Electronic communication expanded dramatically at Penn when all students became entitled to computer accounts. Yes, a lot of that communication is e-mail. But network “traffic” generated from the discussion groups available in NetNews is also swelling. We now read over 3 million postings to NetNews each week, and thousands of us read NetNews every single day. Our students read and post to Penn newsgroups (upenn) to find out about their classes, to understand the operations of their computers, to get classified ads for used books and personal items, and to make comments about life at Penn. And they read international newsgroups for coverage on job postings, hobbies, software, personal ads, weather, science, education, sports, hot news stories, and much more. On average, students read 600 postings a week!

Why? Here’s a sampling of recent postings from Penn. Bioengineering professor Kenneth Foster answered questions about his class’s homework assignments. Farhad Mohit, a Wharton undergraduate, posted a poem to rec.arts.poems. David Hanna, an Arts & Sciences undergraduate, posted information about Penn’s Thai Club to the international newsgroup soc.culture.thai and to upenn.general. (Posting in upenn.general may interest more people at Penn in joining the Thai Club, while posting in the international Thai newsgroup lets people around the world know what’s going on at Penn.) Mathematics professor Michael Larsen recommended a book called “Islandia” in rec.arts.books. Lisa Ruthig, from Wistar Institute, answered a question about a molecular biology protocol which was posted in bionet.molbio.evolution. Alan Kellman, an Engineering undergraduate, announced holiday services in upenn.hillel. David Roush, an Arts & Sciences undergraduate, offered to trade his Friday Grateful Dead tickets for Thursday tickets in rec.music.gdead. Chemistry Professor Don Berry answered a question about rust removal from a table saw in rec.woodworking. Veterinary student Douglas Thamm recommended a method of testing water quality in rec.aquaria.

rn versus tin

Most Penn students who read NetNews use a newsreader called “rn”. They read the first screen of an article (i.e., a posting) in a newsgroup, but they may or may not read the rest, depending on whether they find it interesting. They move to the next article and the next and the next—searching for interesting articles and the follow-up discussion to them. Most newsgroups have several discussions going on simultaneously, and since rn displays all articles in chronological order, it can be difficult to follow discussion “threads.” A thread consists of the original posting and all of the follow-up postings about the same subject. A new program called “tin” makes it both easier and more efficient to follow subject threads.

Tin is a UNIX-based NetNews reading program that has been installed on many large systems on campus, among them eniac, mail.sas, futures, equity, dolphin, and pobox. Unlike rn, tin has built-in support for discussion threads. Instead of presenting articles in chronological order, tin groups related articles together so that you can easily pick and choose discussions that you want to follow. Since tin also tracks articles that you have seen before, it can ignore previously viewed articles and jump you to the next unread thread when you press the left arrow key.

How tin works—an overview

Once you are subscribed to the newsgroups that interest you (see below), the two most important functions of tin are selecting newsgroups and selecting articles to read within a newsgroup. These two functions are handled on different menus.
Your newsgroup subscriptions are listed on the Group Selection menu that appears after you type “tin” from your host’s system prompt or from your host’s main menu. (Note: you may be asked if you want to subscribe to new newsgroups before the Group Selection menu appears.)

The number of unread articles in a group is displayed next to the newsgroup. Use the up and down arrow keys to move the highlighter bar to the group you wish to read. Then use the right arrow key to move “inside” that newsgroup and view the unread articles. (Alternately, the left arrow exits you out of the tin newsreader.) Once you are inside the newsgroup, the menu changes to a listing of unread articles.

Note that each thread is shown as a single entry, along with the number of responses to the original article and the name of the person who posted the original article. Again, the up and down arrow keys let you choose which thread to read. The right arrow displays a selected thread, the left arrow returns you to the Group Selection menu.

Sequentially pressing the down arrow key takes you through a complete thread of related articles, then moves you to the next thread until you have finished reading all of the articles in the newsgroup. If there are new responses in a thread you have read before, you can skip the old ones. After the original article appears (reminding you what the thread is about), use the right arrow to move to the next unread article in the thread. If you get bored with a particular thread, use the left arrow to move back to the article listing menu, and pick a different thread.

Subscribing to newsgroups

As noted above, only the subscribed newsgroups are displayed on the Group Selection menu. Some computers on campus have a default set of groups for their users. However, there are thousands of groups available. To see the other newsgroups, type “y” at the Group Selection menu. You’ll see all the available newsgroups, with the ones you are not subscribed to marked with “u” for unsubscribed. You could use the arrow keys to look through them. However, since there are over 5,000 newsgroups to choose from, you may want to search for interesting groups with the “/” key. For example, /humor will show you the next newsgroup containing humor in its name or description. Type “y” again and all of the unsubscribed groups will disappear.

Subscribing to a newsgroup doesn’t take up any space in your account. It’s not like a newspaper subscription, where the papers arrive at your door and pile up if you don’t take them inside. The articles themselves are stored in a database on a computer operated by Data Communications and Computing Services (DCCS). At any time, you can hide all the old articles you haven’t read by using the catch-up key. Just type “c” and you’re up to date in a newsgroup. The hidden articles are still stored in the NetNews database, so you can look back at them. The database does have limits though. Most older articles are deleted after about a week. The exceptions are articles in the Penn (upenn) hierarchy, which are kept for several months.

Finding out more

Tin contains several summary lists of commands available to you on different menus—just type “h” from any menu to get a listing of available commands. The University has also created a reference card for tin. The printed version of this reference card is available through the Schools, and a PostScript version is available on the central FTP server ftp.upenn.edu /doc/tin/tin-doc-genl-printer.ps). If you’re already an avid news fan, you’ll find this new newsreader will save you precious time as you read your average 600 articles a week. If you haven’t used a newsreader before but want to try one, you’ll find tin a much easier newsreader to use.

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