Everything Old Is New Again
Introducing Newsgroups: The Bulletin Board System For The Next Millennium

By Ernie Longmire

Many of you may remember the bulletin board system (BBS) boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the first days of personal computing, many PC hobbyists connected their machines to telephone lines and wrote software that allowed other computer users to call in and leave electronic messages, much as people have been leaving messages for each other on non-electronic bulletin boards since time immemorial.
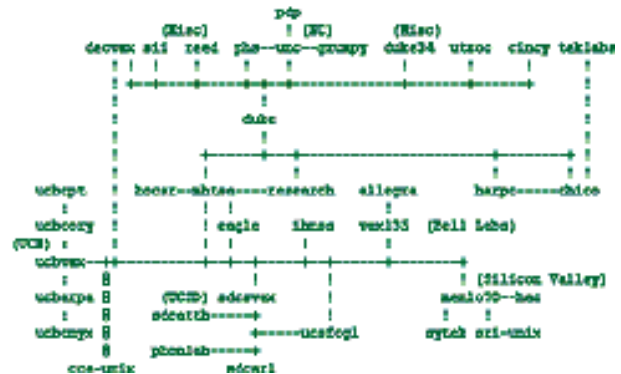

As the personal computer market expanded, so did the number of bulletin boards available in the world. Many computer companies, including BASIS, set up BBSes so their customers could ask questions electronically and download software. Unfortunately, BBSes can be difficult to use. Each different piece of BBS software has its own user interface, and unless you live close to the place where the system is set up, they can be expensive to call. But if you have access to the Internet, there's an alternative that has all the advantages of a BBS and is accessible to anyone in the world for no more than the cost of a call to your Internet service provider: a *news server* hosting a number of discussion areas called *newsgroups*.

What Is A Newsgroup?

Newsgroups got their start in early 1980 when students and researchers at places like Bell Labs, Digital Equipment Corporation, and the University of California at Berkeley designed a new kind of BBS software, called *news* software. Like traditional bulletin board software, news software lets you create, read, and post messages to discussion areas. Unlike traditional bulletin board software, news software was designed to propagate and synchronize those newsgroups across multiple computers. Any machine running news software-a *news server*-could be configured to connect to any other machine running news software, after which those machines would share all the messages they received on all the newsgroups they had in common. After a time, the machines that exchanged news with each other came to be known as the *Usenet*.

At first, news was exchanged through the Usenet over telephone lines. One news server would be programmed to automatically dial

up another news server and exchange messages over a simple modem connection, usually late at night in order to keep telephone costs down. But as permanent network connections between computers became more popular, news software was updated so that servers could easily exchange messages over those connections as well. The programs people used to read news-*newsreaders* or *news clients*-became similarly sophisticated allowing people to easily navigate the ever-exploding number of newsgroups available, and to automatically find messages on specific topics or posted by particular people.

The Usenet still exists today, with hundreds of thousands of computers sharing messages instead of just dozens. There are thousands of newsgroups covering every topic you could imagine, and there are millions -- millions! -- of people out there filling those newsgroups with discussions-and sounds, pictures, chain letters, and advertisements for get-rich-quick schemes.

Fortunately, news servers don't have to talk to each other to be useful. It's possible to set up a news server on the Internet so that individuals can connect their news clients to it directly-just as people used to use their terminal programs to dial in to a BBS but without the long-distance telephone charges. And in fact that's just what BASIS has done with its new public news server at *news.basis.com*, which is home to a collection of newsgroups designed to be of particular interest to our customers.

How It Works

If you're already using the Internet, you probably have a news client ready to use on your computer, as the two most popular web browsers available today-Netscape Communicator and Microsoft Internet Explorer-have news clients built into them. Instructions for connecting your client to the news server at *news.basis.com* are available at http://www.basis.com/support/newsgroups-gettingconnected.html. This web page also lists and describes the newsgroups currently available on the BASIS news server. Once you've subscribed to the groups you're interested in, your news client will ask for a list of messages from our news server. You'll be able to select the messages you're interested in from this list and either read them interactively or save yourself some time by downloading them to be read offline.

Newsgroups have a number of compelling advantages over mailing lists. First and foremost, a discussion that's taking place in a newsgroup is a discussion that's *not* cluttering your mailbox or your hard drive with a lot of messages that may not be of immediate interest to you. While it's always possible to file away copies of messages for your own reference, with the BASIS newsgroups it's no longer necessary. We've set up the server so that messages never expire, with a nice side effect being that new subscribers to a

discussion group can easily catch up on recent, or not-so-recent, postings before jumping into a discussion.

In addition, newsgroups offer more robust and consistent support for reading messages in thread order -- a requirement that many of our CompuServe-based customers take very seriously. And because all the messages in our newsgroups reside on a central server, your messages are available for everyone else to read as soon as you post them. You don't have to wait the hours or even days it can take for an email or Usenet news posting to propagate through the network.

On the other hand, the downside of the newsgroup discussion model is that email is usually received and checked automatically, whereas with newsgroups the reader often has to check with the news server to see whether there are any new messages. This difference is mostly a difference in perception. Anyone using a POP-style mail client to get his or her email from an Internet Service Provider is already polling its mail server to check for new email.

Find All Your BASIS News At news.basis.com

BASIS has started the process of replacing its other existing online discussion areas, including our CompuServe forums and the bbx-list mailing list, with the newsgroups on our news server. We believe that in the long term this strategy will allow us to communicate more effectively with our customers. All BASIS-specific discussions will finally take place in a single location that's accessible to everyone. You won't have to be a CompuServe customer to access our primary discussion areas, and you won't have to keep track of discussions in multiple formats (email, CompuServe, et al.) in order to keep on top of everything.

In the meantime, the various mailing lists are still available for your use, during your transition to the newsgroups. We realize that all of our customers can't change immediately, but we encourage you to see what is available in the newsgroups. We hope that the BASIS newsgroups will make it easier for you to get the information you need, both from BASIS and from the hundreds of helpful and dedicated Business Basic professionals always ready to lend a colleague a hand.