TeX online communities — discussion and content

Stefan Kottwitz

Abstract

On the Internet there are various platforms where TeX users meet for discussion. In this article, such systems will be compared with a particular focus on usability and content development.

1 Introduction

It all began in the 1980s with mailing lists such as `texhax`,[1] and Usenet. Around 1990, the Usenet group `comp.text.tex`[1] emerged, and continues today to be a place where TeX hackers gather.

On the continuously developing Internet, TeX user groups created mailing lists, and built home pages and software archives. Web forums turned up and lowered the barrier for beginners and occasional TeX users to get support.

Today, TeX's friends can also follow blogs and news feeds, and take part in vibrant question and answer sites.

These various systems offer different features, which make some particularly useful for discussion and others useful for information look-up and content creation.

2 Classic discussion systems

2.1 Mailing lists

Subscribers to mailing lists discuss a certain topic via email. The topic can be broad, such as TeX in general, or very specific, such as a particular LaTeX 2_ε package. The list's server receives emails from subscribers and reflects them to all other subscribers.

Mailing lists have the advantage that they can be used on every device with a mail client, so are accessible on tablets and smartphones, and even offline, just going online during receiving and sending.

However, there are caveats:

- Following a general (LA)TeX list can be difficult because of high traffic.
- Subscribing to quite a few specialized lists can be overwhelming.
- If a user doesn't know yet which package might solve his problem, it may be hard to find the right list.

Focused mailing lists are great for organizations, developers, and authors, but less so for a casual user.

A well known example of a mailing list for general TeX questions and discussion in English lan-

guage is `texhax`.[2] It has been online since the 1980s, has hundreds of subscribers and offers a public archive.

About 50 further lists, most dealing with a specific topic, can be found on the TUG home page.[3]

There are further specialized TeX mailing lists hosted by various providers.

2.2 Usenet groups

Usenet is a discussion system on the Internet, distributed by thousands of servers world wide. It emerged around 1980. In Usenet, articles are logically organized in hierarchies of subjects and arranged in threads. It can be accessed via a dedicated newsreader client or can be accessed via web interfaces, such as Google Groups or mail gateways.

The first TeX group `comp.text.tex`[4] was established about 1990, and it is still active today with about 1000 posts each month. Its language of discussion is English, but there are further groups in other languages, including `de.comp.tex.tex`[5] in German since 1992, `fr.comp.text.tex`[6] in French since 1992 and `es.comp.lenguajes.tex` in Spanish since 1996 (although the latter is not used any more).

Usenet has some advantages — it is distributed on many thousands of servers, and is thus redundant which makes censoring hardly possible. Furthermore, it has been around many years and a lot of experienced users participate. However, though the Usenet as a whole is structured, the TeX group itself has no further structuring, except thread subjects.

There are feature-rich dedicated Usenet clients, although many people also use it via Google Groups. This brings us to a potential problem — some nice features depend on Google Groups:

- How could we access the `comp.text.tex` archive if Google stops providing it? Remember, Deja News stopped the original Usenet search service in 2001, before the archive was sold to Google who reopened it.
- How could we access it via the web if Google Groups disappears?

3 Web based communication

3.1 Blogs, feeds and aggregators

There are various blogs maintained by users, user groups and companies. They offer knowledge and news, though they can be hard to find and follow. Feed aggregators provide a solution for this problem.

---

[1] Reviewed by Jim Hefferon in "Which way to the forum?", *TUGboat* 32:2, 2011

[2] `http://lists.tug.org/texhax`
[3] `http://lists.tug.org`
[4] `http://groups.google.com/group/comp.text.tex`
[5] `http://groups.google.com/group/de.comp.text.tex`
[6] `http://groups.google.com/group/fr.comp.text.tex`

They offer convenient access by aggregating posts of dozens TeX blogs into one list, which can be read online or via a feed. Two are outstanding, `texample.net`[7] and `planet.dante.de`.[8] Both offer a chronological list of posts from most TeX blogs.

3.2 Web forums

A web forum is an HTML-based discussion forum on the Internet, usually hosted on one server, unlike Usenet. Forum posts are logically organized into categories and subcategories and arranged in threads, usually chronologically. The forum can natively be accessed via web browser on any Internet capable computer, thus also on tablets and smart phones. Posts can make use of markup such as HTML, BBCode or Markdown, and LaTeX syntax-highlighting is usually available. Web forums support file attachments and inline images, useful for displaying TeX and LaTeX output.

Web forums are usually moderated, and thus are spam-free and afford some measure of quality control.

`latex-community.org`[9] is a well frequented web forum[1] for TeX and LaTeX, covering all topics. It has been online since Jan 20, 2008. At this writing, it has 7673 registered users and 14,087 threads containing 52,762 posts are available for browsing and via the forum search feature. The forum is organized into 5 categories with 38 subforums.

In addition to LaTeX-specific web forums, there are also various LaTeX subforums on many technology and math/science discussion sites.

Another LaTeX forum is `golatex.de`,[10] though it is in German. An outstanding feature is its LaTeX wiki, which uses the GNU Free Documentation License.

A challenge — building a knowledge base

Besides communication — how can we improve the content of online TeX resources? This means reliable archiving, good searching and browsing access, quality measuring, elimination of redundancies, and cross-linking.

3.3 Q&A sites and advanced web applications

So-called Q&A web sites are specialized in strict question & answer format. They are intended both for experts and for general user support. Like web forums, such sites are hosted on a server or server farm.

The complete archive is stored as a database enriched with extra information such as quality scores, content related tags and links to related information.

`tex.stackexchange.com`,[11] now also known as TeX.SX,[1] is a TeX-dedicated site on the network of Stack Exchange Q&A sites. These sites offer a very dynamic web interface with assisted editing, tooltips, good search and browsing features. The site's content is free under the CC BY-SA license;[12] regular database dumps are freely available for download on `clearbits.net`.[13]

TeX.SX has been publicly online since November 11, 2010. Today there are 7,300 registered users, more than 11,000 questions, and about 20,000 answers, and it is quickly growing.

In August 2011, Stack Exchange Inc. became an institutional member of the TeX Users Group, initiated by TeX.SX.

Compared to other systems, TeX.SX offers some outstanding features:

Tagging: Questions can be marked by one or several tags. This allows browsing by subject, filtering, feed subscribing, and more search features.

Voting: Users can vote posts up or down. So the best solution (or at least the most popular) will be displayed at the top, most easy to see.

Reputation system: Users earn reputation score if other users vote up their posts. This allows community moderation: the more reputation the more moderation features are available for the user.

Community edits: All posts can be edited by all users, either directly by users with high reputation score, or by edit suggestions which need to be confirmed. This improves quality: mistakes can be corrected and answers can be improved.

Duplicate control: When a user creates a question, possible duplicates are suggested. Users can flag existing duplicates. This leads to the best solution, with an automatic FAQ system.

Database exploring: The database dump can be browsed by SQL queries online.[14] This provides statistical features; complex queries can filter and connect content and attributes.

Open API: Programmers have developed applications for various special purposes, and for Android and iOS.

Meta site: There is a companion Q&A site with similar features, where users can discuss moderation, usage and any questions about the site

---

[7] http://www.texample.net/community/

[8] http://planet.dante.de

[9] http://www.latex-community.org

[10] http://www.golatex.de

[11] http://tex.stackexchange.com

[12] http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/

[13] http://www.clearbits.net

[14] http://data.stackexchange.com

		Mailing lists	Usenet	Web forums	Q&A
Usability	Reading, writing	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Markup, inline graphics			✓	✓
	Attachments	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Commenting, annotating				✓
	Deleting own posts			✓	✓
	Community deleting				✓
	Editing own posts			✓	✓
	Community editing				✓
Interfaces	Native web access			✓	✓
	Articles, blogs			✓	✓
	Tool-tips				✓
	Assisted editing				✓
	Feeds		✓	✓	✓
	Twitter posts				✓
	Chat				✓
	Statistics				✓
	Open API		✓		✓
Availability	Redundancy		✓		
	Archive on server	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Full public archive	✓			✓
Quality	Accepted solutions				✓
	Community voting				✓
	Duplicate elimination				✓
	Automatic FAQ extraction				✓
	Community edits				✓
Moderation	By moderators			✓	✓
	By the community				✓
	Mod election by community				✓
	Meta & moderation site				✓
Content access	Full text search	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Topic categories			✓	✓
	Quality sorting				✓
	Database queries				✓
Filtering by	Topics			✓	✓
	User-defined terms		✓		
	Consensus score				✓
	User score		✓		

Table 1: Feature comparison of online systems

and how it works. This keeps the focus of the main site on TEX-related content.

Chat site: A chat with features closely related to the main TEX site allows free discussion of more complex problems.

4   Comparing systems

Table 1 shows which features are available on which systems, for mailing lists, Usenet groups, web forums, and Q&A sites. It is a rough comparison based on the mentioned TEX examples for each platform. Some points are debatable though. For example, on the Usenet authors may cancel messages, though on the distributed network this is clearly not reliable, and today there are web gateways for non-web services such as Usenet and mailing lists.

Conclusion

For discussion, Usenet groups, mailing lists, and web forums are great. On Q&A sites, mixing discussion with content is undesirable, however there are separate discussion sites and chats as companions to the main site.

For content building and for developing TEX knowledge bases, dedicated sites with a proper free license are recommended.

⋄ Stefan Kottwitz
   Hamburg, Germany
   stefan (at) texblog dot net
   http://texblog.net