About NautNews On/Offline Newsreader

Why Should I Use NautNews?

NautNews is intended to provide a more flexible news reading environment for anybody using a Windows[*] based PC to access an NNTP news server as their news feed. If you can answer "yes!" to any of these questions, then you probably need NautNews.

> Does it annoy you to have to maintain an open SLIP/PPP connection while reading and responding to news?

> Do you sometimes have trouble reaching your service provider when you want to read news?

> Even though you have a direct ethernet connection and a super hot PC, does news reading feel sluggish because of the slow response of your NNTP server?

> Have you ever gone looking for a message, only to find it has expired on your server?

> Can you think of other ways to mark articles besides just "read" and "unread"?

> Wouldn't it be convenient to have multiple messages open on your screen while trying to compose a reply?

> Wouldn't it be convenient to see both an index view and article text at the same time?

> Are you tired of squinting at your news because the fixed display font makes the messages hard to read on your display?

NautNews can solve all those problems because it allows you to download your news for reading later, then upload your responses next time you connect. NautNews will then organize and display the articles as fast as your PC can manage it, so that sluggish feeling will be gone, and you have your choice of font and size for display. Articles will remain available as long as you want, and will be available locally as ASCII text for whatever additional uses you may have! You can mark and display them as read, unread, pending, or archived to make it easy to save articles, or set them aside for later

action.

What is NautNews?

It is intended to be the best full featured news reader/poster for use with MS Windows 3.1 (or higher) and a winsock compliant driver library used to connect to an NNTP network news server. "Best" is an elusive term, but for me it includes an interface that allows the user easy access to the basic tasks of managing a news database, while maintaining local control over the information, as well as a recognition that more and more users are dialing in over SLIP or PPP connections, and that maintaining a long term connection may be neither desirable or possible.

NN's main difference from other readers is that it first retrieves all the news, then lets the user browse and respond while not necessarily remaining connected to the network and the NNTP server. NautNews has several components:

NAUTNEWS: The basic news folder manager from which all other functions are launched. On startup it displays a table showing the status of all of the groups you have in your folder. From here you can:

> RETRIEVE: Connects to the NNTP server and retrieves all new articles in either all or selected groups, saving them to disk on the PC. Current settings allow downloading of either headers only, or complete articles.

> READ GROUP: All the usual features of a news reader, plus a simultaneously displayed index window, which will present articles in numerical order, subject order, or by author name. Articles may be marked as either read or unread, as well as pending and archived. Pending and archived are designations that will prevent articles from being deleted, and that will only be reset if you explicitly request so for that article. This way you can save articles for later action/reference within the framework of the news reader, without needing to save them separately and keep track of what you put where.

> RESPOND: While reading a group you can create a new posting to that group (or more groups by crossposting), followup to an existing posting, reply to the article's author by mail, or forward the article to someone else for action. If you

prefer, NN will invoke your own text editor for composition. These messages/articles are stored as files for future posting, and need not be sent during the current session.

POST and MAIL: Separate programs called by NN, which find new postings/mailings created by NN and send them to the NNTP/SMTP server for posting/mailing. Both are independent, so that they can run in parallel with the retriever, as they will if you select File/Update Everything from the NN menu.

Where can I get it?

You can contact the author (Rick Sellens rick@weber.me.queensu.ca) and ask about becoming an alpha or beta tester. It is intended that the program will eventually become available as shareware, and in commercial versions.

What do I need to run NautNews?

Right now I'm not really sure, but I can tell you about the development tools and the three test systems I've been using. NautNews has been programmed in Microsoft˙ Visual Basic, Version 2.0, and as of version alpha 0.21 has been upgraded to Version 3.0 of Microsoft Visual Basic.

486 Machine: 80486 DX2 66MHz, 8MB memory, Cirrus Logic CL-GD5426 Graphics card running in 1024x768 mode with 256 colours, WfW 3.11, DOS 6.22, Trumpet Winsock 1.00.

486 Machine: 80486 DX2 50MHz, 16MB memory, ATI Mach32 Graphics Accelerator running in 1024x768 mode with many colours, WfW 3.11, DOS 6.2, Trumpet Winsock 1.00, lots of other weird extensions that shouldn't make a difference.

386 Machine: 80386 40MHz, 8 MB memory, ordinary SVGA card operating in 800x600 mode with 256 colours, Windows 3.1, DOS 6.2, Trumpet Winsock 1.00, pretty vanilla installation.

All three machines run well, with speed comparable to other applications. Performance limits seem to be the speed of the net (or modem) connection, machine/graphics card speed for redrawing windows, and the responsiveness of the NNTP server. Groups with large numbers of active articles may take a noticeable time to update the index and display the message list when you begin reading a group. (It takes about 15 seconds per thousand

messages to open a group for reading on the 66MHz 486. New messages also require about 20 seconds per hundred to index, but NN can be set to do this automatically on retrieval.)

Problems and Suggestions:

First check the bugs.txt file that came with the distribution. It covers bugs that I already know about, and features I'm planning to add, as well as problems I think have been solved. If you find something new, or have a suggestion for a new feature please let me know at strombus@xmission.com.

Thanks for taking the trouble to give NautNews a try, and special thanks to all of those brave alpha testers who have slugged their way through versions 0.21 through 0.25, passing on excellent information to help me fix things.

Known Problems With NautNews:

Some problems are not immediately fixable because they require major modifications, or don't have an obvious solution from where I sit, or simply aren't worth solving. Many of the problems below are also present in many other newsreaders. Any suggestions you have would be welcome.

There is no communication between groups, so crossposted articles will be presented to the user in all of the relevant groups.

Articles bigger than 30000 bytes can't be displayed inside the program, but it responds gracefully, by showing you the first 30000 bytes of message and letting you invoke your own editor/viewer. (This is because a Visual Basic text box is limited to about 32K)

Storing all articles as separate files is a space hog on machines with large disk cluster sizes. A later version may also store all article text in yet another MS Access Database.

NNTP downloading can be inherently slow, but it doesn't require any special arrangements like compression to be handled at the server end, which means you can use any provider without special arrangements. (NN is completely tolerant of any other way you find to introduce serially numbered messages into the news directories, and will stay that way.)

Funny things happen to the nautilus graphic on some non-standard graphics displays, including the Cirrus 1024x768x256 smallfonts driver.... it may be a little ugly, but it's not mission critical. ;-)

There is no security check on the validity of claimed origins of messages and articles, and I don't see how to implement that when there are so many NNTP servers that will post messages without authentication, and provide no mechanism for providing authentication. The best option I can see is maintaining a list of validated from addresses, based on a successful telnet login, but I wonder if that difficulty is likely to alienate users while other news programs continue send posts and mail without the bother of such authentication.

Improvements in Version Beta 0.50

For a start we managed to jump a whole quarter of the way to version 1.00 ;-) I have been using NN for **all** my news now for more than eight weeks, and although it has been an uphill battle, I think this program is ready for general release. The primary lack is still in documention, but for good hints read the strombus home page on the web at http://www.xmission.com:80/~strombus/, and the testers' FAQ available from that page.

Most of the changes relate to robustness, for instance making the posting editor respond intelligently to a resizing down to ridiculous proportions..... or making sure that the user supplies a relative reference for a news directory and a dozen other details you probably don't care about.

Added a switch for whether or not to create a Date: header locally. It appears that some NNTP servers have been configured so that they will reject articles with the date already set.

Retrieve from selected groups now works.

Several mods provide more information to the user to convince her/him that things are happening, or to provide more information on how to correct problems.

The posts now use the preferred
Name of User <address@sub.domain>

format for producing addresses.

Followup-To: poster will now generate mail messages instead of additional postings to news.

You can now sort by sender in the newsreader -- threading "real soon now"

Improvements in Version Alpha 0.25

The indexing system has been completely rewritten. Indexes are now stored as MS Access database files. Indexes may be displayed in numerical, subject or author order. (Threading will come later -- the information is in the database, but needs massaging.) This improved indexing means a group may have an arbitrary number of messages in the index, of which up to 25000 may be active at any one time.

Navigation is vastly improved, with many of the rn navigation keys working while in the reader (n, N, p, P, f, F, q, k, c). Articles may also be marked read or unread by selecting them in the index.

The mailer and poster are more robust and incorporate a checker that will catch most faults in outgoing messages and give you a chance to correct them. Mailer now recognizes and deals well with multiple users on to, cc and bcc lines.

News articles may be forwarded by mail to another user.

Poster will remind you to consider fewer groups and a replyto: when you are replying to a crossposted article.

The retriever now notices if the NNTP host connects, refuses service, then disconnects, and responds accordingly.

The post composer will dynamically size the text entry area within the
window, only show the headers when you want them.

Configuration switches control which headers are presented to you.

Added a HELO call to the mail script, plus an RSET before each mail transaction.

Added verification on the form of the entries in configuration.

Made the timezone a dropdown list box with fixed choices

Message boxes will remind you about the existance of unsent mail and post files and ask if you want to send them.

An alarm bell will ring when downloading is finished -- user selectable.

Improvements in Version Alpha 0.24

Many cosmetic changes, including more menus, but still no help. n and p will allow you to go forward/backward in the reader window without mousing...

That contentious article indexer is now gone -- the reader indexes articles on the fly, and it's a little smarter, so it should be a little faster.

You can now select from a list of previously retrieved group names from your server, or add groups manually.

You can select under options/switches to choose which headers get displayed.

Retrieve does nothing but add article files to the directory, so if you have another way to move them in (like a zip file on a floppy, or a qwk/soup type system) you can add serially numbered article files and nn will recognize them.

NN now includes a key field to unlock the shareware version -- the only difference in this version is whether or not it displays the "about" box.

Made selective retrieve by groups work.

The headers in poster stretch to fill the window.

Added version checking on config with a warning about updates.

Improvements in Version Alpha 0.23

Expanded the browser to include the retriever and turned most of the buttons into menu items, eliminating the "file control" problem.

Rewrote the software to produce the message index. Additional posts in the same subject group will be indented. The index now follows where you are in the group. Double clicking an index item will take you to that news item. Next and Previous should also behave much more reasonably.

All of the windows will now remember their size and position, as long as they were ordinary windows (not maximized or minimized) when they closed.

Empty groups are handled properly.

Switched all done/quit buttons/menus to be the same as double clicking the control box, eliminating a couple of problems.

All read / unread now ask if you really want to do that.

When a header line is not available in the message the word "Unavailable" will appear instead of "Don't Know" (but you will still have messages labeled "Don't Know" in your index from before.)

Headers in the reader are labelled and expand to fill the full width of the form.

New posts will have a blank references line.

Editing the group specifications will build a default directory specification as you type in the group name.

"All Read" will go to the last message in group.

The retriever, poster and mailer will warn when they initialize the winsock driver, pointing out that the winsock driver may take a long time to timeout if it isn't getting a conection.

Added a notice to the retriever for impending timeout.

Retriever now tells you that it will interrupt the connection after this message is complete.

Improvements in Version Alpha 0.22

There were a few big bugs in 0.21 that didn't cause me any trouble, but broke other people's installations (sigh...).

If the NNTP server was missing a message between the first and

last message, NautNews would write a two byte file for that message. This made all sorts of funny things happen. Fixed now.

Empty news directories caused crashes with indexing, reading and cleaning. Fixed now.

If you examined a big news group on a slow computer, it was possible to generate an out of stack space error and crash because index update requests would pile up, one per article change. Fixed now.

Funny things were happening in the folder manager when you removed groups, or cancelled an "add group" request. Groups were getting deleted when they shouldn't. Fixed now.

In addition to these pretty fatal flaws, some other things were fixed up:

For short articles, NN will retrieve about twice as fast by retrieving both header and body in one call to the server. On my server at least, the latency for NNTP command response (about 1/2 second dead time / command) is the dominant time requirement when retrieving short articles.

NN will recognize "Reply-To:" and "Followup-To:" headers when posting or replying.

Cosmetic factors were improved, including having the index window correctly resize when maximized.