A leap into the past: Using Usenet

CS-234: Technologies of democratic society, Fall 2022

NOTE: If you have **any questions regarding this assignment**, please **do not hesitate to contact us** by starting a [discussion on Moodle](#) so that (1) we can help you and (2) your classmates who might potentially have the same questions benefit from our answers.You **can also always contact the CS-234 staff** at: `cs234@groupes.epfl.ch`

Introduction

Usenet is a worldwide distributed discussion system - the first digital global forum to receive widespread use on the Internet. The name *Usenet* comes from the term "users network". Users read and post messages (called *articles* or *posts*, and collectively termed *news*) to one or more categories, known as newsgroups, which are themselves logically organized into hierarchies of subjects. For instance, *sci.math* and *sci.physics* are within the *sci.** hierarchy, or *talk.origins* and *talk.atheism* are in the *talk.** hierarchy. When a user subscribes to a newsgroup, the news client software keeps track of the articles that user has read. Usenet resembles a bulletin board system (BBS) in many respects and is the precursor to other Internet forums that have become widely used. Discussions are threaded, though posts are stored on the server sequentially.

The major set of worldwide newsgroups is contained within nine hierarchies, eight of which are operated under consensual guidelines that govern their administration and naming. The current *Big Eight* are:

- *comp.** – computer-related discussions (*comp.software*, *comp.sys.amiga*)
- *humanities.** – fine arts, literature, and philosophy (*humanities.classics*, *humanities.design.misc*)
- *misc.** – miscellaneous topics (*misc.education*, *misc.forsale*, *misc.kids*)
- *news.** – discussions and announcements about news – meaning Usenet, not current events (*news.groups*, *news.admin*)
- *rec.** – recreation and entertainment (*rec.music*, *rec.arts.movies*)
- *sci.** – science related discussions (*sci.psychology*, *sci.research*)
- *soc.** – social discussions (*soc.college.org*, *soc.culture.african*)
- *talk.** – talk about various controversial topics (*talk.religion*, *talk.politics*, *talk.origins*)

The *alt.** hierarchy is not subject to the procedures controlling groups in the Big Eight, and it is as a result less organized. Groups in the *alt.** hierarchy tend to be more specialized or specific—for example, there might be a newsgroup under the Big Eight that contains discussions about children's books, but a group in the alt hierarchy may be dedicated to one specific author of children's books.

Many other hierarchies of newsgroups are distributed alongside these. Regional and language-specific hierarchies such as *japan.**, *malta.** and *ch.** serve specific countries and regions such as Japan, Malta and Switzerland, respectively. Companies and projects administer their own hierarchies to discuss their products and offer community technical support, such as the historical *gnu.** hierarchy from the Free Software Foundation. Microsoft closed its newsserver in June 2010, providing support for its products over forums now.

Usenet is still culturally and historically highly significant in the networked world, having given rise to, or popularized, many widely recognized concepts and terms such as "FAQ", "flame", "sockpuppet", and "spam".

Today, Usenet has diminished in usage and importance with respect to Web-based forums, blogs, mailing lists and social media. Usenet differs from such media in several ways: Usenet requires no personal registration with the group concerned; information need not be stored on a remote server; archives are always available; and reading the messages does not require a mail or web client, but a news client. However, it is now possible to read and participate in Usenet newsgroups to a large degree using ordinary Internet browsers since most newsgroups are now copied to several internet sites. This is exactly what we will do in this first CS-234 assignment.

For more information, see the [Usenet page on Wikipedia](#).

Some interesting EPFL Usenet history is available in the following links:

- [https://web.archive.org/web/20070208223558/http://sawww.epfl.ch/SIC/SA/publications/FI98/fi-5-98/5-98-page3.html](#)
- [https://web.archive.org/web/20030810193727/http://sicwww.epfl.ch/SIC/SA/News/](#)

Connecting to Usenet

To explore Usenet, we use [https://youfiles.herokuapp.com/newsclient/](#). We tested this online newsclient with Chrome, Safari, and Brave. If your browser does not support the proposed client, please download and install one of the supported browsers.

To configure your client, you should fill the following entries:

- Server and port: Select the server **news.aioe.org** from the dropdown menu "*Select Newsgroup, Usenet Server". This also sets the default port used by the server. You are welcome to try other servers, but some carry only a subset of the newsgroups.
- Username and hostname: this translates to username@hostname when posting a message in Usenet. You can choose your real email address (e.g., [first.last@epfl.ch](#)) or a fake, anonymous username and hostname.
- You can also insert an email address to receive replies to your messages.

Exploration

In this first part of the exercise, we learn to navigate inside Usenet and we explore some interesting newsgroups. You are invited to explore the different default servers listed by the client and visit the following newsgroup:

- *alt.test.**
- *comp.sys.mac.{system, games, advocacy, …}*
- *comp.os.linux.{misc, networking, advocacy, …}*
- *comp.lang.{c, c++, javascript, ...}*
- *ch.dot.**

Some groups are moderated (e.g. misc.legal.moderated) while others do not have any form of moderation (e.g. misc.legal). In short, in the context of Usenet, moderation means that a message anyone posts to a moderated newsgroup gets emailed privately to the moderator instead of getting immediately posted to anyone. Then, if the moderator thinks it is appropriate, the moderator posts it to the newsgroup with a special "Approved:" header field so that it does not just get emailed back to the moderator again. You can find more information about how moderation works at http://pages.swcp.com/~dmckeon/mod-faq.html.

Posting a message

In the second part of this exercise, we ask you to post a message on a newsgroup of your choice. As discussed earlier, you can decide if you want to use your real identity or a pseudonym. You are welcome to take full advantage of your old-school Usenet experience by participating in a real, interesting discussion, but if you want to post a purely test message that is not on any meaningful topic, you may use the special-purpose newsgroups 'alt.test' or 'misc.test' for that purpose. If you post to these test newsgroups with a real email address, you will likely get some automated responses confirming your message was seen.

As a friendly reminder, here are the client and posts editor shortcuts:
Client shortcuts: Help (?), Quit (q), Post (p or P), Help (?), other listed directly in the client
Editor shortcuts for posting: Save (Ctrl+s), Quit (Alt+q), Help Menu (Ctrl+/)

When ready to post, (Ctrl + s), (Ctrl + /) and then select (Enter) "Quit editor". A prompt will then appear asking whether to post your message.

Question 3
What is the unique **Message-ID** that was automatically assigned to your posted message?
Hint: You can find it in the message's full headers by pressing 't'.

Question 4
Last week, you read chapter 8 of Robert Dahl's "[Democracy and its Critics](#)". In a few sentences, describe in what ways would Robert Dahl consider Usenet to be "democratic" or "not democratic" based on his criteria?

Deliverable

We ask you to upload on Moodle a **PDF** document containing short answers (3-5 sentences) to the four questions (numbered 1 to 4) and a screenshot of your message posted on Usenet. The answers to the four questions need not be longer than a single A4 page. Please upload a **single file named <YOUR_SCIPER>.pdf** on Moodle. Please **do not** put your name on the submitted PDF.

Submission deadline is Thursday, October 6, 2022 @ 23.59.

Plagiarism

All work that you submit as part of this assignment must be your own original work. Failure to comply with this rule will be considered as plagiarism, which is a form of cheating and a severe violation of the academic honor code. Any potential case of plagiarism will be handled seriously in accordance with EPFL's disciplinary rules and regulations. If you have any questions about whether your actions might cause any violations, please contact the CS-234 staff immediately.