Bring news to your desktop

Get connected with *Pan*, an open-source newsreader for the web.

IN A far-off time before the internet – well, the late eighties – people got their online fix by using their modems to log on to bulletin board systems (BBSs), which, if you were lucky, only cost as much as a local telephone call. As most BBSs could only manage perhaps two or three connections at any one time (they used modems, so you needed a separate phone line for each connection), there was never any real-time interaction. You couldn't chat with people directly, but what you could do was leave messages for people, as if on a physical bulletin board.

These message boards were often visited by people with similar interests, and the clever thing was that at a certain hour every night or two, your BBS would telephone other local BBSs and transfer messages from their boards to yours. Eventually this became really organised, to the point where you could contact people from all over the world just by posting a message on your local board and leaving it for the web of BBSs to deliver it for you.

In some ways, modern online newsreaders are directly descended from those old BBS message boards, and they work in a similar way. You connect to a server, the equivalent of your local BBS, which contains thousands of online message boards covering every subject that could ever be imagined. This server is connected to others, so that news or other messages that you and other people post on the boards spread their way across the internet in much the same way as with an old BBS system.

USING THE SOFTWARE

Reading newsgroups can seem a little antiquated when compared with more modern, web-based message boards, but that's mostly because you need to use a separate application for accessing a news server. There are many available for Linux, from the one included with *Mozilla* to text-based readers you can use from the shell. One of the best is called *Pan*, which we're looking at here, but it's fairly accurate to say that when you've used one newsreader, you've used them all.

PAN AT A GLANCE

Use this field to filter the massive list of newsgroups.

You can search through downloaded messages from here.

A list of newsgroups available on your news server.

The message window can display either text or images.

All the message headers for the selected group are listed here. Green disc icons mark articles that have been downloaded.

When you first start *Pan*, it will need your name and email address. These details are used when you post your own messages to the news server. It then needs the address for your news server – which is usually provided by your ISP and is often something like **news.your_ip.co.uk**. If your ISP doesn't have its own news server, there are many others you can use for a small monthly fee. The final thing *Pan* needs is the address of your email server, but this is only used if you want to contact people personally.

If everything has been configured properly, *Pan* will ask if you would like to download a list of groups for 'default'. Default is the generic name given to the

news server you have just configured. As for the list of groups, these are the message boards (called groups by a lot of newsreaders) that are currently held on the server, and you should click on Yes to download them all. Don't be surprised if this takes a little while; there can be as many as 60,000 separate groups on any one server.

THE SETUP

By default, Pan splits the main window into three panels *(see Pan At A Glance box, above)*. On the right, the header pane sits above the message panel. The panel on the left is the place to start navigating the thousands of groups available. There are obviously far too many to browse through, so you usually need to enter some search criteria in the Find box above the list. This will list all the groups that contain your chosen search elements.

When you've found a group that looks interesting, you can either select it or double-click on it. *Pan* then gives you the option of downloading a selection of message headers, all the new headers or all the headers and their contents, or 'bodies'. If you're not sure about the content of the groups, we'd suggest you start with a small number of headers, to give you a flavour of what's typically discussed. After that, you're free to explore and have all kinds of news delivered to your desktop. ●
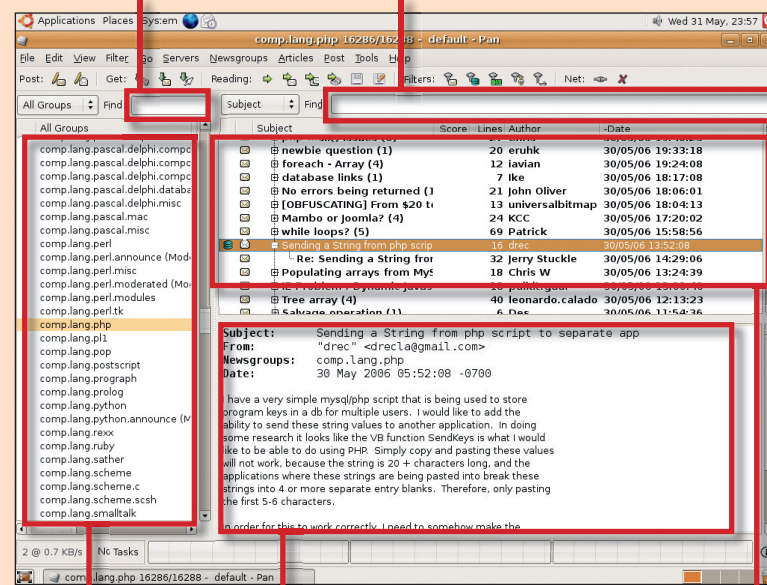

OR TRY: KNODE, KDE'S OWN NEWSREADER

Most newsreaders are functionally similar to each other, and *KNode*, which runs on KDE desktops, is certainly similar to *Pan* in that it works best while online. With *KNode* this means that messages and articles can only be read while you're connected to the internet, as opposed to downloaded and stored on disk, but the advantage of this is that you don't need to download all the headers or messages in one go. *KNode* will just update them when necessary.

The *KNode* newsreader is part of the KDE personal information manager, *Kontact*.