



Cruising Usenet Newsgroups in Style

by Scott Holstad

Ah, Usenet, the land of newsgroups, that trusty old realm of Internetdom. Where news gathers like geeks around a new SPARCstation. Where people treat each other like O.J. treats ... (okay, I won't go there). Where you can find info on just about anything. Do you realize that with more than 21,000 (yes, that's t-h-o-u-s-a-n-d) Usenet newsgroups out there (each with who knows how many articles), it would take 47,673 hours to read everything? Yes, it's true -- indeed, it's a scientific fact. ;)

Well, you loyal "bLink" devotees have heard us banter about Usenet before. You read the June 1996 edition of "bLink" (I'm sure you're saving it, aren't you?), which focused on newsgroups. (For a good introduction to newsgroups, be sure to read this.) Perhaps you've even entered the hallowed halls of Netscape News, in the Netscape Navigator (TM) browser and rifled through the medicine cabinet. (What'dya mean you don't do that when you visit your friends: get real!) As you may have learned in June, Netscape's newsreader is included as part of the browser, and we're all grateful for that. Nonetheless, while we certainly don't wish to be disparaging to Netscape (in fact, we're BIG fans of that particular company), there are other newsreaders out there, some of which are darn good!

What do you want out of a newsreader? We probably all have different Internet needs, but most good newsreaders should help you scroll through all of your available newsgroups, display threads (related messages), view article titles, download and decode binary attachments, and provide additional options.

One of the more popular newsreaders for PCs is WinVN. The Windows(R) Visual Newsreader was developed by NASA employees (circa 1989-92) for Windows and Windows NT. A similar application (and one which is good for machines with low memory) is Ken Ng's News Xpress. Other PC newsreaders you may wish to check out include NewsBin, Microsoft Internet News (both for W95 -- MIN is specifically for use with the Microsoft Internet Explorer(TM) Web browser), and News for Windows NT.

I like saving the best for last though. The undisputed king of PC newsreaders is Forte's Agent. It's highly customizable, supports extensive threading features, allows you to perform background tasks (downloading binaries) while reading messages, and doubles as an email app. Best of all, while Agent is the only commercial newsreader discussed here, a **free** version, called (shockingly) Free Agent, is available for download (and I swear by this program).

Mac aficionados have quite a few newsreaders to choose from as well. NewsHopper, MacSlurp, and InterNews are programs to consider. Perhaps the most popular Mac newsreader is Peter Speck's Nuntius. It's well thought of by many, and fans say it's easy to use. However, in all candor, I've never had much luck with Nuntius. I always seem to have a difficult time, whether it be memory problems or not being able to quickly go through my preferred newsgroups. Instead, I have turned to John Norstad's NewsWatcher. It isn't overly impressive looking, but the interface is clean and it's very easy to move around in.

For you UNIX geeks ... okay, I admit it, you have a lot of options, and you are smugly aware of this. However, for those few ignorant souls among you, if you're into X Windows or if you like playing with Python, check out the tons o' newsreaders available to you.

Hey, reading the news is important, gang. You do want to stay informed, don'tcha? What's that old saying, "You are what you drive" (or, "the clothes make the man" or any other spurious cliches you can think of)? Well, that refrain also applies to newsreaders. So, download an application which'll really let you cruise Usenet in style, and let 'em eat your dust!



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