Thunderbird and e-mail

by Andy Pepperdine

Introduction

With recent revelations, there is now some interest in how e-mail works and what some of the terms mean. This paper is intended to explain some of the things.

What are POP and IMAP?

When e-mail is delivered, it arrives on a mail server somewhere on the net. When you want to read a message, you fetch it from the server. The methods of doing this are known as protocols, and POP and IMAP are the two in very common use.

POP is the simplest. It allows you to retrieve e-mail onto a local machine and to read the messages. When you connect to the server under this protocol, then all messages and attachments are downloaded to your local machine, where they will then reside. Typically, they are then delete from the server.

However, you can optionally keep copies on the server. In that case, when you later connect to the server, you will see the message again. You will not normally know whether you have already read it, but it will be downloaded again.

For POP, the storage you need on a server is only the little required for the currently unread messages, as typically they will all be downloaded at the earliest opportunity.

For some ISPs, this is the only option they offer for the ISP e-mail address.

IMAP has more features and is more useful if you want access to your mail from several different devices, like a phone or tablet, as well as your standard PC. When you connect via IMAP, you can set it up so that only the subject lines are downloaded, making it easier to see quickly what has arrived. Only when you read a message, will it then be downloaded for you to see locally. Typically, attachments are not acquired locally until you explicitly ask to read or save them. In addition, the server will keep information on whether you have already seen it, so that your e-mail client can show you what has been read and what is new.

In addition, IMAP allows you to structure your folders on the server to suit yourself.

Note however that the storage demands will be much greater. If I were to keep all my mail on a server, it would need several gigabytes to hold everything I've collected over time. If you are not paying for the storage, then you may well not have that sort of space available.

Sending e-mail

To send e-mail, you have to use an outgoing server. In general, you do not need to use the server corresponding to the e-mail address you are apparently sending from. I have seen a recommendation that you should use your ISPs outgoing server for all messages as that will be available and quick. Personally, I doubt that is the best way in the current state of the net. I try to

stick to the server supplied by the appropriate e-mail service. That way only that service sees messages from those addresses.

But having said, that, it was once a life-saver when the authentication to the outgoing server failed for a few hours and so I had to use a different one, completely satisfactorily.

Thunderbird Accounts

Thunderbird is an e-mail client, and can be set up so it can talk to a mail server either by POP or IMAP, provided the server allows those protocols. It seems now to have an extensive database of possibilities, and connection to any of the common servers is almost guaranteed to give you the best option. But it still gives you the choice when it has detected both POP and IMAP.

You should be careful when setting up an account what type of connection you make between Thunderbird and the server to access your messages. The server may provide various options for authentication (that is to ensure it is dealing with you), or for encryption (that is to disguise the content of the communication between you and the server). Be aware that some ISPs will assume that you are authenticated because you are communicating on one of their lines. In this case no log in will be necessary, but also, no encryption of traffic will be enabled either.

If you are accessing an independent server (not your ISP), then authentication is necessary, but encryption of traffic is optional.

Conversion from POP to IMAP

If you have an account that you are accessing via POP, then there is no easy way to switch it to use IMAP. The best I can suggest is to delete the POP account in Thunderbird, and create a new one. If IMAP is available, it will probably detect it.

Add-ons for Thunderbird

Thunderbird has a number of add-ons available covering many extra functions that you may wish to incorporate. To see them, go to Tools → Add-ons. The Extensions tab shows you what is currently installed and whether they are enabled. The Get Add-ons gives a search bar to find new ones and install them.

Lookout

Lookout is a simple extension that will allow Thunderbird to read and interpret attachments that have been sent from a Microsoft Outlook server as an email extension. Without this add-on, Thunderbird cannot read it. During installation, you will be asked to accept a license.

ImportExportTools

This extension allows you to export messages from one Thunderbird installation to another. When you have this extension, another entry appears when you right click on a folder, which will allow you to export or import the messages in the folder. There are many options available for exporting messages and folders in various formats.

Dictionaries

There are also several dictionaries for a variety of languages to include in your spelling check menu. Just search for the language. For instance, if you still have only American English, then try adding a British English Dictionary (or other relevant variant).

Junk and Spam

Junk is the folder where Thunderbird puts messages that it has determined may be spam, or that you have marked as such.

Spam, however, may also have been removed or marked by the mail server provider. My experience has been that their spam detectors have been getting better, and less gets through. Your experience may differ, however.

Most e-mail providers now go through one of the commercial spam checks, and anything that appears to be dubious is marked in the message header. Thunderbird can be set so it will accept their recommendation as to what is junk. See the options under Junk Settings for the Account Settings.

You should ask your e-mail provider who they use, if any. They may also provide options to let you control what you see, and what is automatically moved to the junk folders. If you let them select for you, then also check the expiration dates, and make sure you check the spam contents regularly through their webmail interface.

Further information

Thunderbird has a Help menu, and the Help Contents take you to their support web pages, where you can search for the help you want.