NeXT Technology

The Usenet, comp.sys.next, and NewsGrazer

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The Usenet provides the most accessible electronic bulletin board for people in higher education. This worldwide system supports hundreds of discussions covering a wide range of topics, including one devoted to NeXT computers. In the past, Usenet participation was restricted to those who could tolerate programs with arcane command-line interfaces or confusing X Windows™ applications. Now NewsGrazer, a new NeXTstep application, allows everyone easy access to the Usenet.

Usenet, news groups, and comp.sys.next
The UsenetÐwhich stands for "user's network"-serves as a forum for exchanging ideas and information, much like its commercial counterparts CompuServe®, and MCI™. The Usenet consists of a worldwide network of computers running netnews software. Discussions and information exchange take place within hundreds of news groups, each group devoted to a different topic.

A sequence of abbreviations, separated by periods, comprise a news group's name and define the group's topic. In the group rec.humor, for example, "rec" stands for recreation and "humor" stands for humor; this group contains jokes and other amusing material. Most groups begin with one of the following abbreviations:

comp   Groups focused on topics of interest to computer professionals and hobbyists. Topics include software source code and hardware and software systems.

news   Groups concerned with the Usenet and its software.

rec   Groups oriented towards hobbies and recreational activities.

sci   Groups marked by special, and usually practical knowledge, relating to research in or application of the established sciences.

soc   Groups primarily addressing social issues and socializing.

talk   Debate-oriented groups that tend to feature long discussions without resolution and without appreciable amounts of useful information.

misc   Groups addressing themes not easily classified under the other headings or which incorporate themes from multiple categories.

alt   A collection of alternative groups ranging from alt.activism to alt.tasteless. Many Usenet sites elect not to carry alt groups.

Some sample groups: sci.math.symbolicÐusing symbolic mathematics applications like Mathematica; alt.tv.twin-peaks-discussions of the television series Twin Peaks; and alt.skate, discussions of ice skating, roller, rollerblading, and skateboarding; rec.scuba, scuba diving.

While almost all groups enjoy worldwide distribution, others are restricted to geographical areas or even to specific companies. The group ba.food, for example, carries restaurant reviews and other food-related information pertinent to the San Francisco Bay Area; ca.earthquakes has California earthquake reports. In addition, each computer connected to the Usenet can choose to receive some groups and ignore others. As a result, not all Usenet sites carry all news groups.

News articlesÐthe letters or postings sent to a news groupÐfan out from central computers to individual Usenet computers. Users can create new articles by responding to a particular article or generating one from scratch. Their Usenet computer then posts the article, sending it off to find every Usenet machine willing to accept it.

comp.sys.next

The Usenet features several NeXT-specific news groups: comp.sys.next.announce contain announcements related to NeXT computers; comp.sys.next.programmer and comp.sys.next.sysadmin have programming and system administration discussions; and comp.sys.next.misc has discussions not relevant to the other groups. The comp.sys.next groups are a worldwide electronic support network for NeXT users, especially for users in higher education. Articles range from a call for help with Mathematica to an obscure technical tidbit to the latest NeXT-related rumor. In recent months, discussion activity with these groups has increased dramatically, and now collectively rank eighteenth among all news groups in terms of total posting volume. Public FTP archive sites store all news articles posted to these groups during the past few years and are retrievable via the FTP program.

NewsGrazer brings the Usenet to everyone

In the past, people who wanted to read Usenet news had to suffer with less-than-friendly applications. The common news reader program rn assaults the user with a command-line interface. Several news reader applications exist under X Windows, but they lack consistent, intuitive user interfaces and force the user to cope with the X Windows environment. Users of these applications wished for something better, and most nontechnical users elected not to read news because of the complexity involved. NewsGrazer supplants these older applications by presenting a NeXTstep interface for reading news.

NewsGrazer displays news groups alphabetically and hierarchically in a browser, similar to the file system presentation in the Workspace Manager's browser. When a user selects a group, NewsGrazer displays the group's articles (optionally sorted by title and date). Selecting an article displays its text and a picture of its author (if you have one in your NewsGrazer image database). NewsGrazer also displays an icon representing the current article. Dragging the icon into a folder in the Workspace copies the article into the folder. Users can also store articles in NewsFolders, similar to NeXTmail's Mailboxes. NewsFolders appear in the news group browser along with the Usenet news groups.

NewsGrazer lets users create new articles from scratch or respond to an article currently displayed. NewsGrazer also lets users reply directly to an article's author via e-mail, by messaging the NeXTmail application to create a Send Window automatically addressed to the author of the article.

Pictures, sounds, and programs: NewsGrazer handles them all

People often distribute large data files such as pictures, programs, and sounds by uuencoding themÐconverting them to a representation suitable for shipment around the Usenet. For example, alt.binaries.pictures and alt.fractals contain articles with uuencoded gif images. Often, the uuencoded files are so large that they have to be split up and posted in a series of several articles. For Usenet readers to view these images, they must concatenate the articles into a single file and then uudecode the file. NewsGrazer automates this process.

When displaying an article that contains uuencoded data, NewsGrazer places an icon where the data would normally appear. You can double-click the icon to view the data in its encoded state, or drag the icon into the Workspace Manager to save the data. Additionally, you can reconstruct the original file by selecting all the articles containing data from the original file and choosing NewsGrazer's Uudecode command. NewsGrazer automatically extracts the data, reconstructs the encoded file, decodes the file, and places the decoded file's icon in an icon well. You can then double-click the icon to open the decoded file. You can also move the file into a folder by dragging its icon into the Workspace.

NewsGrazer also lets users create articles containing images, sounds, or any other documents simply by dragging them into the Post window. You can also include text written with different fonts in these postings. You must run NewsGrazer to see the fonts and documents; if you do not have NewsGrazer you can still read the article's text.

NewsGrazer has a wide range of Preference settings, so users can configure the application to their own tastes. NewsGrazer requires NeXTstep 2.0 or later and access to a news feed. Your campus network administrator will be able to help you locate a feed. You can retrieve NewsGrazer from the Purdue University and Oregon State University public FTP archive sites.