[++]: *SELF-DISCIPLINE*: Towards better News

Bertrand Meyer

ISE Inc.

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1 SUMMARY

This document describes a voluntary program, called ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***, of which people who post on Usenet may want to become members if they feel that it can help the News mechanism fulfil its extraordinary potential while avoiding the aberrations that threaten it.

SELF-DISCIPLINE is an acronym:

__S__tart __E__levating the __L__evel of the __F__ield:

Democratic ***I***nitiative for ***S***erious, ***C***ivilized, ***I***nformed, ***P***roductive and ***L***iterate ***I***nternational ***N***etwork ***E***xchanges

If you find such a long acronym corny, just ignore the expansion and take the word ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** for exactly what it means.

An important request: the author asks that if you intend to take any action on the basis of this document — even if that action is just to express an opinion on it — at all you read it *twice*, as he found it difficult to express his goals in a completely sequential manner, and did not find the time to improve it so that it would flow more naturally.

If you want to become a member of the ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** program, just make sure you have understood what it implies, and start observing its rules in some of your postings. Do not make a big fuss about it; do not post and cross-post about ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** itself. Just apply it quietly.

If you *disapprove* of the program, please keep quiet about it too. That's the best way to let the whole thing die out.

2 WHY *SELF-DISCIPLINE*?

Usenet (taken in this document as a general term for news forums available through the Internet) has exploded during the past few years. Thousands of discussion groups are available. Are we using this new medium properly?

2.1 The potential of News

Although many serious people admit to being "News addicts", jaded comments are common, to the effect that "Most of what goes out there is junk".

To add a personal note, the author of this document, who tries to post responsibly (after having contributed his share of less than fully thought-out messages) almost always receives, after having posted a News message, a few e-mail notes of the form: "Thanks for trying to bring some sanity to the debate, but I can only offer my sympathy; with all the dimwits out there it's a lost cause".

Perhaps it is a lost cause. Or perhaps not.

I am trying this — the ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** program — because I think that this conventional wisdom can be disproved. Because I would like to see really top people post on Usenet. (Today they most often don't, because they know that Joe Sixpack has more time than Don Knuth, can as a result post many more messages, and can try to make Don Knuth look foolish.) Because I think the major problem facing the News community is a glut of messages, and that some of us, by controlling our impulses to shoot before we think, can help correct that problem. Because once in a while there is a true gem, and there could be more gems if there was a better way to get past the junk.

Because I would like to disprove the bleak assessment of Usenet that, according to a recent correspondent , Cliff Stoll presents in his book *Snake Oil*. (I have not read that book, although I did see a line about it in *Newsweek* — which I guess by Usenet standards gives me expert status, so that I can start posting definitive opinions all around about it .)

In a word: because I think that the News mechanism has the potential — if we only handle it with care — of becoming an extraordinarily useful tool for exchanges and progress.

2.2 Previous efforts

Almost since "The Net" has existed some people have tried to codify "Netiquette". Judging from the results, their work has been a dismal failure. One of the most respected of these arbiters of good taste, Gene Spafford, who for many years maintained the guide for new users, quit in disgust a few years ago, sending out a message stating how disappointed he was with the universal contempt for the most basic rules of sane discourse.

But if one examines these efforts, it will not be hard to understand why they could not succeed. They were all reasonable and well-intentioned, but for all the respect, gratitude and admiration that their authors deserve, they suffered from fundamental deficiencies that with hindsight explain why they were doomed:

- They were a bit boy-scoutish in their spirit. They assumed that everyone is good. Everyone is not good.
- They told people to be good. That is not very useful. We should take a lead or two from the legal and political professions. No law that I know says that one must be good. Laws define what is permissible, usually by defining what is not permissible.
- Perhaps worst of all, they made little allowance for imperfection. A stable system must provide corrective mechanisms for deviations. With the traditional "Beginner's Guide to Netiquette", it suffices that one person violate the canons of common sense — which such Guides codify — for the whole thing to break down. Well, one person *is* going to violate the canon, and pretty soon.

2.3 Less is more

The ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** program owes much to these earlier efforts, but tries to overcome their limitations. The key realization was that you can achieve *more*, perhaps much more, by being *less* ambitious — perhaps much less.

In particular:

- ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** does not try to codify all Usenet behavior. It only focuses on behavior that can be disruptive to the system.
- ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** accepts people as they are. People will get angry and hurl insults at each other. Gladstone and Disraeli insulted each other copiously decade after decade, and they are remembered as great statesmen. Why should we pretend that Usenet correspondents will always be nice (or that they will always do right)? We can, however, limit nasty consequences.
- ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** focuses on form rather than content. It is very difficult to codify what people put in messages, for at least two reasons: first, it restrains freedom of expression; second, it is very hard to decide cases objectively — for example, whether a certain comment is an insult or merely an expression of strong dissent. It is much easier to specify measurable factors, such as number of times that someone may post on a certain topic. A few of the rules below affect content (rules 8, 10, 11), but the vast majority affect form.
- Finally, ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** does not assume that everyone will apply its rules. In fact, I expect that even if the program is successful its members will for a long time, probably forever, remain a minority. So ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** does not impose anything on anyone: only those who agree with it need be concerned. Others can just ignore the program; it will not affect them. No member of the program will taunt them because they are not in it (that, in fact, would be against the rules). The message from ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** members to others is: "We think we are doing right and you are welcome to join the club, but if you don't, fine, just continue doing what you think is best. The only risk you incur is that some of us — who are particularly busy, or feel particularly strongly about the program — might pay more attention to fellow members' postings than to yours".

2.4 Quality and quantity

The principal focus of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** (although not the only one) has already been hinted at: volume of exchanges.

We cannot expect that every posting be of top quality. But we can try to stop the diarrhea that so often characterizes exchanges. ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** particularly focuses on those endless, and endlessly boring, sequences of answers and counter-answers on a single topic, which run for weeks or months, defying all "ENOUGH NOW, PLEASE GO AWAY!" pleas by concerned bystanders.

By defining some purely quantitative criteria, ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** can help its members behave themselves, and, I hope, produce a dramatic improvement of the overall quality of technical exchanges.

2.5 The topical focus

"Technical exchanges" were just mentioned as the principal concern. ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is indeed intended for technical newsgroups, although it might spread to recreational groups. The impetus for ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is to make a better use of News for professional purposes.

If anyone wants to apply the same idea to non-professional discussions, fine, but that is not what this document is about.

3 THE PROGRAM

With this analysis and rationale in mind, it is time now to define what ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is. As is so often the case, it will be convenient to start by listing a few things that it is not.

3.1 What *SELF-DISCIPLINE* is not

The following negative characterizations will, I hope, help avoid possible confusions.

SELF-DISCIPLINE is not a committee. No one is in charge, neither the author of this message (thanks, but no thanks) nor anyone else. The program, like the Internet itself, is entirely self-regulated.

SELF-DISCIPLINE is not a newsgroup. It potentially applies across all newsgroups (although its major focus, as explained above, is technical groups). Note, however, that if the program succeeds it will have a newsgroup devoted to it, ***news.discipline***, whose purpose will be discussed below. If the program *really* succeeds, ***news.discipline*** will have very little traffic. Ideally it should have none — meaning there are no violations.

SELF-DISCIPLINE is not an attempt to regulate Usenet. That would be foolish and meaningless; and no one, and certainly not the author, has the authority to contemplate such a thing, let alone undertake it. ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is a voluntary program for people who share a taste for a certain style of exchanges (the ***SCIPLI*** style: Serious, Civilized, Informed, Productive, and Literate) with the understanding that this style will only affect a subset of Internet exchanges.

3.2 The spirit of *SELF-DISCIPLINE*

What can make ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** successful is the best feature of the Internet: the extraordinary self-regulatory nature of the medium.

The shameful abuses of Usenet attract everyone's attention: the immigration lawyer who posts his junk ads to two thousand groups, the Nazi crank who posts his hate mail. We are all outraged, as well we should be. But just as remarkable is how many smaller abuses get corrected: the usually decent person who sends out an inappropriate message (who has never done so?) and gets corrected, quietly or loudly, privately or publicly, becoming more careful as he learns the tricks and rewards of the exercise. Unlike the approaches discussed earlier, ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** does not assume that everyone will behave well all the time. The program actually takes it for granted that people will misbehave at least once in a while (especially when they are learning), and tries to provide self-regulation mechanisms to recover from such incidents.

(A note of style, which has nothing to do with the rest of this message but is made necessary by the context of the time: in the preceding paragraph and a few more cases below I use the English word “he” in its centuries-old role as a sexless abbreviation for “he or she”. It’s a stylistic convention, nothing else.)

SELF-DISCIPLINE, as already noted, is voluntary. Not everyone will become a member. Being a member is a little like wearing a lapel pin, perhaps a small badge — not even a bumper sticker (that would already be a little on the garish side). You just identify yourself discreetly as someone who cares about the quality of network exchanges; you don’t make a big fuss, just try to follow the rules, and maybe wink once in a while at a fellow member to signal your appreciation of a kindred spirit.

3.3 The newsgroup

In its full swing, ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** assumes the existence of a newsgroup, called ***news.discipline***. This newsgroup will be devoted to discussions on ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** itself, and possible violations of the rules by people who purport to be members and have not compiled with earlier, private criticism.

The ***news.discipline*** group is a regulatory mechanism. One of its purposes is to ensure that ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is not causing any increased traffic on other newsgroups. In fact, the rules below state very clearly that to post any discussion whatsoever of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** on a topical newsgroup is a flagrant violation of the program.

The program can start, and prosper for a while, without ***news.discipline*** being in place. If it is successful, someone should take the initiative of creating the newsgroup. I hope there will be a volunteer. I certainly won’t do it, as I do not have the time, but I will be glad to help. Please contact me if you want to volunteer (if only to make sure that if several people do they can work at it together).

3.4 What is *SELF-DISCIPLINE*?

What then does it mean to become a member of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***? Only three things:

1 • You decide to become a member. (You are entirely responsible for that. No one else will coopt you, although people may of course suggest that you join; and you do not need to ask for anyone else’s approval.)

2 • You have read the present document from back to back at least twice (and read it again once every two years or so, as the rules may evolve slightly).

3 • In any of your postings that identifies you as a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member, you follow the 15 rules given below. (Note that even if you are a member it is perfectly acceptable to post messages that do not identify you as such, and hence are not bond by the rules.)

That’s all.

4 MESSAGE IDENTIFICATION

From now on we will say that a News posting is "a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** post" if it identifies its author as being a member of the program. As just noted, not all messages emanating from program members need to be ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** posts.

4.1 The lapel pin

Every News message has a Subject header. (Some News program let you get away without one, but that is not advised and in fact quite infrequent.)

As part of the rules given below, a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** post will have a Subject header beginning with

[*xx*]

where *xx* is a two-character code identifying the nature of the message. For example an "opinion post" (as defined below) will have a subject message beginning with [++].

This rather discrete indication is the metaphorical "lapel pin" discussed earlier.

4.2 Cleaning up responses

The lapel pin convention raises a small technical problem. Every News program will allow you to post a message that is a "follow-up" to a preceding one; the follow up will have a Subject header of the form **Re:** *original*, where *original* is the original's Subject header. So a response to a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** message will have the [*xx*] code appear after the **Re:**. For example if you post a message with the Subject header

[++] I have demonstrated that the earth is flat

will trigger responses of the form

Re: [++] I have demonstrated that the earth is flat

The presence of such a lapel pin after **Re:** bears no indication as to the nature of the follow-up message. If the responder is also a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member, he should add his own mark, for example

[++] **Re:** [++] I have demonstrated that the earth is flat

or

[..] **Re:** [++] I have demonstrated that the earth is flat

where "..", as explained below, denotes an "information post".

Note that this causes a small nuisance, as some News software does not deal very well with responses in which the **Re:** line has been edited. The problem, however, should not be too bad. ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** members should remove any lapel pin appearing after the **Re:** to avoid accumulating codes and confusing News readers. This is not a formal rule (since in some cases you might want to remind your readers of the original's classification, for example if the response's one is different) but a strongly recommended convention.

If the program succeeds, one may hope that future News programs will automatically remove any lapel pin appearing after **Re:** in a response. This is a trivial upgrade, so I hope that some News program authors are reading this!

4.3 The *SELF-DISCIPLINE* label

In addition to the lapel pin, the rules require any ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** message to include a short label message. (Do not confuse the *label* and the *lapel*!) This is an explanation, of which the current version reads like this:

> The "lapel pin" [*xx*] in the Subject of this message signals adherence to ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***, a voluntary program for quality News discussions. For details see **http://www.eiffel.com/discipline** or **ftp://ftp.eiffel.com/pub/discipline**. Please do NOT post comments on this newsgroup on this aspect of the message.

This message might change somehow in the future. (For one thing I would like to make it shorter, although I don't see how.) It should normally appear at the end of the message in order not to detract from the message's actual topic. It is also possible to put it at the beginning, especially during the initial period, as we want to draw some attention, albeit discreetly, to the program.

5 DEFINITIONS

The rules given in the next section will rely on a few definitions. In particular, we must classify News postings (hereafter just called "posts") according to two separate criteria: origin and tone.

5.1 Classification 1: origin

Every post is one of the following:

O1 • Original post: post which is not a response or follow-up to a previous post.

O2 • Response post: a response or follow-up to a previous post.

5.2 Classification 2: tone

Every post is one of the following (each given with its corresponding lapel pin):

T1 • Opinion post: expresses the author's view on some topic (pin: **[++]**).

T2 • Correction post: corrects an error or opinion expressed by an earlier post by the same author (pin: **[--]**).

T3 • Query post: requests information on some topic or answers to a "how to" or "what is" question (pin: **[??]**).

T4 • Information post: announcing some information, event or product (pin: **[**]** if the target of the information is available for free, **[$$]** if it is available for a fee).

In addition, the special lapel pin **[!!]** and the corresponding category (***news.discipline*** protest) may be used in exceptional cases; see rule 13.

5.3 Notes on the classifications

The Origin and Tone classifications are orthogonal, e.g. you may have an original opinion post, a response information post etc.

For a response post (O2 according to Origin), the Tone classification may be different from the Tone classification of the original message. For example one may have an opinion response to an information post, or conversely.

In case T4 (information post), the difference between **[**]** and **[$$]** is not related to whether the originator is "non-profit" or "commercial", but to whether the object of the announcement is free or for a fee. So for example a paying conference from a non-profit organization is **[$$]**, whereas a free product from a commercial organization is **[**]**. This is quite important.

Finally you may have noted the absence of any "joke" category. A good joke does not need to be advertized as such. (For the same reason, I never use the dreadful "smiley". Voltaire could do without the smiley; Bernard Shaw could do without smiley; we should be able to do without the smiley, or else we must not be very funny. STOP THE SMILEY before it kills another joke. This is a personal pet peeve, not a rule of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***!)

6 THE RULES

Here now are the rules that ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** members should observe for their ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** posts. In this section the phrase "every post shall..." means "every ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** post shall...", since the program does not define any rule for other posts. Similarly, the phrase "every poster shall ..." means "every ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member, in his ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** posts, shall ..."

Rule 1: Identification

RULE:

Every post shall be identified by a "lapel pin" as described in section 4.1 and a "label" as described in section 4.3.

Rationale: this is what defines a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** post, discreetly but clearly. It is enough to intrigue readers — especially if they like the style of the message — and make them want to become members too.

Rule 2: Opinion breadth

RULE:

No opinion post shall be posted on more than three newsgroups.

Rationale:

> Opinion posts tend to generate lots of responses. Cross posting them to many groups produce exponential netnoise.

Comment: in most cases, an opinion post should be posted to exactly one group. The rule is a little more tolerant, for people who think that the whole world should hear what they have to say, but one should be the rule, two or three the exception.

Rule 3: Opinion follow-up directions

RULE:

> Every opinion post, if posted on more than one newsgroup, shall include a "follow-up to" specification listing a single of these groups for follow-up.

Rationale:

> Avoiding netnoise.

Rule 4: Opinion follow-up targets

RULE:

> Any response to an opinion post shall be posted only to the follow-up group, except if the response is to a post involving the poster explicitly, in which case he may post at most one response to all the original groups, with a follow-up indication as per the rule 3.

Rationale: avoiding netnoise.

Rule 5: Original opinion frequency

RULE:

> No poster shall post more than one original opinion per week in newsgroups belonging to any primary news classification (*comp*, *sci* etc.).

Rationale: even if you are full of ideas about all kinds of subjects, you should give the world time to digest them. It is unlikely that any of your original opinions will be crucial enough that it can't wait for a week.

Comment: to allow for people who have plenty of original opinions on all kinds of different topics — such as object-oriented programming, Japanese baseball leagues, Monteverdi operas and Tennessee gubernatorial races — the "no-more-than-one-per-week" rule only applies within one of the principal top-level branches of the News hierarchy.

Rule 6: Opinion follow-up frequency

RULE:

> No poster shall post more than one opinion response per forty-eight hours on any given topic or thread.

Rationale: avoiding those dreary endless threads, where a few people go on and on and on and on and on for weeks or months. Note that changing the Subject header to bypass the rule is a violation of the rule, unless the change of topic is substantial.

Comment: A good practical limit is two opinion responses at most during the first week, and at most one per week thereafter. The rule is a bit more tolerant to allow for cases in which the discussion heats up and you don't want to wait too long to respond.

Another comment: It is often a good idea to respond to several messages together. This is much more effective than endless little person-to-person threads. In such a global response, make sure to observe the next rule.

Rule 7: Quotes in follow-ups

RULE:

> In any follow-up post, quotations of other correspondents' message shall be limited to the strict minimum necessary to understand the respondent's own points. Every effort shall be made to identify precisely and unambiguously who wrote what, especially in cascaded responses.

Rationale: it is extremely irritating, and a waste of time, to see a new message that begins or ends with a huge quotation of another (especially if you have read the original). One should not just rely on News software's ability to quote extensively, but edit the original down to the bare essentials. This takes one person a few minutes, and may save thousands of people lots of aggravation.

As to the second point of the rule, confusions occur all the time as to who said what; one is never too pedantic about identification.

Rule 8: Opinion authorship

RULE:

> No one shall post an opinion message (original or follow-up) who is not a professional of the underlying domain, with at least two years' experience on the topic discussed.

Rationale: it is absolutely unacceptable to see people posting *opinions* on technical topics about which they have no qualification to inflict such an opinion on thousands of innocent readers. This is like Joe Sixpack telling Don Knuth on CNN that bubble sort is better than Quicksort. This phenomenon is one of the worst dangers threatening the viability of Usenet: incompetent (or semi-competent) folks shamelessly expressing their views about anything and anyone — and nice, competent people encouraging them to continue in the name of free expression. Promoting or just accepting this is the best way to keep serious people away from the Net.

Comment: this is not an elitist rule; it is a survival rule. Non-specialists are welcome to participate, and to post messages of a "tone" other than "opinion" — requests for clarification, for example (in the same way that a brave undergraduate may ask a question at the end of a seminar by Don Knuth). But, please, do not post an *opinion* on a professional topic of which you are not a specialist. And if you *are* a specialist and see such a post, do not applaud the poor soul! (By the way, if you are not in computing science, you may by now wonder who in the world is this Don Knuth. Well, you probably guessed anyway: he is one of the most famous scholars in the field, a living legend.)

Other comment: this is one of the few rules that have to do with content rather than form, and whose observance is hard to measure (who decides who is an experimented professional?). So it is hard to enforce. But it provides a way for chastising (gently and privately, at least to start) someone who claims to be a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member but clearly does not know what he is so vehemently posting about.

Yet another comment: to understand this rule, remember that ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is primarily meant for technical newsgroups used by professionals for professional purposes. It would be more debatable for groups devoted to the discussion of recreational, cultural, social or political questions. (Imagine for a second that we require people to be competent before publicly expressing political opinions!)

Rule 9: Spelling and grammar

RULE:

> All posts shall be checked by their authors, before posting, for spelling and grammar. Members of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** shall, however, refrain from making pejorative comments about mistakes made in these areas by other people, except if relevant to the theme of the discussion (or to make a harmless humorous remark).

Rationale: being careful about these aspects helps the ELF part (“Elevate the Level of the Field”). But if mistakes do get in we don’t want to waste any time on this aspect.

Comment: there are plenty of spell checkers around. Being a non-native speaker does not fundamentally affect the issue, although readers will of course be even more tolerant in that case.

Rule 10: Standards of address

RULE:

> With the possible exception of posts to ***news.discipline*** (see rule 11), no post shall make any representation as to the moral qualities of other posters. This rule, however, shall not be construed as preventing the frank and open exchange of arguments and the expression of criticism and disagreement.

Rationale: we want to promote some mutual respect without stifling debate. An example of resolution of the opposition between the two sentences of this rule is the following:

- “That statement by Mr. XYZ is a lie”, although not desirable, is within the policy.
- “Mr. XYZ is a liar” is not permissible.

Rule 11: Response to outrageous statements

RULE:

> With the possible exception of posts to ***news.discipline*** (see rule 11), a poster who responds to a statement that he considers outrageous shall do so in a non-outrageous manner.

Rationale: keeping one's head cool, and serving as a good example to others.

Comment: it is often a good idea, before posting a strongly worded message, to let a night pass.

Rule 12: Resolution of rule violations

RULE:

> If a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member sees a post that is marked as emanating from a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member and appears to violate one the rules in a way that disturbs him, he will contact the other member privately to raise the issue.
>
> If the complaining member feels that he is unable to resolve the issue and that it is serious enough to warrant public discussion, he may raise the matter of the original poster's behavior, but only on ***news.discipline***. If felt necessary, it is permitted to post on the original newsgroup a single message of the form:
>
>> I consider that a recent post on [theme] by [identification of original poster] is not compatible with its presentation as emanating from a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** poster, and have raised the issue on ***news.discipline***. Direct any follow-ups to ***news.discipline***.

Rationale: providing a forum for discussing rule violations, without messing up the original newsgroup.

Additional comment: even if the complaining member is "unable to resolve the issue", he should seriously consider whether the matter is "serious enough to warrant public discussions". In many cases it is preferable to forget the whole thing. Note that "resolving the issue" does not mean forcing the other person to post a retraction or apology. If that person accepts that the incriminated message was not quite appropriate, and agrees to be more careful in the future, that is usually enough. There is no need to force people into public penance, and, as usual, the less noise we generate the better.

Rule 13: Target of posts to *news.discipline*

RULE:

> Posts to ***news.discipline*** shall only concern the behavior of posters who present themselves as ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** members.

Rationale: ***news.discipline*** is only meant for discussions of possibly inadequate posts whose authors claim they have observed the rules of ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***. It is not a general forum for discussing News, Netiquette, cranks, hate messages etc. Under no circumstance should it be used to bother or criticize people who do not claim adherence to ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***.

Rule 14: Form of posts to *news.discipline*

RULE:

> All posts to ***news.discipline*** shall follow rules 1 to 6. They shall normally follow rules 10 and 11 too. However, a poster who finds that a ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member's attitude repeatedly unacceptable may violate rules 10 or 11 or or both, but only if he uses the label pin **[!!]** as the category mark for the message and continues to follow rules 1 to 6.

Rationale: there needs to be some way of reacting very strongly if someone outrageously violates the rules while presenting himself as a bona fide member of the program. The "protest" label pin **[!!]** is to be reserved for this purpose. Although such cases should be extremely rare, we are never immune to gross, unethical violations.

Rule 15: Use of this message

RULE:

> A ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member may post a copy of this message to a technical newsgroup if he feels that it will help improve the quality of the exchanges on that group, but only if he has serious reason to think that no such post has been made on the chosen newsgroup during the preceding twelve months. No ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** member may ever post comments on this message on a technical newsgroup.

Note: "Technical newsgroup" in this rule means any newsgroup other than those whose topic is News per se (such as ***news.discipline***).

Rationale: A little propaganda helps, but in keeping with the spirit of the program it should remain modest. Once a year is an absolute boundary. In fact there should not be any need to post the message twice on any given newsgroup — either ***SELF-DISCIPLINE*** is compatible with the spirit of the group and it will catch on, or it's a lost cause for that group.

As for comments on this message, they should under no circumstance be posted outside of ***news.discipline*** and other groups devoted to discussion of News. To post comments on a technical newsgroup, and hence add noise, would be a mockery of this whole effort — and an insult to its author, who is trying to limit netnoise, not be responsible for increasing it.

7 WILL IT WORK?

WIll it work? I do not know. But it is fair to state what I would view as success:

- If within a few months 10% of the posts on 10 newsgroups mention ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***, then the program may be considered successful (i.e. it will not die easily).

- If 30% of the posts on 30 newsgroups mention ***SELF-DISCIPLINE***, the program may be said to have succeded far beyond the original hope.

If any of these thresholds is reached, this will be an encouragement to try other self-regulatory, voluntary mechanisms. I have two such ideas, which I will keep in reserve for the moment.

8 SPREADING THE WORD

The best way to spread this program is to start using it in your posts. If other people find it interesting, they will join too. As noted (see rule 15), you may repost the message on other newsgroups if you feel that will help — provided you make sure no one else has already done it in the past year.

One final note: please, please, please, do **not** post comments on this message on technical newsgroups. If you wish to discuss it, then you should either:

- Send messages to the author (but note that although I usually try to respond to e-mail including from strangers, in this case I make no such promise since I probably won't have the time).

- Post messages to a group devoted to News (possibly telling me about it so that I can subscribe).

Finally, if this does catch on someone should take the initiative of creating the group ***news.discipline***.