

Mailing Lists and Newsgroups: Subscribe to Newsgroups!

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Do you use your microwave oven only to nuke a cup of coffee, cook popcorn or defrost the pork chops? Harnessing the full functionality of a microwave oven is perceived by many as too complex and iffy. "I don't know how long to microwave a Rock Cornish game hen, and I can't be bothered to find out."

The full functionality of the Internet is often perceived in much the same way. Once folks, technophobes in particular, get in the groove on the Web, they're content to do nothing more than surf and exchange e-mail.

But they are missing out on some great resources. One in particular is Usenet. It's an information gold mine that offers enlightenment, learning, opinions and participation.

Usenet precedes the advent of the Web by a decade. It is an amazing resource pool in which millions of messages are exchanged in forums known as newsgroups.

Residing on servers all over the Internet, newsgroups are text-based information gatherers that can be read by anyone, unlike mailing lists, which can't.

There are newsgroups on Usenet that represent just about every topic known to man. Some are helpful, some are highly controversial, some are mainstream, and some are fringe.

Because there are so many, they are grouped for easier identification. Alt., for instance, which stands for alternative, is perhaps the biggest grouping with the widest range of topics, 21,392+ as of this writing. Other examples of groupings are "comp" for computers, "soc" for social issues, and "misc," among others. Like Internet addresses, newsgroup titles are separated by "dots," alt.acting.cast-calls, for example.

There is no central repository of newsgroups per se. Internet service providers (ISPs) can pick and choose which newsgroups will appear on their news servers. But collectively, all newsgroups are available on servers throughout the Internet.

If you have Netscape Communicator or Internet Explorer 4.x or better, you should have no problem scanning newsgroups. Using Communicator's Messenger or Internet Explorer's Outlook, you can read, subscribe or post messages to any newsgroup available.

If you don't use those browsers, you can download shareware. Free Agent for PCs or NewsWatcher for Macs are good programs. To find these, I recommend MindSpring.com, which has a great download site at <http://download.mindspring.com/software/index.html>.

If you do subscribe to a newsgroup, be aware that posting messages that are clearly of little benefit to the group's readers or are profit motivated will get the same reaction as does spam. In fact, you could find yourself without Internet access because group moderators (folks who choose what goes on many of these lists) are likely to report newsgroup spammings to your ISP. In turn, your ISP may close your account, and everyone on the list will know about it.

I strongly suggest that you at least take a peek at this very fertile Internet tributary. It's well worth the read.

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