

Whither Bionet?

Newsgroups constitute a major proportion of the traffic carried over the Internet. These newsgroups make up 'Usenet', a world-wide distributed discussion system. The newsgroups are classified hierarchically by subject. They are similar to e-mail in that a person with a computer, the necessary software and an Internet connection can contribute to them and receive replies; they are dissimilar in that an e-mail is sent to one or a few known people whereas a message (or article) posted to a Usenet newsgroup can, in theory, be read by anyone in the world.

The Bionet.* news hierarchy contains the BIOSCI newsgroups. The BIOSCI network allows easy communication between life scientists from all over the world. As with the rest of Usenet, this is independent of the computer systems or networks used. To provide access to the newsgroups for those without access to a news server, BIOSCI operates a mail-to-news gateway so that articles that are posted to a Bionet newsgroup are relayed to an equivalent mailing list, and vice versa. All messages are archived on the World Wide Web at <http://www.bio.net/>, which also provides a searchable interface to all the groups.

BIOSCI is supported by advertising sponsorships at <http://www.bio.net/> in the USA, and by the Medical Research Council's Human Genome Mapping Project Resource Centre in the UK. Therefore, access to Bionet is free of charge. Although the groups are available to all, they

are for communication between researchers, and are not intended to provide a forum or a consulting service for lay persons. The sci.* hierarchy is appropriate in such cases.

Some of the more specialized Bionet newsgroups, including those for the professional societies, are moderated. Announcements of interest to the entire BIOSCI community are made in *bionet.announce*, which is also moderated. The open discussion forum is *bionet.general*, but probably the group which people find most useful is *bionet.molbio.methods-reagents*. This is a forum for exchanging protocols and requests for reagents and (methodological) help. It is unmoderated and has a relatively high level of traffic.

A complete listing of the Bionet newsgroups and a brief description may be obtained from the BIOSCI electronic newsgroup network information sheet (<http://www.bio.net/docs.html>). Software to access Usenet may be found at <http://www.newsreaders.com/>, or by searching for 'news reader' or 'newsreader' at <http://www.versiontracker.com/> or <http://www.tucows.com/>.

The Bionet hierarchy has mushroomed since its inception. Unfortunately, its growth has brought with it a number of problems. It is very much a victim of its own success: some of the groups are so busy that it is impossible to keep abreast of them all (much like science

in the real world). Cultivating a disciplined approach to Usenet is desirable: it is not necessary to read all the groups, and it certainly is not necessary to read all the posts in any given group. A major difficulty is with 'spam'. This is the term for articles that are usually advertising a product or website and that are posted to multiple news groups. Spam constitutes a major proportion of Usenet traffic. Fortunately, much of this nonsense is filtered out at news server sites before it reaches the end user, and it is possible to make effective use of 'kill files' or the filtering capabilities of newsreader software. With practice, a user will also be able to recognize the junk and delete it without reading. Perhaps the only way to regain the

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Screenshot of
www.bio.net forum
web page



high signal-to-noise ratio of the early days is to moderate the Bionet hierarchy. This would involve a major commitment on the part of some users, and might adversely affect the speed and spontaneity of the groups. It may be that the users decide that this is a price worth paying. Some groups in the Bionet hierarchy seem to have been completely taken over by spam, and scientists no longer appear to post to them. It may be time for the BIOSCI administrators to re-examine the entire concept of Bionet.

People have been predicting the “death of the ‘net” from the mid-1980s. Despite this, Usenet thrives and [bionet.molbio.methods-reagents](http://bionet.molbio.methods-reagents.org), for example, is by far the best resource available to researchers today for international exchange of laboratory advice, know-how and ideas.

Notes

1. The FAQ for BIOSCI/Bionet is found at <http://www.bio.net/docs/biosci.FAQ.html>
2. A FAQ for [bionet.molbio.methods-reagents](http://bionet.molbio.methods-reagents.org) was created by Paul Hengen and is archived at <http://www-lecb.ncifcrf.gov/~pnh/FAQlist.html> but is no longer updated. Paul has a host of other useful links at <http://www-fbasc.ncifcrf.gov/~pnh/>
3. Paul Hengen explains his decision not to continue his TIBS column at [ftp://ftp.ncifcrf.gov/pub/methods/TIBS/sep97.txt](http://ftp.ncifcrf.gov/pub/methods/TIBS/sep97.txt)
4. An expanded version of this article will appear in the book *Internet for Cell and Molecular Biologists* to be published by Horizon Scientific Press

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Best of the Web



<http://www.bio.net>

The main Internet archive of the Bionet newsgroups is located at <http://www.bio.net>, and is hosted by the UK's Human Genome Mapping Project Resource Centre at Hinxton, near Cambridge. The interface is straightforward, so searching the Bionet newsgroup archives is simple. The main archive page for each newsgroup lists all messages that are sent during the current calendar month, or the latest month in which any messages were posted. Earlier messages are stored in sub-folders and are almost as easily accessible. A search on 22 November 2001 revealed that well over 300 messages had been posted to the invaluable methodology forum [bionet.methods-reagents](http://bionet.methods-reagents.org) since the beginning of the month: in contrast, some groups had not received a message all year.

If you are intending to post to a new newsgroup, it would be well worth browsing a few months' archives to find out if anyone is likely to read your message! Advertising banners on the archives of some widely used groups, and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, help fund the service.

I have one minor gripe with this archive. People who are used to the names of the Bionet newsgroups will probably think that the groups are listed on the main archive page in an odd order. They are listed alphabetically by the name of the BIOSCI e-mail list that is associated with each group (see Richard's main article for a longer discussion of this). Thus, the newsgroup for the AceDB database — bionet.software.acedb — becomes the second newsgroup in the list because the equivalent e-mail list is named ACEDB. Confusingly, this means that the 'jobs offered' group (BIOJOBS) and the 'jobs wanted' group (WANTJOB) are located far apart!

Besides the archives, the Bionet home page contains Bionet and Usenet documentation, and links to some comprehensive bioinformatics sites including Human Genome Mapping Project's own Genome Web and The Bioinformatics Resource. Either of these may feature in a future Best of the Web.

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