

Transgender Usenet Research Guide

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Overview

This guide is intended to help researchers unfamiliar with Usenet gain an introductory understanding of the platform and its history. Beyond the brief background, it also contains an abbreviated listing of transgender-related newsgroups, an overview of the two large-scale Usenet archives that exist, and a selection of recommended background readings.

Background

First established in 1980, Usenet is a distributed discussion system built on a decentralized network of servers ferrying user messages, or articles, to subscribers across the network. Usenet's architecture is governed by [RFC 5537](#). Usenet posts mirror email in format, with designated headers containing pre-set information, including a unique Message-ID, and message content below. Which posts a given post responds to is tracked in the "References" header. More detail on their specific format requirements of Usenet articles can be found in [RFC 5536](#).

All messages are required to designate at least one newsgroup to receive their message. After 1987, Usenet was organized into eight "official" newsgroup hierarchies: comp.* (computers and technical topics), news.* (Usenet administration), sci.* (science), rec.* (recreation), soc.* (social issues), talk.* (divisive issues such as religion or politics), humanities.* (humanities-related topics), and misc.* (miscellaneous). Newsgroup names are organized in order of increasing specificity of topic: in example, rec.gambling.poker focuses on the recreational activity, gambling, and specifically the game poker.

All "official" newsgroups founded after 1987 were required to have a charter that outlined their purpose and focus, as well as any group-wide rules; unofficially, many maintained FAQs that governed day to day interactions amongst posters. Beyond the official hierarchies, the "unofficial" alt.* hierarchy covered topics that were not part of the official hierarchies, and had fewer restrictions on group creation.

Transgender Specific Newsgroups

The first transgender-themed newsgroups first emerged on Usenet in 1992 beginning with alt.transgendered, which is created in response to the introduction of a trans newsgroup under the alt.sex hierarchy, commonly associated with erotica and fetish groups. An incomplete list of transgender-related newsgroups, along with their founding charter and/or their FAQ) has been included below

| Newsgroup | Primary Language | Link to Charter/FAQ (if available) |
|---------------------------|------------------|--|
| alt.transgendered | American English | FAQ: Part 1 , Part 2 , Part 3 (posted 12/23/93-12/24/93) |
| soc.support.transgendered | American English | Charter and FAQ (posted 11/10/96) |
| alt.support.crossdressing | American English | Charter (posted 08/22/04) |
| alt.fashion.crossdressing | American English | Founding Rationale and Charter |
| alt.support.srs | American English | Founding Rationale and Charter |
| alt.personals.transgender | American English | N/A |
| uk.people.crossdressing | British English | Proposal, Rationale, and Charter |
| nl.support.transseksueel | Dutch | Charter |
| japan.soc.transgender | Japanese | N/A |

Available Archives

Several options are available for scholars interested in doing research on transgender Usenet. Information on two of the most complete are included below, though other commercial archives are available. It is important to note, however, that any archive of Usenet is necessarily incomplete, either due to inconsistent propagation of messages or use of the X-No-Archive header, which allowed senders to keep their articles from being archived.

[Google Groups Archive](#)

- **Dates:** 1980-Ongoing
- **Description:** This archive is based primarily on an archive maintained by DejaNews, a commercial Usenet provider, which Google acquired in 2001. Articles are hosted through the Google Groups format, with individual newsgroups formatted as an active Google Group. Articles are presented in a threaded format with headers hidden, but there is an option to view messages in their original format.
- **Search Options:** Text search available, with date limitations by year only. Sorting options either by date or by relevance.

[Usenet Historical Collection](#)

- **Dates:** 1980-2013 (approximate)
- **Description:** The Usenet Historical Collection, maintained by the Internet Archive, is based on a data scrape of the Google-based archive in 2013. The archive, organized by hierarchy, holds individual .mbox files of each Usenet newsgroup. Each .mbox is organized in reverse chronological order.
- **Search Options:** Given the size of each .mbox file, a text editor that can handle large plain-text files, like [EditPad Lite](#) (Windows) or [UltraEdit](#) (Mac), is recommended. Files may also be indexed and searched using Python's built-in mbox library.

Recommended Background Reading

Pfaffenberger, Bryan. 2003. "A Standing Wave in the Web of Our Communications': Usenet and the Socio-Technical Construction of Cyberspace Values." In *From Usenet to CoWebs*, edited by Christopher Lueg and Danyel Fisher, 20–43. London: Springer.

Pfaffenberger discusses the organizational history of Usenet's formation. In particular, he explores the social and political values that underlay Usenet's wider user culture. A good overview for those unfamiliar with Usenet's history and formation.

Paloque-Berges, Camille. 2017. "Usenet as a Web Archive: Multi-Layered Archives of Computer-Mediated-Communication." In *Web 25: Histories from the First 25 Years of the World Wide Web*, edited by Niels Brügger, 228-252. Oxford: Peter Lang.

In her essay, Paloque-Berges constructs a genealogy of Usenet archives on the web, studying their development and deployment. In particular, she illustrates how the technical aspects of archiving Usenet are deeply intertwined with its social and nostalgic connotations.