Using Newsgroups

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Netscape in Windows

In Netscape Communicator 4.79 running in a Microsoft operating system such as Windows NT, the newsgroup server address can be set by clicking successively on Edit->Preferences...->Mail & Newsgroups->Newsgroup Servers->Add. Enter the server address, e.g., netnews.att.net, in the box labeled “Server.” I leave the port as 119. After clicking OK, click on the new entry to highlight it and click on the Default button. You will want to put an “X” in the box labeled “Ask ...before downloading...” To view a newsgroup, connect to the Internet, start Netscape, and open the message window by clicking Communicator->Messenger. You will see a list of one or more mail folders, such as “Inbox” and “Sent.” Below them will be the name of the newsgroup server that you just set. Click on it so that it is highlighted and then click successively File->Subscribe.

At this point a window filled with the names of the newsgroups on your server will open. You can either scroll through the list containing 20,000 newsgroups or click Search. A search for “optics” will probably yield “sci.optics” and “sci.optics.fiber.” Click the dot in the “subscribe” column for each and then click OK. These newsgroup names will now appear under the name of your newsgroup server. Click on one of them and a list of message headers will appear. Click on a message to read it.

Internet Explorer 5.0 in Windows

The procedure for configuring Internet Explorer for reading newsgroups depends on which version of the browser you are using. Click Tools->Mail and News->Read News. Outlook will open. When you open this function for the first time, you will be given an opportunity to work through a configuration process that includes setting the newsgroup server name. This process also provides the opportunity to subscribe to newsgroups. The procedure is similar to that described above for Netscape. After subscribing, click OK. You will see a list of the newsgroups to which you have subscribed. Choose one of them by clicking on it. The messages of your chosen newsgroup can be brought to your PC by clicking Synchronize; but first, you may want to click Settings->Headers Only. This will allow you to download only the message headers when you synchronize. You can change your subscriptions after the initial configuration by clicking on Subscriptions.

For other versions of Internet Explorer, click View->Options->News->Use Internet Explorer to read Internet Newsgroups. At that point you can enter your newsgroup server name.

As you look through newsgroups, you will find that there is a lot of variation in the quality of the postings. Some are filled with advertisements; others consist mainly of postings that criticize the authors of previous messages. The two optics groups, sci.optics and sci.optics.fiber, are not usually characterized by such problems. They contain many questions from workers trying to make a measurement or locate a source for some component like a diverging Fresnel lens. There are postings from students who are either trying to learn some science or trying to obtain paragraphs for a term paper. You may recognize the names of OSA members in the postings. Some of the physics groups, such as sci.physics, tend to feature many philosophical discussions, in addition to problem-solving queries. Responses to postings can usually be viewed by clicking on the plus sign accompanying the original posting. You can reply to postings in a manner similar to that used for e-mail. Often, as a civic duty, a knowledgeable person will assume the task of answering the questions posted to the newsgroup. She or he will do this for a few weeks or months and then someone else will take over.

You will gain a healthy appreciation for peer review as you view newsgroups because most of them allow anyone to post messages. Nevertheless, if newsgroups exist on a topic of high interest to you or a topic in which you need assistance, you may profit immensely by learning how to view and post messages.

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