Checking your e-mail - the geek way

Most of you are probably all too aware that a couple of Thursdays ago another variation on the "Essential Windows patch" virus was released. Some people on the comp.sys.acorn newsgroups reported receiving as many as 6,000 e-mailed viruses in the week that followed! I consider myself lucky; I only received about 50 in total.

I've got my routine pretty much secure: My ISP provides a "WebMail" service, which means that I can check my mailbox from a secure webpage, and delete these e-mails before I even boot up my mail client (though I'm using a secure e-mail client anyway).

For people who don't have access to such a service, there are still a fair few utilities knocking about (for RISC OS, Windows, or whatever other OS you're using) which help you manage your mail. But I'd like to present to you another, much geekier method. This is the method of communicating with your ISP's mail-server *directly*, with no utility other than telnet. Bear with me - this does have its uses!

Put simply: this is the method of you pretending to be an e-mail client, such as (gasp) Outlook Express, or on RISC OS: Pop-Star. This is possible because, like many Internet protocols which originated in Unix land, the communication between your e-mail client and your ISP is entirely text-based, and therefore easy to emulate. The protocol is called POP3, which means **Post Office Protocol version 3**.

A word on telnet

I won't bore you with the history of the telnet utility - I'll just sum it up. telnet is a fairly brainless utility which lets you communicate with another machine across a network. Any characters you press on your keyboard are sent directly to the other machine as ASCII. Any data which comes to your machine is assumed to be ASCII, and displayed in the window. Nothing more, nothing less.

Aside from its official use - which is controlling computers 'remotely' (from a distance, as if you were sat there) - telnet is incredibly useful for all manner of network jobs, such as network programming and testing. This is because of it's simplicity - you know that whatever characters you type will be sent to the remote machine without any form of mangling or prettying-up, and whatever you see displayed on your screen is exactly what was sent.

A telnet utility is supplied as standard with Windows, and with practically every flavour of Linux and BSD. For RISC OS, you'll need to find a utility. I can heartily recommend **Nettle.**

(http://nettle.sourceforge.net/).

So: I'm going to show you how to use this utility to find out what e-mail is waiting for you, and how to prune those e-mails you don't want.

Required Information

You'll need to have some information to hand in order to proceed. This is the same information that your e-mail client requires. You need to know the

address of your ISPs POP3 server, your **username**, and your **password**. If you' re using PopStar under RISC OS, this information is in a simple textfile somewhere in your Boot structure. If you' re using a PC-based mail client, look around for "Accounts". But that may not help you with the password, as they tend to be asterisked-out.

About To Proceed

Assuming you' re connected to the Internet - you' re about ready to begin. So just a couple of things first ...

1. You' ll be pretending to be a computer program - these don' t tend to make typing errors! So type carefully. If you think you' ve hit the wrong key, don' t bother pressing delete - it' ll further confuse the machine you' re talking to. Just press RETURN, accept the error message you' ll no-doubt receive, and re-type. Which is all made a bit more taxing because :

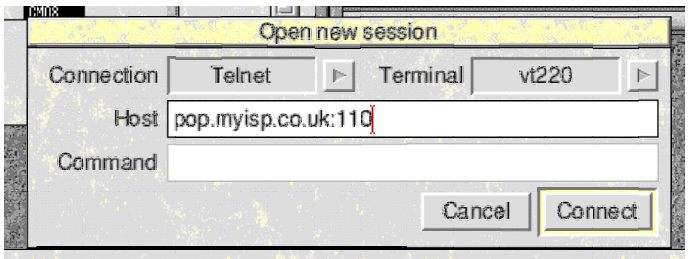
2. You won' t be able to see what you' re typing! Because the mail server thinks it is communicating with a program, it won' t bother ' echoing' (sending back) the characters it receives. It is possible to beat this, by checking to see if your telnet program has a feature called "local echo". Have a look through the menu options - if you find it, it may help you to switch it on.

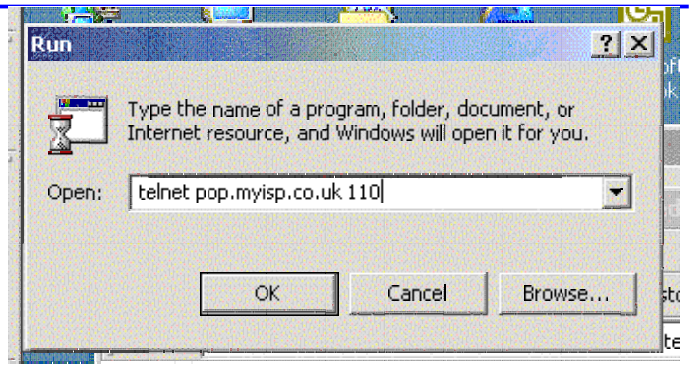
Don' t let all my warnings and preparation scare you - as you' ll see now, there really isn' t much to it.

Actually Doing It

To begin, you need to connect to your ISPs POP3 server. Here' s how you can do it from RISC OS (with Nettle), or from Run... under Windows.

Note the "110" (one hundred and ten) in both cases. This is the port that you' ll connect to on the machine serving the mail at your ISP. And obviously, you replace the pop.myisp.co.uk with the correct address.





All being well, your machine will connect to the ISP, and you' ll see a line of text along the lines of :

+OK How do you do?

In the POP3 protocol, acknowledgement messages always begin with +OK or -ERR. The text after that is ignored, and differs depending on the server software.

The first thing you have to do now is tell the server who you are. You do this by typing

USER my_username

and pressing RETURN. You' ll receive back something like

+OK User is known here.

If you get a complaint, then you mis-typed something. Next, supply your password:

PASS my_password

to get another +OK response.

You' re now logged in, and able to access your mailbox. If you' ve had any errors up until this point, you' ll need to check your details and your typing skills.

Now to check if you have any mail waiting. To do this, just type:

LIST

The server will respond with a list of numbers, like this:

1 4537
2 4684
3 2057

4 175346

Each line describes an e-mail - just an index number, and the size of the message in bytes. The list always finishes with a full-stop by itself - so if all you see is a full-stop, you have no mail waiting!

If you' d like to read an e-mail, type RETR (meaning "retreive") followed by the index number, like this :

RETR 1

The mail server will send the e-mail to you, and finish it off with a full-stop by itself, as before. If you think the e-mail might be a big one (look at the sizes for a rough guess), you can ask the mail server to only send you a certain number of lines of the e-mail, like this :

TOP 1 10

In this example, the mail server will send you the first ten lines of message 1. This is normally enough to see fields like From: and Subject:, so you can gauge whether the e-mail is pertinent or not.

To delete a message, type DELE followed by the index number, like this :

DELE 1

This deletes message 1.

One tip here, relevant to current events: the "crucial Microsoft patch" mails are always between 140 to 170 kilobytes in size. If you see any mails listed around this size when you do a LIST (see message 4 in my previous example), you know to look at those first!

Any deletions you make are not applied until you cleanly disconnect from the server. This is to prevent people losing e-mail when a hardware failure occurs midway through a mail download. To do this "clean disconnect", just type

QUIT

The mail server will usually send you a farewell message, then kill the connection.

This may all look complicated to read, but try it once or twice - it' s easy to get the hang of, as long as you type carefully!

Good God Man, Are You Insane?

I don' t think I actually suffer from insanity, but I suspect I am a carrier. But I find this a useful thing to be able to do, for a number of reasons :

1. It lets me find out whether a fault is at my end, or whether a computer is bust at the ISP end.

2. I get called on by a fair number of friends who either want help setting up or fixing their e-mail access. When they can' t remember whether their username is:
jbloggs, joebloggs, joebloggs.freeserve.co.uk, or joebloggs@freeserve.net
or any of a hundred variations; this allows me to narrow it down without all that tedious reconfiguring of Outlook a hundred times until we get it right.

3. On one occasion, a friend had been e-mailed a letter from his aunt, who had recently bought a computer. This letter had been hand-written on A4 paper, scanned with her brand-new scanner, and attached as a BMP of several megabytes. She had Broadband, so she didn' t mind that it took a while to send. But my friend only had dialup, and didn' t want to download it! It took thirty seconds to delete the offending mail from the server, without his telephone bill suffering.

4. It helps me understand how e-mail clients work, by knowing how it communicates. I consider this very important.

Kris Adcock