

Formation of the TAPR Bulletin Board System Special Interest Group

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that future improvements to BBS operation were being hindered by a lack of central resource which people could consult for help and the exchange of ideas, the Board of Directors of Tucson Amateur Packet Radio, Incorporated¹ created a special interest group to study methods to address this issue. This paper describes the formation of the TAPR BBS SIG, its purpose and its progress to date.

There has been a growing awareness that the BBS forwarding network is not as efficient as it could be. Excellent ideas for improvement arise sporadically from individuals, regional groups and software writers, but they often don't get the exposure they deserve. Sentiment has been expressed that BBS sysops would benefit from a nationally-sponsored group to focus on its interests and to serve as a readily-accessible resource of information and education.

On March 4, 1994, the Board of Directors of Tucson Amateur Packet Radio Corporation, Incorporated, a non-profit research and development organization, voted to form a special interest group (BBS SIG) to become more directly involved in the issues concerning the operation of Bulletin Board Systems. The Board recognized that the operational experience of many of TAPR's members was a valuable and underutilized resource. The introduction of future hardware and software developments would be enhanced by TAPR's sponsorship of such operational support.²

The TAPR BBS SIG met for the first time on March 5, 1994, in Tucson, Arizona, in conjunction with TAPR's annual meeting held that weekend. 20 people attended this session. The primary purposes of the meeting

were to determine if (1) there was sufficient interest among sysops to get together and (2) determine if a group of sysops **could** sit down and rationally discuss those things that affected the operation of their packet bulletin board systems. Happily, 20 people proved this possible. The basic direction and purpose for the TAPR BBS SIG was established during this first meeting.³

The TAPR BBS SIG is intended to provide a focus for the discussion of issues and formation of policies which, hopefully, will result in more efficient message forwarding between bulletin boards. Among the significant activities and goals of the SIG are:

- (1) to collect and archive information from its participants (such as software bug reports), so that individual sysops don't have to each 'reinvent the wheel' every time they install or upgrade BBS software,
- (2) provide an on-going on-line forum (on the Internet) for BBS sysops and others interested in BBS operation,⁴
- (3) conduct workshops for BBS sysops at national gatherings, wherever practical, for the purpose of information gathering and exchange,

(4) make recommendations to amateur digital enthusiasts, the ARRL Digital Committee, and BBS software developers to facilitate more efficient forwarding between bulletin board systems,

(5) encourage consideration of how existing packet bulletin board systems might be integrated more closely (and more efficiently) **into** the evolving digital communications network, rather than continue primarily as *users* of the network,

(6) though the matters of message content and assignment of responsibility are of concern to most sysops, the TAPR BBS SIG is most likely to be successful if focused on operational matters,

(7) develop surveys and poll statistically-significant numbers of BBS sysops, as necessary, to build a profile of the typical BBS station, determine popularity of software, message flow rates, etc.

Some History and Background

The entire packet forwarding network basically ‘happened.’ There wasn’t a grand design upon which to model the development of the network or the software. The **first** WORLI bulletin board system went on the air just over 11 years ago. Today there are a half-dozen major BBS programs in use throughout the world.

For the most part, BBS software writers and sysops have concentrated on getting individual systems to work. If messages resided only on the bulletin board they originated on, we’d never have to worry about matters such as addressing, ‘to’ and ‘at’

fields, BIDs, and such. Sysops tend not to think like distribution managers.

Some message identification and forwarding methods have been borrowed from other data services (such as the Internet, **landline** bulletin boards, and online services). Others have been developed to meet the unique requirements of amateur packet radio. Many good ideas have been rejected due to regional prejudice or the ‘not invented here’ syndrome. As BBS forwarding matures, there will be less opportunity to experiment to determine if **some** alternative addressing method might work better than those in popular use.

Traditionally, hams are very independent and have difficulty adopting internally-created standards. The biggest contribution that the TAPR BBS SIG can make to amateur radio will be to resolve debates over relatively trivial matters such as “should it be NA or **NOAM**?” Rather than judging the adoption of conventions as threatening to individual independence, it is hoped that most sysops will be glad to be rid of the uncertainty. Sysops will then be able to concentrate on more productive activities, such as user **education**, improving their stations, better educating themselves, and enjoying BBS operation as opposed to burning out.

Accomplishments to Date

A quick **review** of the **first** meeting on March 5, 1994, in Tucson, is reported above.

Several **Internet** mail lists were established by TAPR to help facilitate communications between the various TAPR special interest groups and working groups. These lists currently include bbssig, netsig, and tapr-bb. They are open for general subscription.

Over 40 people participated in the TAPR BBS SIG meeting at the Dayton Hamvention on April 29, 1994. These resolutions were adopted at this meeting:

(1) the group **reaffirmed** the use of two-letter continental designators by stations currently using them until the matter could be studied in greater depth,

(2) the TAPR BBS SIG should study and issue a list of the **most-frequently-used** 'to' and 'at' fields,

(3) the TAPR BBS SIG should recommend a common flood bulletin structure.

A smaller working **group**⁵ met the next evening to process the previous evening's meeting and determine how best to implement the resolutions. The concept of a set of recommendations in the form of a bbs setup and operating guide for the popular bulletin board software programs was developed.

An invitation for several volunteers to step forward to collect data, write sections of the Sysops' Guide, and moderate the TAPR BBS SIG Internet forum was posted on the Internet and the packet network just prior to the completion of this paper in late June.

Conclusion

TAPR's Board of Directors is to be credited for its willingness to provide leadership in the organizational aspect of digital communications.

Though our hobby is a communications-oriented one, amateurs often are poor communicators. The TAPR BBS SIG gives a wide cross-section of amateurs involved in digital communications an

opportunity to exchange facts and opinions on line, on the air, and in person.

To be avoided is to quickly unleash a set of 'standards' on the packet community for immediate implementation. The preparation of guidelines should be an open process with reasonable time for consideration and modification.

Because several different sets of 'standards' have been adopted on a regional basis, there is a demonstrated willingness by large groups of sysops and software developers to compromise for the benefit of the whole. This precedent is encouraging in that it indicates it is possible for the TAPR BBS SIG to be able to build a national consensus among key players.

References

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2,3 *see Packet Status Register*, Issue #54

4 to join the bbssig mail list, send an e-mail message to 'listserv @tcet.unt.edu' and include in the body of the message, the text:

join bbssig

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