Listservs as Management Tools in Libraries

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Introduction

Libraries have always been known to be in the forefront in embracing technology to enhance operations. Though their basic missions have not changed through the years, libraries have adopted numerous practical applications of technology to automate many operations. Today, national and academic library catalogs throughout the world are available for searching by anyone with access to the internet. Many libraries also have other online resources such as databases, journals and books accessible to their clientele via the internet. The latest technology to be adopted by libraries is in the area of management. This tool is the List Service popularly known as “Listserv” or the List.

Characteristics of List Service

A “Listserv” or the List is an electronic discussion forum that connects people with similar interests, concerns, or missions. Each List is owned or moderated by one or a group of individuals responsible for managing the technical or public relation aspects of the service. The software program that operates a List receives messages that are posted to a central listserv address (e.g. Vetlib-l@listserv.vt.edu) from subscribers and then re-distributes them to the other subscribing members of the List. Members of a List receive other members’ posted messages automatically in their own e-mailboxes. A reply from any one member is sent to all.

Owners or Moderators of Lists have the options of setting their Lists with the following parameters: Closed/Private or Open/Public, Moderated or Un-moderated.
A closed/private List is one in which subscribers must ask the List owner (Moderator) to sign them up, and only the moderator can unsubscribe them. A closed List is labor intensive as the moderator is very involved in its operation. The membership of such a List, however, is more select and therefore discussions are relevant and focused.

An open/public List is one that anyone can subscribe to on his or her own. Membership is not controlled and therefore can be open to abusive uses such as “spaming” or “flaming”. If subscribers choose to conceal their identities, un-subscribing them if they misuse their membership privileges and become abusive subscribers would be a rather involved process. The advantage of an open/public List is that it is not labor intensive because the system software handles almost everything automatically.

A moderated List means that all postings have to be submitted to the Moderator who would screen incoming messages and exclude unsuitable ones before forwarding the appropriate postings to the List. Such a List is extremely labor intensive for the Moderator, especially when the membership is worldwide. If the Moderator does not want to hold up messages he/she could be working many hours a day and almost every day as postings are received continuously from around the world. An advantage of a moderated List is that it is more focused and eliminates abusive uses of the List.

An un-moderated List means that everything sent to the List appears on the List automatically without screening, editing, or approval from the List Moderator. Such a List is conducive to spontaneity and subscribers get instantaneous satisfaction. The disadvantages of an un-moderated List are irrelevant or inappropriate postings that clutter up the e-mail in-boxes of subscribers.

“Listserv” as a Management Tool

Using a List as a library management tool is a logical extension of its use as an electronic discussion forum for people with similar interests and concerns. In many libraries there are four primary functions or uses of “Listserv”:

1. Committee activities.
2. Collection development.
3. Library instruction.
4. In-house information dissemination and discourse.

(1) Committee activities.

A “Listserv” can serve as a substitute for holding non-confidential meetings such as committee, staff, and association meetings and/or as a tool to assist in meeting activities. As a meeting forum the obvious logistical conveniences are that: (a) It has no time or distance constraints, and so there is no need to schedule times or venue for meetings. Because there are no time conflicts, members can attend several meetings without any problem. Members are able to “attend” from off-sites as long as they have access to the internet. (b) It provides a more informal and less threatening environment.
Committee members, including the Chair, are equal members, and the Chair is less able to direct the flow of the discussion. The Chair can actively participate in conversation as a member rather than as the Chair. (c) Participants have more time to think issues through before responding. (d) Such meetings are more equitable because less vocal and more timid participants have a chance to voice their opinions and not be drowned out by more vocal or aggressive participants. (e) Meetings via “Listserv” can be more open-ended and can last longer (days instead of hours) without tiring or overwhelming participants. Important and time-sensitive issues and problems can be debated and resolved “between” meetings. (Think of how many times an important issue has arisen the day or days following a monthly meeting!) (f) Since all the participants’ inputs are posted on the List, it simplifies recordings of minutes of the meetings. Furthermore, meeting minutes can be easily distributed to all members, and modified and approved in advance of the next meeting. Agendas can be readily distributed and modified, as necessary, before meeting.

(2) **Collection Development**

Another use of the List as a library management tool is in the area of collection development. With the never-ending spiraling costs of journal subscriptions, no library is spared from serials cancellation projects. Librarians who have gone through this irksome project know how involved and extremely time consuming it can be. Traditionally in a serials cancellation project, the librarian identifies and compiles a list of little-used or fringe-journals as candidates for cancellation. This list is then posted on bulletin-boards in the Library and also mailed to the subject departments to solicit comments from their faculty and students. These comments are then compiled and reviewed by the librarian and adjustments to the list are made in response to the comments. The revised list is once again posted and mailed out for another review before submission for cancellation. The procedure sounds simple and workable enough in summary, but in reality it does not work that well for the following reasons: (a) Users do not have the time or inclination to review a long list posted in the Library. (b) The journal list sent to the subject departments tends to take a long time to route through the departments, and frequently the list could sit on a faculty’s desk because he/she is out-of-town or is busy with other duties. (c) Some faculty ignore the initial list and wait for the final list to see if “their journals” are selected for cancellation before they send in “protest notes”.

By using “Listserv” as a tool in serials cancellations, those users who are concerned can subscribe to the Serials Cancellations List and participate in the project. The librarian can either compile an initial list of little-used or fringe journal titles as candidates for cancellation, or ask participating users to submit titles of journals that are important for their research or instruction. With that information, a list of titles that have not been submitted is compiled. Once the list is posted on the List, comments are solicited from participants that will be read by everyone on the List. Since there is no time or place constraints it is easier for all to participate and responses will be representative of the user community. Another instance in which a Listserv can assist in collection management is when a purchasing or cancellation decision must be made very quickly. One recent example is an instance in which the Library had only two days in which to decide whether to subscribe to NetLibrary.
Members of the “Listserv” were able to respond and communicate quickly with other members and a decision was reached before the deadline.

(3) Library Instruction.

A third use of “Listserv” as a management tool is in the area of library instruction. This is especially valuable in managing a distance-education class. For class purposes it is best to have a closed but un-moderated list so that only students enrolled in the class can participate and their messages posted without undue delay. There are several advantages to using a “Listserv” to manage instructional activities. These are:
(a) The responsibility for class communication is shifted to the students who have to send subscription requests to the “Listserv” central address where the instructor will screen and accept the requests. Once they are subscribed to the class List, they will be responsible for informing the moderator for re-subscription should they change their e-mail addresses during the semester. With a List, the instructor no longer has to obtain e-mail addresses from students to compile a class electronic mailing-list. (b) It provides students the option of posting their questions and responses to everyone in the class (i.e. to the List) or just to the instructor. It also provides the means for the library instructor to post answers to specific questions and reduces the number of times the same question is asked of the instructor and the number of times the instructor has to repeat the answer. (c) It serves as a medium for the library instructor to supplement classroom instructions with broader instructions. (d) It provides a means for students in a class to share ideas and to benefit from a variety of perspectives on issues posted by fellow class-mates.

(4) In-house information dissemination and discourse.

“Listserv” is fast replacing the electronic mailing list as a means of disseminating information within the library community. The advantage of a List over the electronic mailing-list is the satisfaction it provides by its expediencies. For example: (a) When minutes of meetings are posted on a List for general information, responses and comments from members on errors, omissions, etc. are immediately available on the List. (b) A List provides an effective medium for posting policy and procedural changes since it gives staff members who might have been overlooked when such changes were made, an opportunity to inform the library community how these changes are impacting their operations. (c) It provides opportunities for discussion and analysis of issues among widely dispersed staff members. (d) It can be a vehicle for staff members who do not physically work close together to get better acquainted with each other’s functions.

Limitations of “Listserv” as a management tool

Though there are many advantages in using “Listserv” as a management, it also has several limitations. These shortcomings are: (a) Computers are expensive and not everyone has one at home nor can every organization afford to provide their personnel
with computers for their exclusive use. Thus some staff members can not access their e-mail easily and conveniently. (b) Not everyone has the same level of computer literacy, so some training in computer competency needs to be provided. (c) Unlike an electronic mailing-list which anyone with an e-mail account can set up and maintain, individuals setting up a “Listserv” would normally have to arrange for the systems manager of the central computing facility to set requested parameters. (d) Owning/moderating a List entails some degrees of risk management. When a List is moderated the Moderator is viewed as analogous to a publisher and could be liable to some type of litigation like any publisher --- e.g. infringement of copyright, defamation, etc.

Suggestions for setting up a List Service

“Listserv” has proven to be a valuable resource for library management. Its many values more than compensate its few shortcomings. Setting up a List is a little more involved than a simple electronic mailing-list, but anyone with a willingness to read an operations manual can do it. To set up a List, it is helpful to keep in mind the following points:

1. The name for the List should be simple but pertinent to what the List is for. List names such as LIBSTAFF for library personnel and COLLDEV for collection development, are relevant. Nobody wants to type a 32-character list-name every time they send e-mail to the List.
2. Archives should be kept for the List. This will be useful for retrieving messages that have been deleted from the e-mail client.
3. The “REPLY” function could be set to go to the entire List or only to the original sender of the message. “REPLY” can also be set to go to a net address (i.e. PID@vt.edu) to keep some of the traffic down on the List.
4. “Auto-delete” function can be set to un-subscribe List members automatically by using the Auto-delete keyword. This relieves the List Moderator the burden of having to manually remove subscribers whose e-mail addresses have changed, or their accounts have expired, or their mail-server is permanently disabled.
5. A daily threshold of a certain number of postings for a calendar day can be set. The default for the daily threshold is 50, but this default number can be modified to be higher or lower.
6. For a List that is very active, a “digest time” can be set to have all messages delivered during a specific time, usually early morning hours when e-mail traffic is not so active. This option however does not allow for immediate delivery of postings to subscribers.
7. A “service area” can be set for a List so that only select subscribers can post to that List. For example, the List can be set so that only e-mail addresses with the domain names of <@vt.edu>, <@wsu.edu>, <@aol.com>, <@cabi.org>, etc. can post messages. This is useful for a List for serials cancellation project. Setting a “service area” is useful if only people within an institution or organization are allowed to participate in the List’s discussions. An example of such a situation would be a List for the purpose of serials cancellation.
8. There are many software programs available for “Listserv” services. The programs that Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University and Washington
State University use to operate their “Listserv” services are “LISTSERV®” by L-
Soft International Inc., and ListProc by CERN (Corporation for Research and
Educational Networking), respectively. For sites with small to moderate
workloads, there is LISTSERV LITE which has a freeware version called
LISTSERV Free Edition. This free version supports ten Lists with a maximum of
500 subscribers per List. This freeware program is available at:
http://www.lsoft.com. Click on Free Software Download at the website. Useful
information on ListProc is available at: http://www.listproc.net/

Suggested Readings

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