

Information Sharing and Dissemination by Use of Mailing Lists

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Abstract

Mailing lists are vital communication tools used by the academic and research community for sharing knowledge and to discuss latest developments and related issues in specific subject area. These also serve as forum for seeking technical assistance or sharing such knowledge in an informal way by cutting all the geographical barriers. This article intends to highlight the usefulness of mailing lists, with a special reference to librarians, highlights the issues related to the mailing lists and also annotates the popular mailing lists in the field of library and information science.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internet not only offers a rich source of information, but also serves as an excellent tool for professional interaction and collaboration. The mailing lists, which are the by-products of internet, serve as important tools for collaborating research and professional activities among faculty, scientists, researchers, students, etc. These provide means for a group of users to establish an e-mail forum on any topic of common interest. Mailing lists enable members to exchange information or make queries about specific topic with all the other members of the group. These lists are also used for distributing newsletters to the registered/subscribed members. These lists are becoming popular among library professionals too for similar above discussed activities. Mailing lists are synonym to list servers and internet newsgroups.

2. WHAT IS A MAILING LIST?

A mailing list is a group of e-mail addresses identified by a single name or single ID. When an e-mail message is sent on this ID/name, it is automatically forwarded to

all the addresses on the list. In other words, all the members on the list get the same message. The result is similar to a newsgroup or forum, except that the messages are transmitted over e-mail and are therefore available only to the members on the list. The software used for the management and distribution of mailing lists to the subscribers is known as 'List Server'.

In addition to sending the messages over e-mail to the registered members, messages will also be made available online on the website of the designated service provider for a specified period. However, access to non-registered members depends on the way mailing lists are set up. If open to the public, anybody can view the messages. If not, one has to register with the list for accessing the messages. Similarly, newsletters can also be sent using the mailing lists service to the registered members by various organisations and websites at regular intervals.

Mailing lists are of two types—moderated and un-moderated. In case of moderated list, a moderator does verification of mails before forwarding to the members of the list. Moderator censors irrelevant e-mails such as

unethical, abusive mails or Spam and also such mails sent by members who have un-subscribed the service. In case of un-moderated lists, no body verifies the content of e-mails; they will be immediately distributed to all the members in the list. Even through un-moderated lists co-exist; their number has come down in recent days because of Spam and other kind of annoying and business mails.

Figure 1 and 2 show the diagrammatic representation of mailing list.

Although several mailing lists can be subscribed free of cost, some list servers charge a nominal yearly fee. A new subscriber registers with the list server through registration page. Any one can subscribe to any of the mailing lists depending on his or her interest. Subscription information will be usually available on the websites of the service providers. Data

validator validates details of the subscriber and the details are transferred to the database after successful validation. Similarly the subscriber's e-mail addresses will be removed from the database, once they 'unsubscribe' from the list.

Whenever any e-mail message is sent to the mailing list, the message is automatically forwarded to all the subscribers of that list, in many cases with the approval of the moderator.

3. FUNCTIONS OF MAILING LISTS

Main features of software used for managing mailing lists are:

- Providing subscribing and unsubscribing options
- Sending welcome message/help commands
- Posting messages to the list (which are e-mailed to all the members)

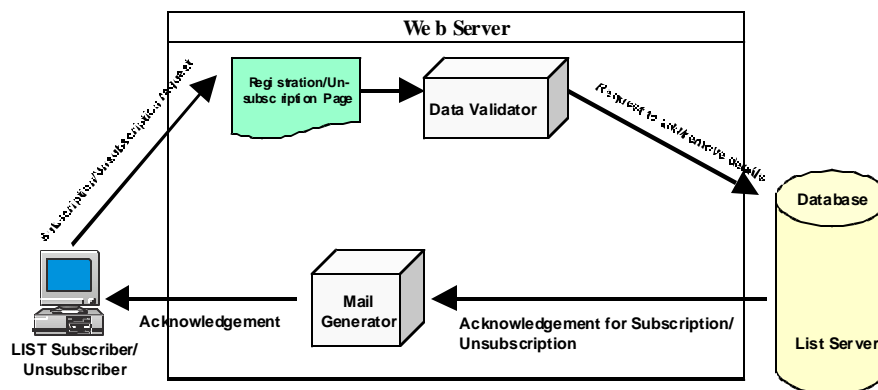


Figure 1. Subscription and unsubscription to mailing list

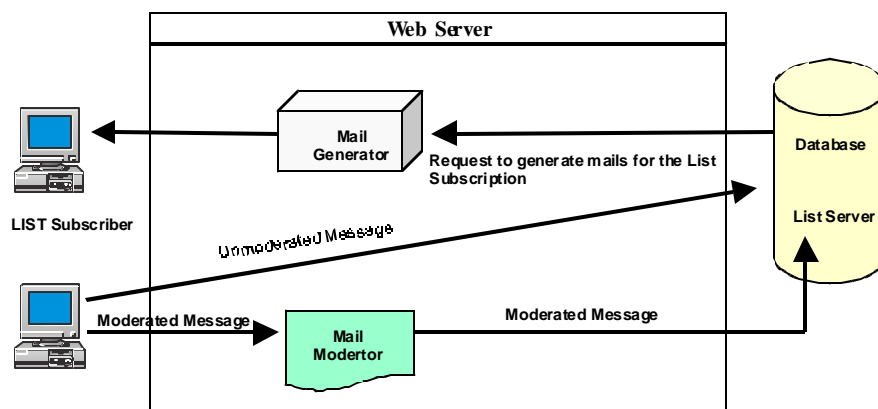


Figure 2. Work flow of mailing list

- ❑ Providing unsubscribe information along with outgoing messages
- ❑ Sending reminders about membership retention/renewal
- ❑ Maintaining database of subscribers
- ❑ Providing information about the members, usage and related statistics.

4. USE OF MAILING LISTS

Mailing lists help librarians in information dissemination to their members and professionals alike. The information could be about library services, products, newsletter, events, placements, etc. These also help to a greater extent in knowledge and resource sharing activities among librarians.

4.1 Marketing of Library Services

Mailing lists can be used to market library services/products which otherwise would be marketed using printed brochures, thus making it cost effective. Another advantage would be its reach. It can reach any number of participants simultaneously with same cost.

4.2 Discussion by Professionals

Mailing lists can be used as tool for professional discussions and to inform events such as conference, training programmes, etc.

They have also been used as forum for seeking solution to some of the local technical problems, creating awareness about the new technology, availability of free software or journal and some time to find out availability of certain specific documents. In other words these serve as tool for knowledge sharing. One good example of such a list or forum is lis-forum of NCSI, Bangalore.

4.3 Sending Newsletters

The mailing lists are now being immensely used to send e-newsletters to all the registered members. These e-newsletters will have same characteristics as their print counter parts with same coverage. In view of the cost saving, the members can be encouraged to write articles on contemporary topics.

4.4 Resource Sharing

Mailing lists can be effectively used as tool for resource sharing among the libraries. Information about weeded out books, back volumes of journals or availability of duplicate issues of journals can be brought to the attention of the participating members. Some times the personal collection of academicians is offered to the libraries free of charge. Therefore, even the non-library professionals who are in the academics may also be encouraged to participate in the forum.

5. MAILING LISTS IN LIS

Of recent, a good number of mailing lists are available in the field of library and information science. These are best known in the profession as LIS discussion forums. Library associations, information centres, university libraries, etc., run such forums with service as the main motto. Many of these lists are subject specific, offering free subscription to members. For details of mailing lists in LIS, one may refer to the directory of list serves available on the internet at: <http://liblists.wrlc.org/home.htm>

Following is the enumeration of some of the national and international mailing lists:

5. INDIA

5.1.1 Corporatelibrarians (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/corporatelibrns/>)

Corporate librarians is a discussion list hosted on Yahoo Groups. It is in operation since November 2000. At present it is having 107 registered members. It is meant only for the registered members, wherein only the registered members can view messages. The main aim of this list is to discuss achievements, problems, creative solutions, tools and technologies.

5.1.2 Digilib_India (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/digilib_india/)

Digilib India has been hosted on Yahoo Groups. It is in operation since March 2001. Presently it is having 102 members. It is also a members only group; only the registered

members can view messages posted on it. Its aim is to create awareness about issues related to digital libraries viz. creation, maintenance, standards, architectures, software, etc.

5.1.3 Digital Lib Research Group:
(<http://drtc.isibang.ac.in/mailman/listinfo/dlrg>)

Digital libraries research group(DLRG) has been hosted by DRTC, Bangalore. It is in operation since October 2002. Its aim is to discuss matters related to digital library.

5.1.4 IASLIC Discussion List:

IASLIC list is in operation approximately since 1999. It discusses various issues related to librarianship. Persons interested to become member may send an e-mail to: SERVER@LISTSERV.INDIA.X.COM with a message in the body of the e-mail as: JOIN IASLIC-LIST.

5.1.5 IATLIS List:
(<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/iatlis/>)

Indian Association of Teachers in Library and Information Science (IATLIS) is in operation since December 2000. At present it is having 102 members. It is hosted on Yahoo Groups. It discusses professional matters related to teachers in LIS and librarians. It is meant for registered members only.

5.1.6 India-LIS:
(<http://infoserv.inist.fr/wwsympa.fcgi/info/india-lis>)

India-LIS is an IFLA mailing list hosted on IFLA web server for discussing various LIS related issues. It is in operation since 2002. Presently it is having 297 members. It is a closed list, wherein only the registered members can send messages. Also, only members can access its archives.

5.1.6 Infolibrarian:
(<http://www.infolibrarian.com>)

Infolibrarian mailing list sends monthly newsletter to its registered members. It is in operation since 2001. Right now it is having around 656 members. Newsletter covers various internet resources, which are of

importance to library and information science professionals. Subscription information is available on the site.

5.1.7 Lis-forum:
(<http://ncsi.iisc.ernet.in/mailman/listinfo/lis-forum>)

Lis-forum is a moderated and closed mailing list or listserv. This list is one of the oldest and it is managed by NCSI, Bangalore. It is in operation since 1995. It discusses various professional matters related to LIS. Any registered member can post a message to this list. NCSI uses same forum to send its monthly newsletter 'info watch' which covers internet resources in sciences and allied subjects.

5.1.8 NMLIS:
(<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nmlis/>)

New Millennium LIS Professionals (NMLIS) is a discussion list hosted on Yahoo Groups. It is in operation since 1999 and presently is having 191 members. It is also 'members only' list. Messages posted on it can be received or viewed only by the registered members. Its main aim is to exchange views, ideas and opinions relating to the LIS field.

5.2 International

5.2.1 AcqNet:
(<http://acqweb.library.vanderbilt.edu/acqweb/acqnet.html>)

AcqNet is a managed or edited listserv, which provides a forum for acquisitions librarians and others interested in acquisitions work to exchange information, ideas, and to find solutions to common problems. It started with a group of 25 librarians in December 1990 and, as of January 2001, has over 1700 subscribers.

5.2.2 IFLA Mailing Lists:
(<http://www.ifla.org/ll/iflalists.htm>)

IFLA hosts good number of mailing lists on its server. Most important among these are: DIGLIB—a discussion lists for professionals to discuss the constellation of issues and technologies pertaining to the creation of

digital libraries. Presently it is having 2940 registered members.

IFLA L—the goal in establishing this list is to facilitate information exchange as well as professional communication and development within the IFLA community. At present it is having 1330 registered members.

5.2.3 Oss4Lib: (<http://www.oss4lib.org/listserv/>)

This is a discussion list complementary to the oss4lib.org weblog. The oss4lib listserv is used for announcing new projects and sites as well as for general discussion on open source software for libraries. It is in operation since 1999. This listserv was originally hosted at Yale University.

5.2.4 PERL4LIB: (<http://www.rice.edu/perl4lib/>)

Perl4Lib is a mailing list for librarians and library staff interested in the Perl programming language. The list is in operation since June 1999 and it is an unmoderated open list. Active Perl programmers have established it to encourage beginners in Perl and also to provide a forum for the exchange of programs, projects and ideas. This is hosted by Fondren Library at Rice University, USA.

5.2.5 Serialst: (<http://www.uvm.edu/~bmaclenn/serialst.html>)

SERIALST (Serials in Libraries Discussion Forum) is in operation since October 1990. Presently it is having 2934 members from 48 countries. This forum covers most aspects of serials processing in libraries. Appropriate topics include, but are not limited to, cataloguing, acquisitions, collection management, serials budgets and pricing concerns, union list activities, announcements, etc.

5.2.6 Web4Lib: (<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Web4Lib/>)

Web4Lib is un-moderated discussion list hosted by UC Berkeley library. It is in operation since May 1994. In this forum one can discuss issues relating to the creation

and management of library-based world wide web servers and clients. The issues for discussion include, web site design, cataloguing, metadata and training.

6. PARTICIPATION IN MAILING LISTS

The first level of participation or involvement starts with registration and observing the discussion by the other members. It creates awareness about the topic and the protocols also known as 'Email etiquette'. Then starts the transition, from observation to the active participation. There are two ways of participation in the second level. First, by making the query and secondly by answering some one else's query. The objectives of the mailing lists can only be achieved by active participation either by sending a query or by answering it. Even a write up about the new developments without any query can also be termed as active participation. Regular interaction with the members develops a sense of belongingness and encourages other mute observers to participate actively.

7. HOW TO RUN A MAILING LIST

Mailing list may be run by anybody by using any of the free internet based services like Yahoo Groups, but one needs to sign up for the service. Before starting a particular mailing list one should be clear about his or her topic of interest and find out whether there is any such list already in operation. Search for existing lists on a specific topic may be done on the net by using any of the search engines or directories. It is better to avoid duplicating the efforts in the same topic. However, running list at local level would be a good idea in spite of the presence of similar lists at the international level. This can be used mainly for discussing issues specific to a particular geographical location or particular group or association.

Some of the Internet sites, which host mailing lists free of cost, are:

- <http://www.freelists.org> (only technology related)
- <http://www.topica.com>

- <http://groups.yahoo.com>
- <http://www.yourmailinglistprovider.com>

One may also run mailing list on their own server using any of the free mailing lists software. Mailman is one such software available in public domain at <http://www.list.org>

CONCLUSION

Mailing list creates a sense of belongingness among professionals, assist in reviving the contacts and bring people together to work for a common cause. It strengthens the bond of librarianship thereby motivating members to share knowledge among with fellow librarians. Lastly and most importantly, the active participation makes any list lively, interesting and informative. On the contrary, many of the lists get contribution only from very few members while others are silent observers.

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