The Internet and Freemasonry

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to briefly describe the Internet; some of the facilities that are currently available for its use; some of the facilities related to masonry that are available on the net and give some recommendations on its uses by lodges.

The Net is all about Communication

Communicate Freemasonry. Make some daily progress in the acquisition of Masonic knowledge.

The Internet

The Internet is a network where people communicate through computers. The hardware in the links may be optical fibre, telephone lines, cables or satellites with radio or microwave. The links have nodes of computers. These computers may pass on messages or have facilities for storage and retrieval of information. The net, in some form, has been in existence for some time. I have had access with e-mail facilities since 1984.

The main facilities that are currently available are

- electronic mail,
- remote execution of programs across the net,
- file transfer,
- hypertext access with pictures and videos.

Electronic mail (e-mail) is the transmission of information from one person, identified by an electronic address, to another. Originally only text characters were allowed but it has been extended to include any type of file, with voice, and pictures. The main use of e-mail is for notification of meetings, items of interest, including seminars and talks. Most university students have their own e-mail. My e-mail address is rap@cs.adfa.oz.au.

Whilst e-mail can be used like a letter sent from one individual to another, E-mail can also be used as a broadcast to many people at once. It is not efficient as multiple copies are transmitted. Software for mailing lists allows people to send a message to a central address and everyone who subscribes to that list then receives a copy.

As individual messages are inefficient and require a knowledge of the people who wish to receive a copy another form is the newsgroup. These groups are broadcast over the network with only a single copy going to every computer (or news-server). Any user can then subscribe and read a single copy. I currently read alt.freemasonry. This is a group where any messages get forwarded. Another form is a moderated group where an individual vets the messages. Newsgroups names have a predetermined structure. A new newsgroup can be formed under commonly accepted rules. Use of the alt hierarchy is relatively easy compared with the more restrictive voting requirements in some of the others types of newsgroups.

A further common use of the Internet is for transfer of data files. A protocol called ftp was the most common. In this whole files are transferred between computers. With this form the interaction is minimal and the use has little control over the process no selection within a file is possible.

Another protocol, that allows for more interaction, is known as http. The use of this allows documents with a structure to be accessed according to that structure. These are specially generated with special often hidden parts. The general form of access is known as hypertext.

Hypertext is a way of linking documents, and words within them as an aide to understanding. As an analogy consider a thesaurus. This contains links through synonyms and the links are the numbers of the groups. Hypertext is an electronic technique for going from one to the other directly. As a further example consider the Canberra Lodges, a document might contain the meetings for a month. A link on the name of the Lodge could return the name of the secretary and other information on that lodge. After reading about the meetings the user would click on the name and another screen of information would appear.

Another advantage of http documents is that the users can form their own annotations. As well as text pictures, and movies can also be transferred across the net. The main current picture transfer is high quality colour. To save time and for a relatively low elapsed time for the transfer the picture itself can be represented with a simpler view and transferred at leisure.

Hypertext is ideal for journals, scientific articles, lecture notes, brochures, booklets. Anything where the areas of interest to a particular user are parts of the document rather than the whole. The wise use of structure and links between the parts allows users to select those parts of interest as well as allowing the generator of the document simple modification and expansion.

Some netiquette

The use of electronic documents has a self imposed, and often well understood, etiquette. The main one is that the senders of e-mail messages to other users, mailing lists, and newsgroups give their own opinion only. This may be made explicit at the end of the message.

Often the mailing systems contain a signature block with can also include telephone and fax numbers, addresses or a Lodge membership note. Sometimes a sentence like 'The opinions expressed are my own and do not reflect those of' is included. In Unix a file called .signature contains the e-mail and other information about the sender.

In this file there may be the statement 'include standard disclaimer' or similar. This is a related to a statement used by a programmer and is taken to mean that the opinions are those of the author alone.

Another convention is that unless the newsgroup is specifically one where intemperate language and other innuendos are to be expected the message should be encoded. This is simple to decode, every letter is replace by that one in the alphabet 13 away from it. If the user is likely to be offended then they ought not decode it.

If an article is quoted a number of conventions exist that clearly identifies this inclusion. The simplest is a > or : at the beginning of each line. A thread or series of linked articles may often have multiple symbols each reflecting a further quote. As well as some acceptable and positive conventions some things are expected to be avoided. Typing everything in capitals is considered to be shouting.

As well as some socially acceptable behaviour some less desirable behaviour is manifest on the net and in particular one practice is known as flames. A flame is usually a disparaging comment about another person, their beliefs and opinions expressed on the net. It implies a more serious comment than simple disagreement.

Other terms that may be encountered are netsurfing netgrepping kill files. A kill file refers to the ability of newsreading software to filter out articles by a particular person or within a particular thread. The user enters commands and those articles are not presented for review. At the other extreme is the use of software that examines all articles for particular words or topics and allows the user to retrieve those articles even although they do not normally read that newsgroup.

Some current use of the Internet by Freemasons

Individual masons have used all the facilities of the Internet. Freemasonry mailing lists, and newsgroups exist.

There is fellowship among Freemasons who met initially through the Internet. Masons travel around the US to visit degrees of brothers. This fellowship extends in ways other than attending lodge. Some brethren are well acknowledged to have a good knowledge of conventions, historical events, or give thoughtful and well expressed options about topics of interest.

The newsgroups are not restricted to lodges which recognise each other with reciprocal visiting, or are necessarily in amity with the Grand Lodge to which they pledge allegiance. Co-masonry in particular has some very knowledgeable people who post messages to the net. In practical terms the masons on the net meet on the level indipendent of recognition.

As well as fellowship between Freemasons on the net, e-mail is a good way to practice some daily instruction. As with general e-mail, a number of threads of interest appear. A major one with a lot of Australian input has been a discussion about candles and lights in ceremonies. Another thread was the Chamber of Reflections in the Craft lodges and the emblems of mortality.

As well as individuals, the net is also used by Grand Lodges to communicate with their members. A number of jurisdictions are using e-mail to contact their members.

The World Wide Web pages, using http, are also frequently utilised by Freemasons. One main one of interest is the Frequently Asked Questions or FAQ. As in all the FAQ the aim is to encapsulate the answers to any questions about freemasonry. This is similar in aim to the brochures about freemasonry.

Use of the Internet by Australian Freemasons

Both e-mail and mailing lists are sometimes used to obtain meeting times in areas where masons are to travel. I have provided meeting times in Canberra to other brethren by this means.

As well as participating in general world wide newsgroups and mailing lists there is a specific Australian and New Zealand mailing list.

Some Masonic netiquette

If a masonic affiliation appears on the .signature, or when writing to a masonic newsgroup it is to be expected that the type of person and their comments are to be judged on the content of the messages. Self regulation has been shown to be practised by Freemasons.

In particular although flame wars are a regular part of many newsgroups they have been absent from the Masonic ones. This I believe is due to the brethren attempting to practice every moral and social virtue. On occasions some brethren have used words that have consequentially been shown to be a little intemperate. They have apologised later. Most commentary is also of an accepting, encompassing nature. Respect for others opinions and their rights to have them are also important.

The self regulation by masons ameliorates some of the 'official' views and concerns about misquoted statements and taking statements out of context.

Masonic Netiquette and Lodge Conventions

While religion and politics are frowned upon in lodge, and often not discussed socially among brethren the same level of discouragement does no apply to the electronic media. While such topics are sometimes discussed no proletarianization or extreme views are acceptable. Any opinions ought to be attempts to understand others views, as well as being restricted to masonic relevance. Some threads include the VSL, and the presence of people with different views of God in Lodge.

The electronic media is also not a Tyled meeting and the communications are restricted to general discussion. The references to ritual of any form usually tend to be oblique.

Some Current Masonic Internet facilities

For mailing lists

- oz-mason@beastmaster.hna.com.au is the list e-mail address for Australian and New Zealand Masons.
- The US based list is currenly changing hosts. The address is freemasonry-list-request@sclinux.blm.gov: To join send mail with 'subscribe'

For newsgroups

- alt.freemasonry

For FTP

- directory pub/ro/rogeri/freemasonry at ftp.metcom.com

Some URLs for the web include

- Roger Ingersolls home page
- The Masonry Universal... Network Magazine
- The Trestle Board
- The American FAQ also available through Roger Ingersol home page.

As with all Internet Facilities the numbers of masons and lodges that use the facilities of the net are growing. Other Masonic Home Pages listed 84 facilities. These include

- Grand Lodges
- Individual Lodges
- Masonic Libraries
- Research Lodges
- Masonic clip art

Advantages to Freemasonry from the Net

Last year in the US more than 50 men joined the Craft as a result of meeting it 'on the net'. A number of brethren have joined as a consequence of the information available on the Internet. In some cases the type of discussion has been the sole reason. In others family associations and other influences have been important but the information gained from the net has prompted to ask questions or to reassess formerly held views of the Craft.

As well as worthy men joining freemasonry the availability of the net is important to the development of existing masons. The masonic knowledge is available on a daily basis and it only takes a few minutes reading the mail to satisfy the instructions of the charge. As well as it is important increased fellowship.

Not only is Freemasonry on the net an advantage to members of the Craft, interested members of the general public can gain a more positive and open view of the Craft and its members. 'Cowans' receive courteous and reasoned responses to questions. Even scurrilous and inaccurate commentaries and pronouncements get reasoned and restrained responses.

The Way Forward

I would encourage individual brethren to read the electronic newsgroups and subscribe to a list. In particular subscribe to the 'oz-mason' To do this send a message to '***oz-mason-r@beastmaster.hna.com.au***' containing the word '***subscribe***'. Grand Lodges with computer facilities should connect to the network so that the Grand Secretaries become aware of the net and its advantages.

I would like to see at least one WWW freemasonry home page in Australia with our equivalent of the FAQ and the names and addresses of the lodges and when, and where they meet - an electronic version of the Masonic Diaries and Almanacs. This will require effort in capturing the data in appropriate form as well as setting up the pages. The web site should promote Australian masonry as a whole - not just the GL of NSW, Victoria etc.

Summary

The Internet is a facility that enables masons to simply and easily meet the aim of increasing masonic knowledge. Masonic Ideals can assist in making the Internet, and also the broader community, practice every moral and social virtue.