COLLIB-L: Listservs in library communications

By Larry R. Oberg

The development of a listserv

Listservs are a unique new means of communication among members of particular interest groups. Still in their infancy, listservs are controversial, much as the telegraph, the telephone, and the radio were when they first appeared. Academic listservs are criticized by detractors as a babble of disparate voices desperately seeking to be heard, and lauded by supporters as forums that stimulate the discussion and the resolution of practical and theoretical problems within a given field. Although the value of listservs to librarians has yet to be reckoned, their use has outstripped our understanding of their role and potential.[1]

The nature of listservs

Listservs, often referred to as electronic discussion groups, electronic seminars, or simply lists, broadcast mail among members of an invisible electronic college and archive it for later retrieval. Postings are sent automatically to all subscribers or held for review by a moderator who releases selected items for general distribution. Lists may be open to the entire networking community or closed to all but the invited. Participation assumes access to Bitnet or the Internet, often referred to collectively as "the net." Academic listservs are fostering the emergence of a distinctive form of dialogue that involves members of a profession in productive, often informal, discussions of practice and theory.[2]

Whether listservs depress or elevate the level of discourse, they have become an enormously popular means of communication to which librarians and support staff alike commit significant amounts of time. The voices heard on the lists can be cantankerous, ornery, tedious, and trivial. They can also be stimulating, informative, creative and, occasionally moving. Participation in listserv discussions helps keep librarians aware of new developments in the field, resolve practical problems, clarify theoretical issues, and minimize professional isolation through communication and collaboration.

COLLIB-L: The CLS listserv

The need for better and more immediate communication between the membership and the officers of ACRL's College Libraries Section has been recognized for some time. At the 1993 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Denver, the CLS Executive Committee approved the creation of a listserv to enhance communication within the section, supplement its newsletter, and increase membership. The list would serve a dual purpose, it was decided, by functioning as a forum for communication among all librarians in predominately undergraduate institutions as well as linking the Executive Board with the membership. Mignon Adams, section chair, and the Executive Committee charged me with undertaking the project.

On March 9, 1993, COLLIB-L, the College Librarians Listserv, was made available to members of the networking community. Within three months, nearly 600 subscriptions were received from librarians and library support staff in the United States, Canada, Australia, and other countries. The rapid growth of COLLIB-L demonstrates that more college librarians have access to the networks than had been previ-

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ously estimated. Although the number of new subscriptions has levelled off, the list continues to grow. If growth is interpreted to indicate approval, then COLLIB-L is a success, filling a void where no equivalent forum had existed.

A new voice and its problems

Listservs are fostering a new mode of expression and COLLIB-L has found its voice somewhere between oral and written communication. Stevan Harnad suggests that this voice is akin to the scholarly letter writing that characterized an earlier era.[3] It may also be a self-limiting voice. Listservs favor two groups: those with excellent verbal and rhetorical skills and those with chutzpah and network savvy.[4]

On most listservs, a minority of subscribers contribute postings, and "lurkers" abound. The term lurkers is used to designate subscribers who follow, but do not participate in, list discussion; it is not considered disparaging by old list hands, but "readers" might be a more generous appellation. Listservs probably differ little from print media in the ratio of readers to writers.

The role of the moderator in the developmental process of listservs is an important one. List moderators can set the tone for the list and encourage or discourage postings. As COLLIB-L moderator, I chose to encourage a thoughtful tone. Always lively and occasionally heated, the list's collective voice nonetheless has been a serious one. Discussion topics have included rethinking the current model of reference, digitizing course reserves, configuring automated services, constructing gophers and campuswide information systems, and gender as a determinant of list-posting habits. Practical concerns are raised on COLLIB-L, but a high percentage of the postings address professional and even theoretical issues.

Complaints indicate that subscribers are not altogether comfortable with this new medium. Many are overwhelmed by the volume of mail they receive. Although the problem of junk mail is a real one, irrelevant and trivial postings can be deleted with a single keystroke. List mail can also be managed effectively by electing to receive mail in digest format and when listowners or moderators post judicious reminders of listserv protocol.

The persistence and vehemence of these complaints indicate that some subscribers are perplexed by this new medium and unable to define with precision what is of importance to them.[5] The eclectic nature of the postings no doubt also reflects the range and interrelatedness of librarians' concerns. It also comes as a surprise to the uninitiated that unrestricted listservs are democratic forums in which the postings of support staff receive the same attention, interest, and respect accorded those of directors and even venerated icons of the profession.

Since its inception, COLLIB-L has functioned well and little intervention on the part of the moderator has been required. The list has been remarkably free of "flames," the rude and discourteous postings that pose a problem on some lists. Flaming may indicate that those who exercise little self-control when posting are unaware of the size of their audience. The informality of listserv communication may also lead new or naive subscribers to commit opinions to a list that they would hesitate to express in

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conversation or print. In any case, it is clear that listservs encourage an academic, rather than a bureaucratic, style of discourse.

Another, perhaps more serious, complaint is that the imprint left by these electronic forums differs markedly from that of their print counterparts. Unlike books and journals, listserv records are ephemeral, volatile, and mutable. They may be archived, but search mechanisms are primitive, bibliographic control lacking, and preservation responsibility informally bestowed or assumed.

Listservs and e-journals

Some of the thinking out loud that occurs on the lists appears to be stimulating what one librarian recently termed "the greater degree of thought and formalization" that precedes publication.[6] Not surprisingly, listservs are spawning electronic journals and e-journals are spawning listservs. *PACS-P* and *Psychologuy* are two examples of e-journals paired with listservs. This symbiotic relationship may help stabilize, codify, and preserve the more scholarly communications that appear on the lists.

Electronic journals rapidly disseminate scholarly information to the peer community. *Psycholoquy,* for example, has foregone the time-consuming standard double-blind review process and adopted an online version of the "open peer commentary" originated by Sol Tax in *Current Anthropology* and continued by Stevan Harnad in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences.* Contributions to *Psycholoquy* are refereed by the journal's 70-member editorial board, often within a few hours. In this manner, these new experimental journals hold the promise of speeding up the production of new knowledge.[7]

The future of listservs

Still in their infancy, listservs are beset with problems that will need to be resolved before they are accorded the trust, confidence, and respect enjoyed by nonelectronic media. The privatization of the networks is an overarching concern.

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ways in which listservs are used. The current flat fee model (buying the river) allows listservs to function in a manner that metered charges (paying by the drink) most likely would not.

Concerns have also been raised about the possible imposition of institutional restrictions on network access, excessive staff time spent on irrelevant or trivial lists, and the privacy and ownership of networked communications. Some librarians are concerned that their professional associations, strapped for cash, will substitute listservs for expensive printed newsletters and journals without first determining members' information needs and relating those needs to appropriate means of distribution. Others worry that listservs, established to facilitate associational communi-

cation, are being supported by public or private institutions, an arrangement whose value will need to be made clear to the institutions involved and whose permanence, in any case, cannot be assured.

Despite these concerns, listservs are increasingly popular and appear to satisfy many of the conversational, practical, and even scholarly communication needs of librarians. Their value as a forum for academic discourse and their effectiveness as an agent of change, however, have yet to be assessed. The lack of shared protocols leave subscribers unsure of net etiquette.

Still, many users expect listservs to have a salutary effect upon the profession by involving librarians, especially those who work in poor schools and remote areas, in an evolving discussion of our practice, theory, and collective future. If the performance of COLLIB-L is an example, our expectations may one day be realized.

Notes

[1]Willard McCarty, "HUMANIST: Lessons from a Global Electronic Seminar," *Computers and the Humanities* 26 (June 1992): 205.

[2]McCarty, "HUMANIST," p. 217. McCarty suggests that we "must be able to argue convincingly that what may at a glance seem an endless procession of unjustified opinions, unsubstantiated arguments, and irrelevant serendipity just might be the sound of ancient humanism rebuilding itself out of new materials."

[3]Stevan R. Harnad, "Post-Gutenberg Galaxy: The Fourth Revolution in the Means of Production of Knowledge," in Michael Strangelove and Diane Kovacs, *Directory of Electronic Journals, Newsletters and Academic Discussion Lists,* 2nd ed., Ann Okerson, ed. (Washington, D.C.: Association of Research Libraries, Office of Scientific and Academic Publishing, 1992), p. 241.

[4]McCarty, "HUMANIST," p. 206.

[5]McCarty, "HUMANIST," p. 212. McCarty notes that "the anxiety of information overload, then, originates partially in the frustrated desire to preserve the transitory and so points to our need for a model to tell us what e-mail is, what to expect of it, and so how to handle it."

[6]Richard H. Werking, personal communication to the author, August 2, 1993.

[7]Harnad, "Post-Gutenberg Galaxy." ■