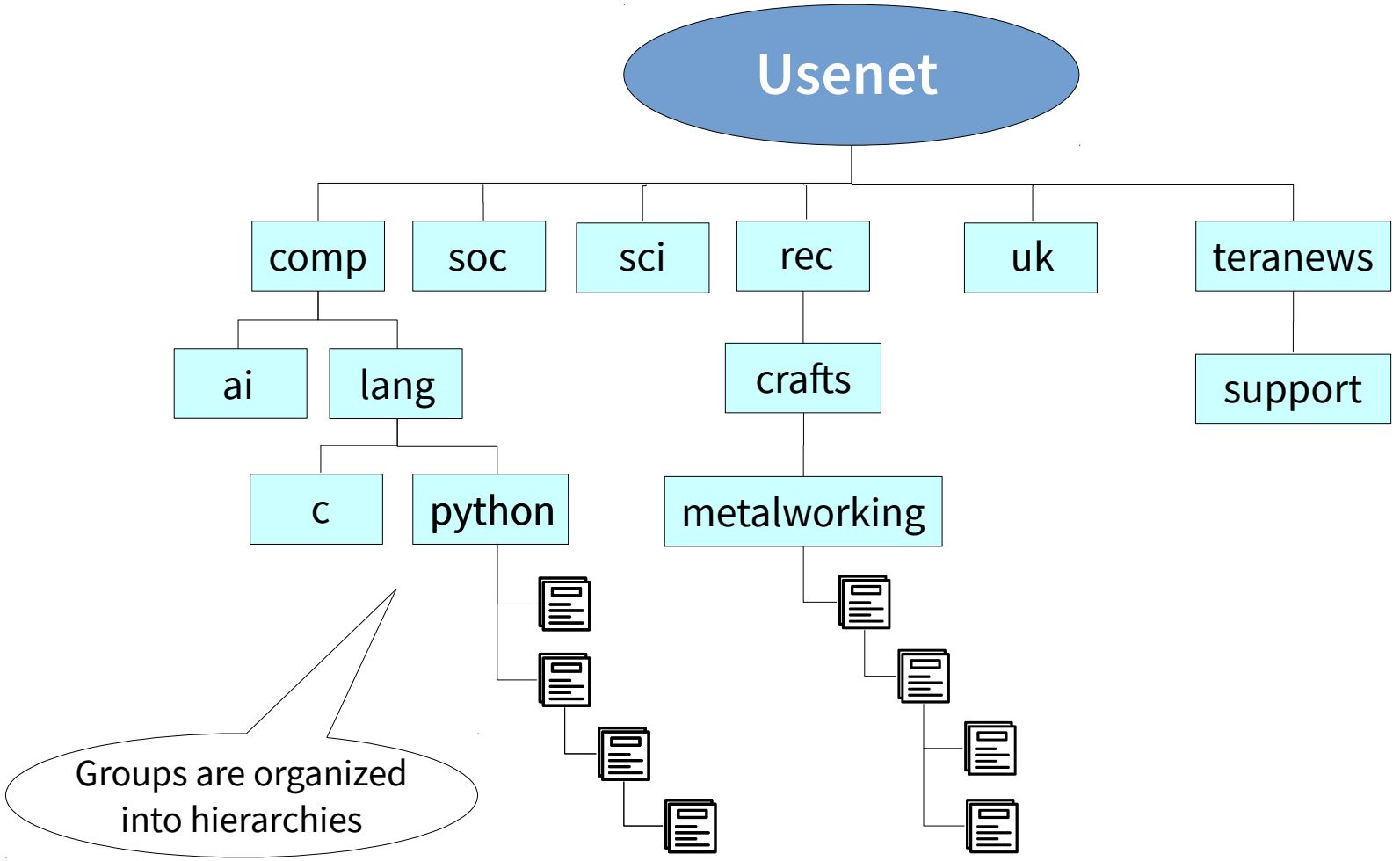

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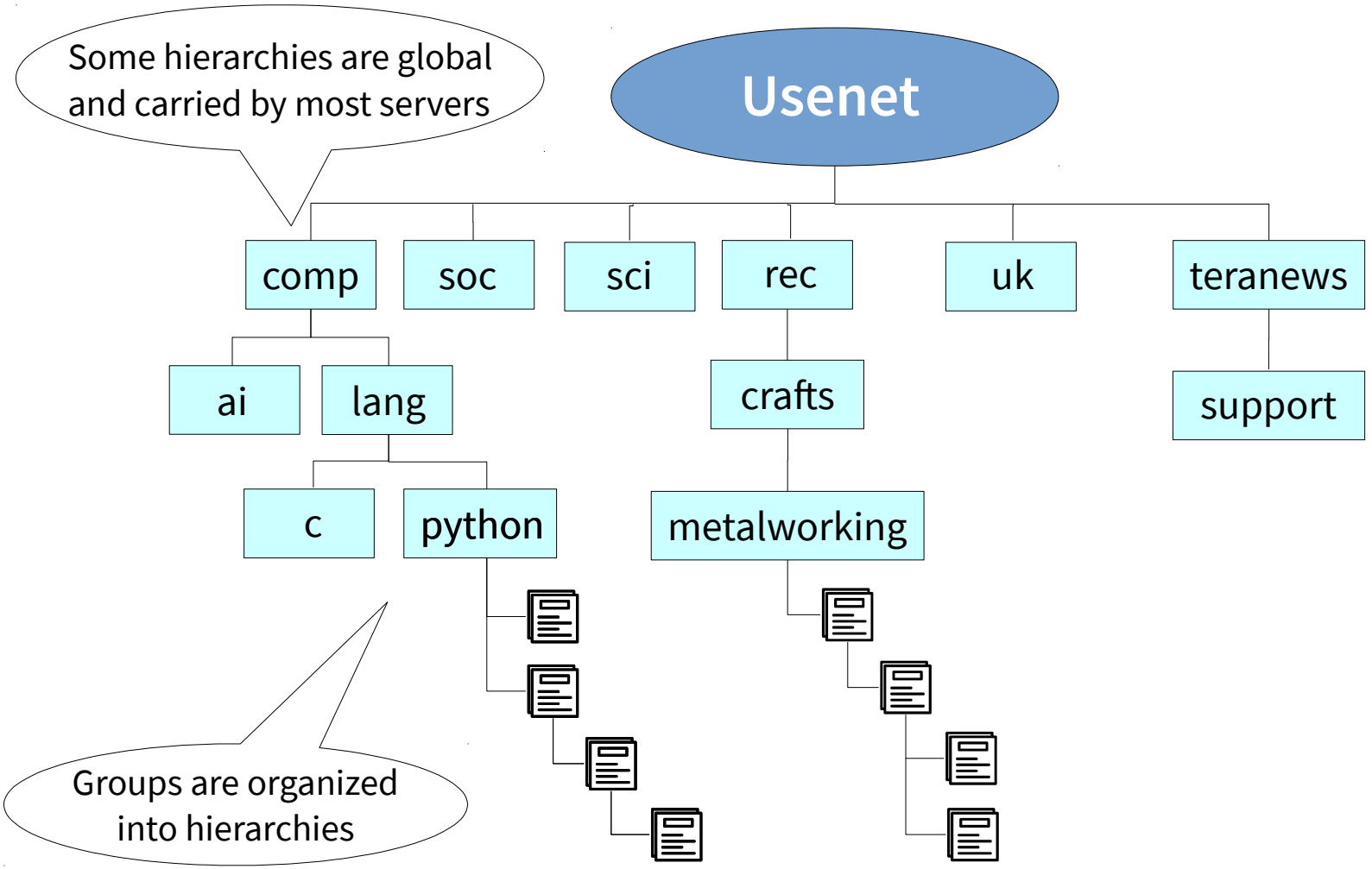

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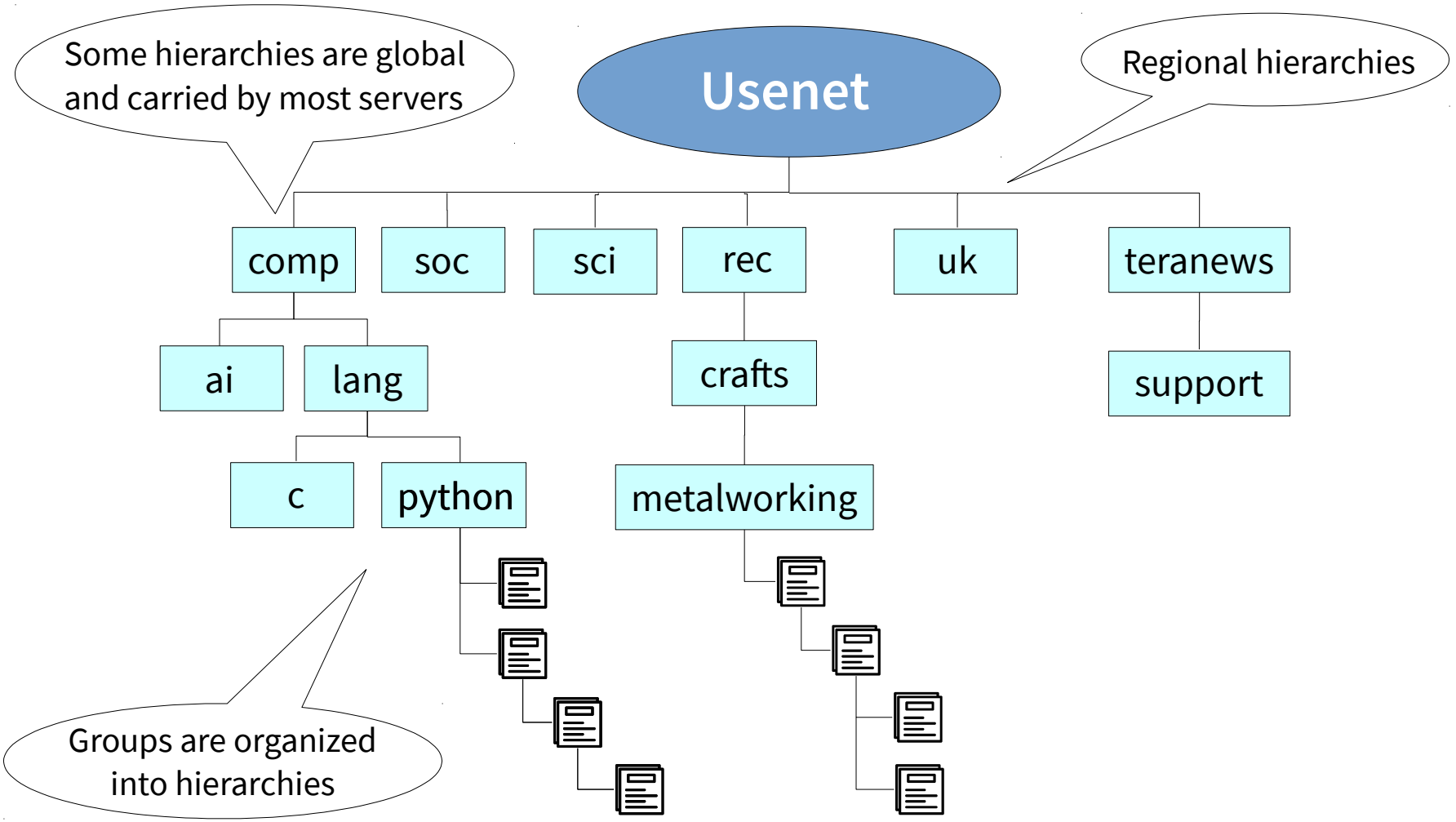

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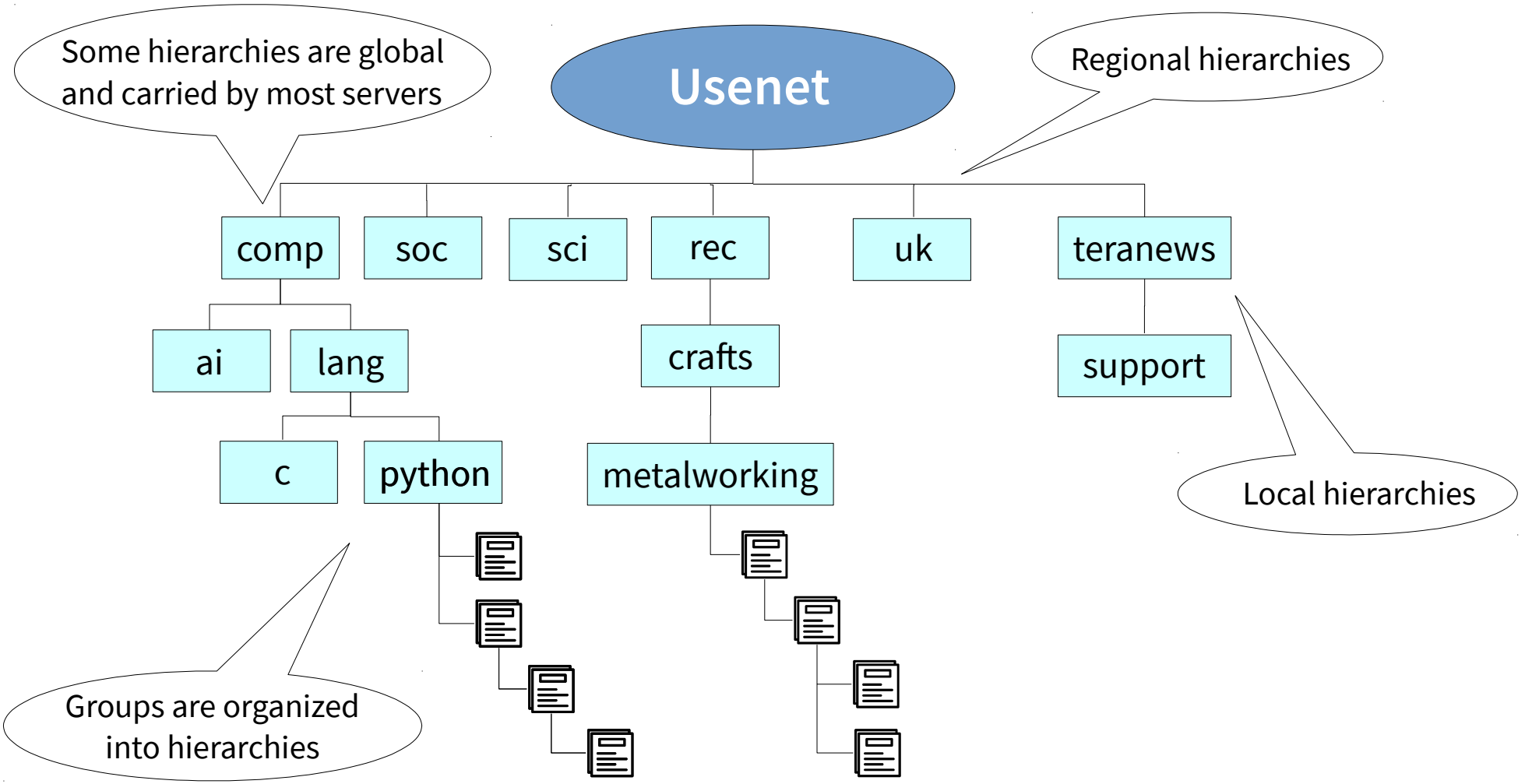

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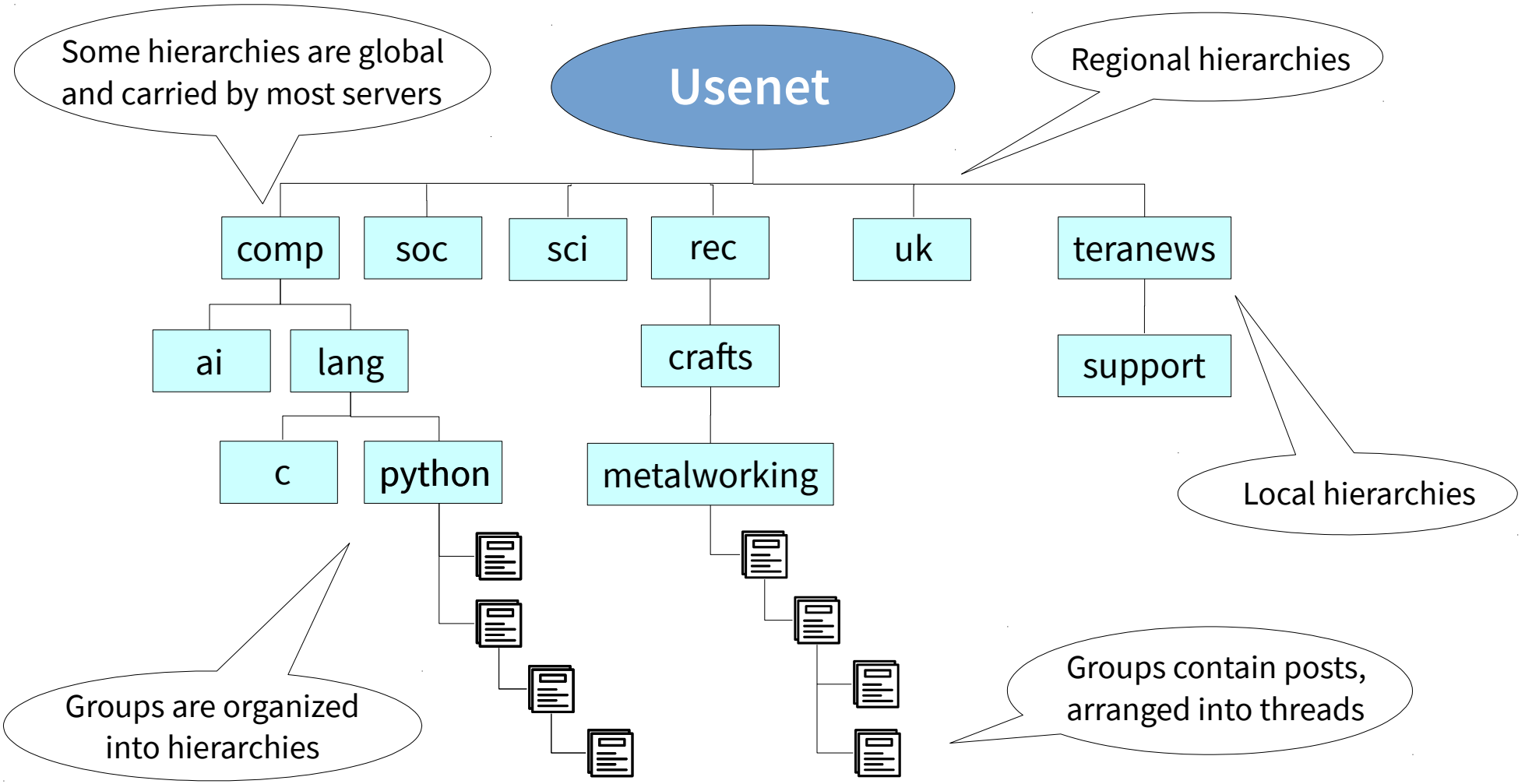


Usenet Users

- Identity all client-side.
- Upside: Can post from anywhere, and move providers easily
- Downside: Forgery is possible (like with email)

Usenet Protocols

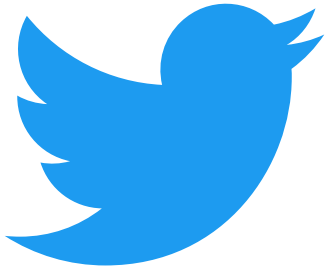
- NNTP (Network News Transfer Protocol)
- Formerly, batch copying using UUCP
- ...or sometimes even an airmailed magtape!

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:

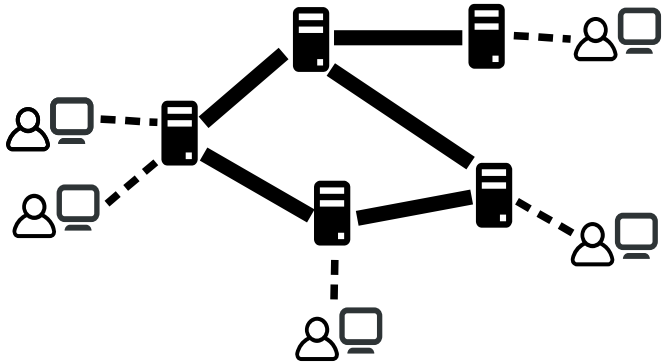


- Top-down control
- Proprietary platforms
- Acts as "town square" - but actually privately owned
- Platform lock-in: people want to be where other people are
- Owner can change your user experience
- If server shuts down, your account and posts are gone

How does Usenet compare to other social media?

Usenet:

- Federated network of servers
- Open protocols (NNTP)
- Free software (e.g. Thunderbird, INN)



- Anyone can run 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.

How does Usenet compare to other social media?

The Fediverse:

- Federated network of servers
- Open protocols
- Free software
- Anyone can run 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?

- On Usenet you follow groups, not people
- Usenet uses email for direct messaging
- Usenet is good for long-form multi-party discussions

What are Usenet's strengths?

- Highly resistant to censorship
- High degree of anonymity is possible
- Forms lively communities around common interests
- Well-established social conventions promoting smooth and respectful communication
- 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

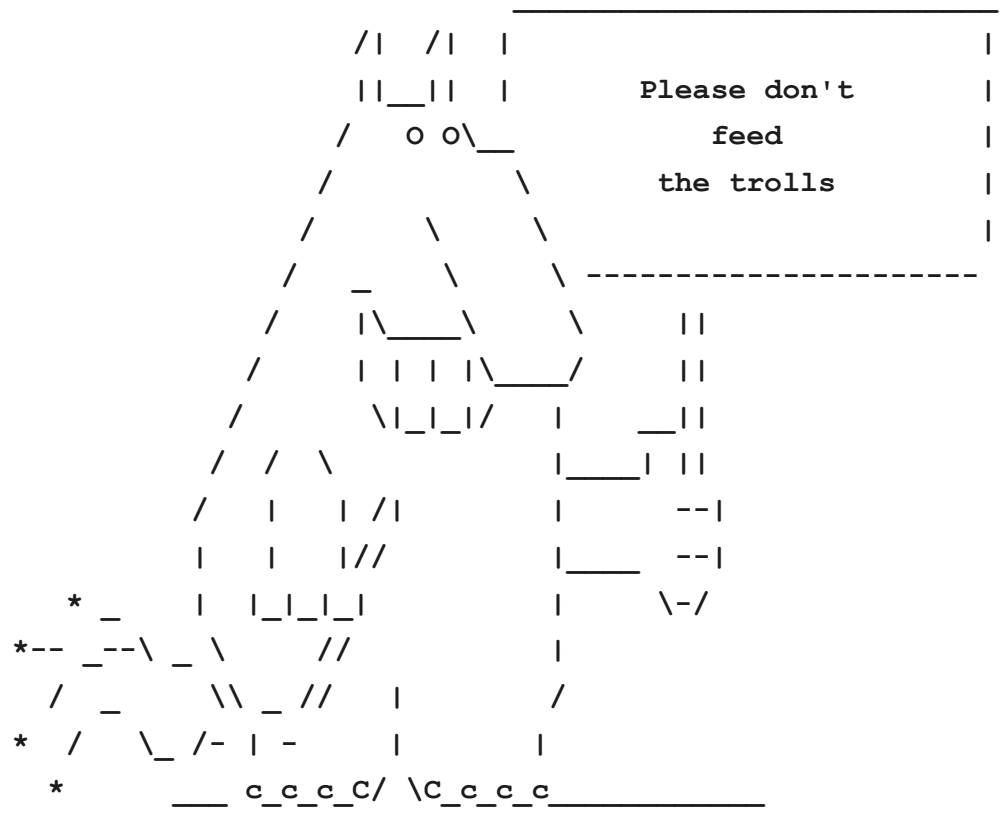
Dealing with abuse

Admin level:

- Spam filtering (e.g. Cleanfeed)
- Ignoring cancels/supersedes
- Banning users
- De-peering
- Usenet Death Penalty

What can we learn from Usenet?

- Don’t feed the trolls?



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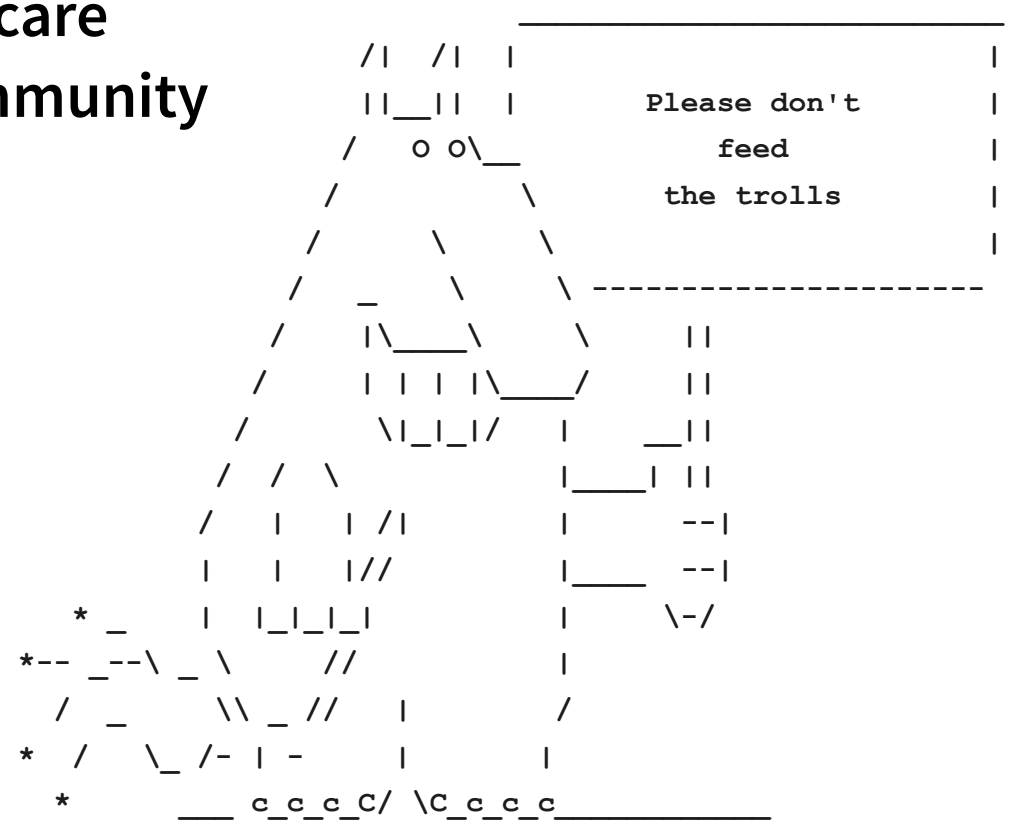
- Don’t feed the trolls?
- Only works on people who care about being part of the community



What can we learn from Usenet?

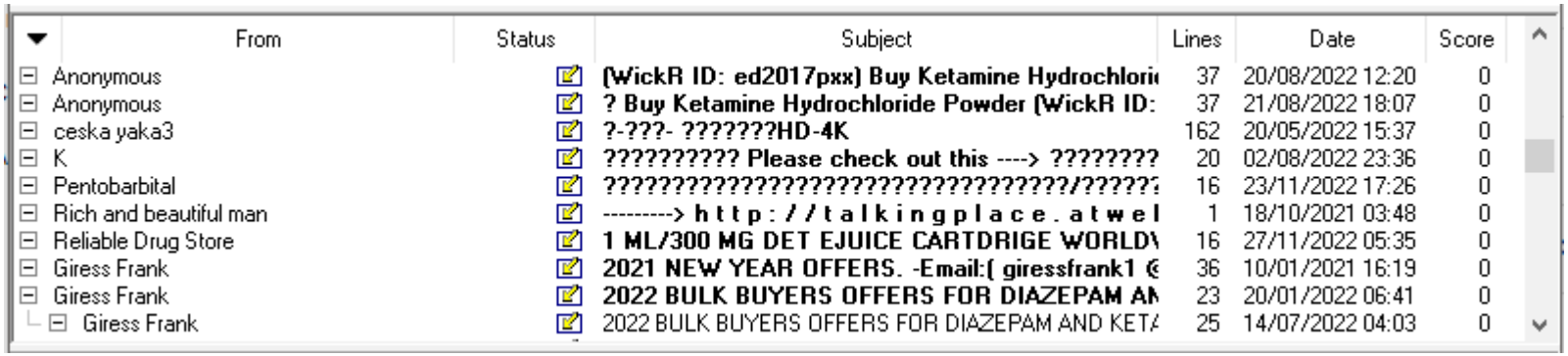
Ignoring abuse doesn't work

- Many trolls will escalate, or go after other targets
- Community members give up and leave
- New users get discouraged even more quickly

What can we learn from Usenet?

Ignoring abuse doesn't work

- Spammers don’t give up either
- New users see wall-to-wall garbage



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Anonymous		? Buy Ketamine Hydrochloride Powder (WickR ID:	37	21/08/2022 18:07	0
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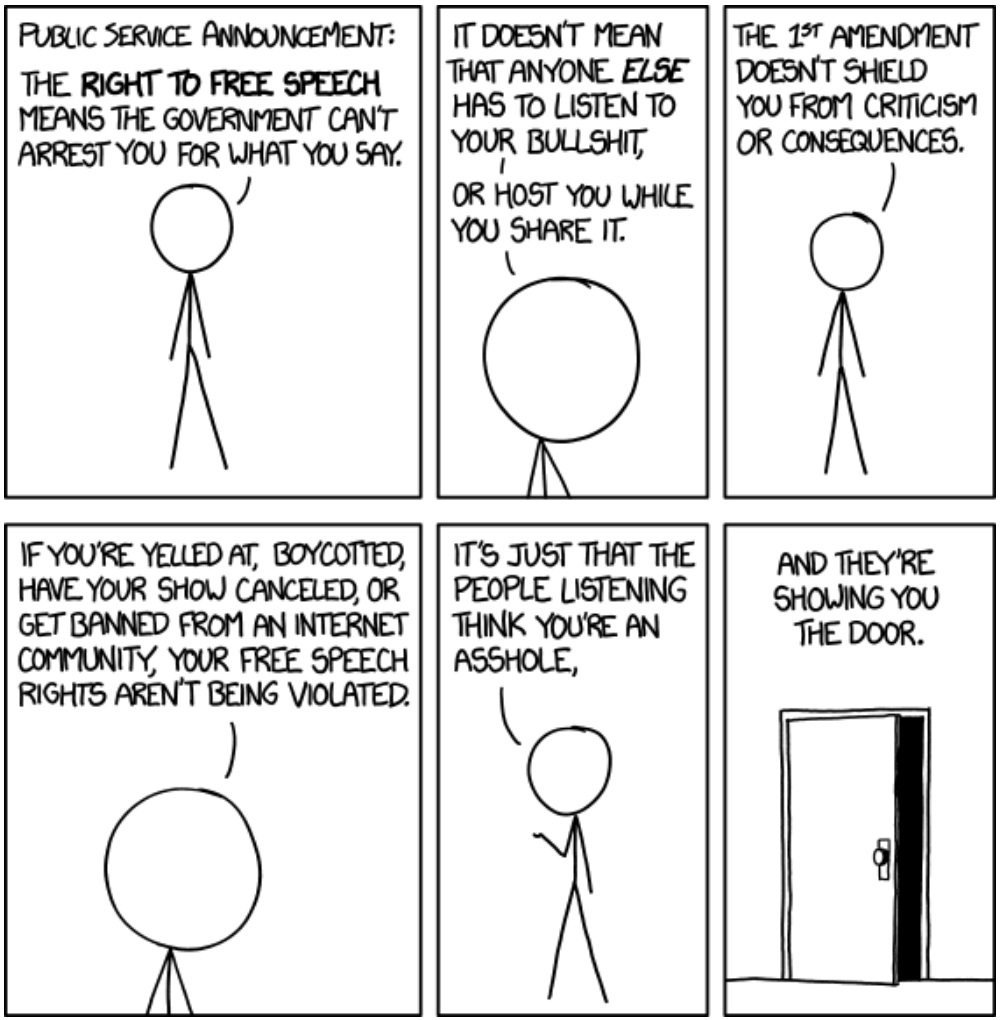
K		?????????? Please check out this ----> ????????	20	02/08/2022 23:36	0
Pentobarbital		????????????????????????????????????/??????	16	23/11/2022 17:26	0
Rich and beautiful man		---------> h t t p : / / t a l k i n g p l a c e . a t w e l	1	18/10/2021 03:48	0
Reliable Drug Store		1 ML/300 MG DET EJUICE CARTDRIGE WORLDV	16	27/11/2022 05:35	0
Giress Frank		2021 NEW YEAR OFFERS. -Email:[giressfrank1 @	36	10/01/2021 16:19	0
Giress Frank		2022 BULK BUYERS OFFERS FOR DIAZEPAM AN	23	20/01/2022 06:41	0
Giress Frank		2022 BULK BUYERS OFFERS FOR DIAZEPAM AND KETA	25	14/07/2022 04:03	0

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

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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
- 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