

Usenet newsgroups and clients

READ ALL ABOUT IT

Usenet groups contain a wealth of information about subjects so diverse it can boggle the mind. Colin Murphy takes a look at the weird and wonderful world of Usenet and newsgroups



In Usenet forums not only will you find discussions about food, television, beer and some of my other favourite subjects, you will also find technical and scientific information on nutrition, poor eyesight and alcoholism. Self help groups and self interest groups can flourish via Usenet. You could have access to as many as 80,000 different groups.

A group is defined by the topic it deals with and these topics are nested in an hierarchical structure. For example, `uk.comp.sys.sinclair` is the Usenet group primarily given over to discussing all things related to Sinclair, be they C5 trikes, Black watches or ZX Spectrums. This is in the systems group, which in turn is in the computer group, and they all are in the UK group, which is also know as the top level domain.

There are seven big top level domains such as `comp`, `sci` and `news` to name but three. There are many more top level domains, with country specific domains like `uk`, `ie` and `za`, company specific domains

Paid for NNTP servers

Should Usenet becomes a must have facility for you, but your ISP still doesn't provide an acceptable server, then you have the option paying for access to an NNTP server. There are many Usenet groups available and the majority of ISPs will only carry a subset of these groups, either for political or financial reasons. If your hunger for Usenet demands a 'full feed', then you might consider subscribing to one of the subscription services like <http://www.supernews.com/> to name but one.

like `demon` and `blueyonder`, and the marvellous `alt` domain, which stands for alternative and caters for a lot of what wouldn't fit neatly into other domains or indeed into polite society.

You won't need to be bothered with the vast number of groups available, you subscribe only to the groups you think you will be interested in.

In a group someone will post a message, a comment, a question, or just leave a piece of their mind. With luck, someone else will post a reply, and others will post a reply to the replies, and these will hopefully have some relevance to the group subject, although quite often not. Just like email, these discussions start off with a subject to give you some clue as to what they might be about.

Usenet is open to all, which is both good and bad. Usenet can be a most valuable source of information, but you cannot rely on the quality of that information straight off. It takes a little time, but after a while you learn whose views are worthwhile.

Usenet is used for more than just messages; you can also find a wide variety of data files, like software, graphics or audio tracks. These are to be found in binary groups. Often a discussion group will have a binary group attached, so `comp.sys.pSION` will include a `comp.sys.pSION.binaries` group where people can exchange files.

Usenet can be accessed via a specialist client or

Free access NNTP servers

Sometimes your ISP's NNTP server may not quite fit your requirements; it may not carry the groups you are looking for, or it just may not be very well run. There are some free access NNTP servers, which may offer a solution, one of which is FreeNews (IP address 202.85.164.51).

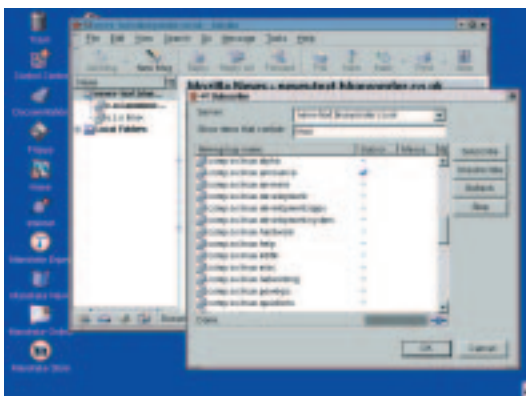
through Web interfaces, probably the best known being DeJa News, which is now owned by Google. If you were to use a standalone client you would then need access to an NNTP server. Luckily, most ISPs run their own servers, so this shouldn't be a problem. You will need to know the IP address, or the servers name at least, which will need to be entered into this configuration file.

How you use Usenet depends very much on what type of link you have to the Internet. If you have a permanent connection, then you will probably access the NNTP servers directly. If you're not so lucky and you rely on a dial-up Internet connection, you may want to consider running your own local NNTP server as well, using something like Leafnode. Some of the Usenet clients also have support for off-line browsing built in.

Mozilla

If you are already using Mozilla as your Web browser and email client, then there is very little you need to do to start using it as your Usenet client as well. From the main window select Edit/ Mail/ News account settings, New Account, and select a Newsgroup Account. All you need is the name of the Usenet server from which you are going to obtain your news, the rest you can make up. Make sure you are online, click on the server entry in the listing and Subscribe to Newsgroups. If this really is the first time you have connected to this news server, then a list of newsgroups will now be downloaded, which can take a few minutes, especially through a dial-up connection. Once downloaded, you can then start to choose groups to subscribe to.

You can browse through this list, which could take a while, or you can reduce the list to a more manageable size by including some keywords. Subscribing to a group will add this to your list. Click on this group from the list and the latest message headers will be downloaded. Click on a header and you can read the body of the article. Articles that have follow-ups and replies will usually be nested in a tree structure, which is automatically opened if you start to read a message in that chain. You can reply



Mozilla - subscribing to some Usenet newsgroups.

Saving time with Leafnode

Much of your time with Usenet will be taken up by reading text, which is a slow process at best. If you're using a dial-up Internet connection then this can be wasteful of your telephone resources. Ideally, you want all of the most recent texts from Usenet downloaded in one batch so that you can read them offline. Leafnode enables you to do just that, by downloading all of the new messages in a group that you have recently shown an interest in. These are then kept locally so that your client can access them. So, instead of configuring your News browser to contact the server directly, you ask it to look to your local machine.

Looking for groups to subscribe to

Any self respecting Usenet newsreader client will enable you to search for newsgroups, either by looking just at the group names, or occasionally by group description as well. On one server, the keyword 'Linux' produced a list of 367 different groups – not all will be active, not all will be in English and you can't even rely on all of them to be referring to Linux as we know it, but at least it's a manageable size. Groups that every self-respecting Linux Usenet reader should subscribe to include: comp.os.linux.announce and uk.comp.os.linux.

and forward messages just like you would with email.

You can now read your messages while online, but this is a time consuming task, tying up the telephone line and possibly costing you a packet. You can configure Mozilla to download the headers and bodies by default. Settings for this can be found in the offline menus. Should the newsgroup be very busy, you may not want to download all of it, in which case you can flag the message headers you are keen to see the bodies for and then download these in one batch. The off-line features in Mozilla are improved from previous versions and are much better than those found in Netscape 4.x.

If you are just interested in finding out about Usenet and you already use Mozilla (or Netscape – the functioning of the two is very similar) for email then using its News features would be a good place to start.

Knode

Knodo comes with the KDE desktop environment and so would integrate seamlessly if that's the environment you are using. Knodo, according to the Web page, is GNKSA compliant, but hasn't been

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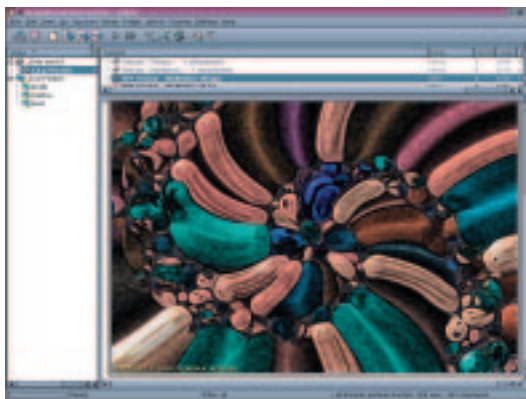
Subscribing to Newsgroups

To help you limit the amount of News that you download, you subscribe only to the Usenet groups of interest to you. The newsgroups have room descriptions, if your News server supports them, to help you to further decide if a certain room is dealing with your subject.

Message headers

Usenet messages, much like email messages, come in two parts, the message header and the message body. Unlike email, which is, hopefully addressed to you and of relevance to you, a Usenet message often might not be as relevant. Because of this, Usenet clients will usually only download the message headers first, you then decide which bodies are worth getting.

Knode: Not all the graphics on Usenet are unsuitable for a family magazine.



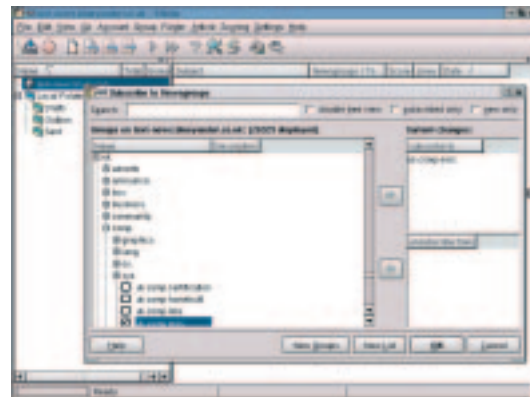
reviewed as yet. It has support for MIME and usefully supports multiple servers, which enables you to increase the groups you can access should you be unfortunate enough to have to use an NNTP server with restricted content. It will deal with images online, as can be seen in the screenshot, which is something that Mozilla doesn't yet support.

Knoder is designed to be used as an online browser only, so you either need a permanent Net connection or run your own local NNTP server like Leafnode. It has the full set of features that you need to take full advantage of Usenet.

Knoder can sometimes download binaries in multiple parts, which may make it easier to deal with than with Mozilla. If you are interested in taking a lot of data files from Usenet then use one of the standalone programs like **bgrab**.

You can score articles, which enables you to easily cut through the noise on Usenet groups and follow those articles that are of interest to you. You create a set of rules, which can follow articles, or follow your fellow posters if they always seem to have pearls of wisdom. By doing this, these interesting messages can be highlighted so they are easier to spot.

You are also given access to features such as cancelling and superseding articles. Because your



Pan, with some messages highlighted for a future batch download

words of wisdom are sent out to the world to be viewed by all and sundry, anything that might have been hastily said, or even downright wrong, could haunt you for some time to come. Here you are given the functions needed to send special control messages to Usenet which enables you to cancel, or at least update, your previous posts.

Pan

Pan is part of the GNOME project but can be used with other desktop environments so long as the correct libraries are installed, which in most distributions they are. Pan has good support for offline browsing, so, if you don't have a permanent connection to the Internet and are bothered about setting up a local server like Leafnode, then Pan might be the choice for you.

The Pan developers are proud, and rightly so, of their 100 per cent mark of approval from the Good Net-Keeping Seal of Approval evaluations team; making it the only Unix reader that can make this claim, at the time of writing.

Pan gives you many choices as to how you want to download your messages: you can download full bodies with headers on a per newsgroup basis, or flag messages and download them in a batch form for offline reading. You are given control of how and when Pan will try to make contact to the specified Usenet server, which is important if you have configured your system as dial on demand.

Pan also offers a full range of filtering features (Bozo and Spam), with which you can easily avoid the more noisy and bandwidth-wasting participants of Usenet.

GNSK

The Good Net-Keeping Seal of Approval 2.0 (GNSK for short) is an independent set of criteria, which should be thought of as the minimum requirements to make an NNTP News client useful. A useful source of information.
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~js/gnksa/gnksa.txt>

Info

Mozilla: <http://www.mozilla.org/releases/>

Knoder: <http://knoder.sourceforge.net/>

Bgrab: <http://www.student.dtu.dk/~c960941/bgrab/>

Pan: <http://pan.rebelbase.com/>