
Not without the archived web. Tracking down the origins of early Usenet newsgroups in astrophysics and in some related disciplines.

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Abstract

This poster is about the founding and the first years of development of two major usenet newsgroups - an early type of computer-mediated communication tool - within the scholarly community of astrophysicists; references are made to the related communities of physicists and mathematicians and their own newsgroups. The communities above are considered to be very early adopters of internet tools for scholarly communication. Nevertheless, no previous specific study has been found on this subject, so that, although significant studies have been conducted on usenet newsgroup either in research environments at large, or in different scholarly communities, episodic accounts found in the literature of what happened in the astrophysics and physics domains show that a better grounding is needed.

Tracking down the origin of this uptake, and getting a sufficiently adequate idea of the scenario by that early time, is not an easy task. The first results obtained show that the major Usenet newsgroups in astrophysics were born between the beginning of the '80 and the beginning of the '90 in the 20th century, with a significant evolution along time. Such a timespan - from 30 to 40 years ago, approximately - is challenging: it results to be difficult, or sometimes definitely impossible due e.g. to some departure, to reach out to the researchers who have had a relevant role in the founding and/or early maintaining of these newsgroups. Thus, the research needs to move its focus on the available internet archives to a considerable extent. On the other side, most of the suitable online archives - whose global and individual consistence is not well-known, and has been explored - suffer from a suboptimal situation of usability, as well as from notable problems of coverage.

With respect to previous, and more broadly or differently-focussed studies on usenet newsgroups in scholarly communities, two main outcomes emerge. First, the crucial point of the balance between communication and documentation function (Paloque-Bergès 2018) is absolutely present in the astrophysical domain, with specific, well-documented and well-aware dynamics. Secondly, the trans-professional affordance of these resources - intended as their possibility to serve both scholarly and professional users - emerges very clearly as a desirable goal for founders, although according to Paloque-Bergès it's more usually found in interdisciplinary domains.

The ultimate goal of the present research is to reconstitute a sufficiently satisfying, albeit provisional, overview of this early scholarly communication experience, which be meaningful both from an archival point of view, and in a historical perspective; the latter is aimed at a conceptually simple, but sound reconstruction of facts. A more in-depth theoretical account

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of these experiences, with a wider review of the literature, is a possible goal for a further stage of this research.

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