

Mailing Lists

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Mailing Lists

Internet mailing lists came into use as early as the 1970s, when ARPAnet users began to send e-mail messages to large groups of subscribers. The first attested mailing list message was sent by ARPA Net Manager Steve Walker. In his June 7, 1975 e-mail Walker advocated a social use of mailing lists for informal dialogue. In parallel with official experimentation and debate, a number of leisure-related mailing lists such as SF-Lovers, Human-Nets or Wine-Tasters were created for the discussion of topics popular with the scientific and military population of ARPAnet.

Steve Walker's experiment in social networking through e-mail has opened the way for a vast amount of online social relations and interaction: this entry will detail how the affordances and constraints of mailing list technology and history has defined such relations and brought their specific aspects to the fore.

Without entering into a detailed technical discussion, mailing list software applications redistribute to a specific group of subscribers all mails sent to the list address: each participant receives a copy of all messages. People do not have to "pull", or actively request or search for content: it is all "pushed" to them. Another key characteristic of mailing lists is that messages wait on a computer until they can be read and answered to at one's pace, allowing for an asynchronous engagement. Since most mailing lists are archived, it is always possible to access their whole history. As in most online communications, archival access poses privacy and anonymity concerns. Participants' perception that mailing lists are a cozy and semi-private club, especially when membership is vetted, is contradicted by the permanence and accessibility of all online activities.

Despite initial criticism that social interaction under these constraints could only produce a passive and impoverished social behavior, researchers such as Howard Rheingold or Nancy Baym have demonstrated the cohesive, creative and highly social nature of mailing list communities. While it is generally agreed that mailing lists allow and even facilitate intense social interaction and networking, it does not mean that its specific affordances are not unproblematic. The text-only nature of mailing lists, even if partially mitigated by specific locutions, emoticons and other diacritics, has been channeling social anxieties about diminished control over new forms of interaction, expressed in the form of moral panics over the decline of standards of English, and the miscegenation of oral and written paradigms. Indeed, while the "mail" metaphor implies a written linguistic register, the informality of mailing lists exemplifies Walter Ong's notion of secondary orality. In parallel, claims have been put forward that the narrowness of channel can act as an empowering forum for personal opinions, argumentation and debate, and contribute to the growth of non-geographically bound communities for individuals isolated by their offline situation: for example, Mary Grey studied how a gay teen-ager in a remote town in Utah can develop and affirm his identity through online expression.

Norms of acceptable behavior or "netiquette" frown upon emotional and personal invectives, or "flames", commercial use in the form of spam or business propositions, and off-topic posts. Desired list characteristics may also include specific standards of discussion and content and formal norms such as using meaningful subject lines, signing messages, avoiding quoting the entire trail of mails in a discussion--this being particularly disagreeable for those people who read the digest version of the list. In digest format, posters may choose to receive all messages for the day grouped in one single message, usually to speed up the reading process.

The importance of avoiding off-topic, or "OT", posts evidences the topic-bound nature of mailing lists: discussion focuses on one or more specific subjects of discussion, and what does not conform is criticized or censored as being OT. While the object of discussion is overtly declared, the purpose and the tone of a mailing list can be more slippery, and conflicting

expectations on this point can quickly generate flames and ultimately bring the list down. Mailing lists can for example be—or perceived to be—venues for self-development and expression; community building; task-oriented collaboration; information exchange; critical discussion; work- or leisure-related activities. The qualitative ethos of a mailing list is thus a frequent bone of contention, with clashes between factions advocating a supportive and conciliatory style and those who prefer a frank and vigorous exchange.

Unlike other types of social fora or groups, mailing list messages are all formally equal: a reply or a comment are not technically different from the message they respond to, being just another mail message sent around. This setup promotes a sense of equality and free peer exchange. However, there are both qualitative and quantitative dis-symmetries in mailing list interactions. Frequency analyses consistently show how a minority of posters write the majority of messages, while most participants only read, or “lurk”: and how the popularity and cultural capital of posters is directly proportional to their output and to the number of replies their posts generate. List moderators and owners also have the power to devise and enforce mailing list rules, and to “gag” or ban those who don’t respect them. The enforcing powers of moderators and opinion leaders are amplified by their sway over less active or influential members, who “pile up” against the opposing opinion or individual.

Moderators are usually self-taught, even when lists are subject to heavier external constraints such as in the case of work-related or official mailing lists. In the latter case, moderators may receive some more guidance; however, instructions are mostly focused on the technical aspects of listserv software. The prevailing assumption is that social group management skills are a given, best mastered experientially. New members are inducted to the mailing list community through the same implicit apprenticeship-based model: expectations are that they lurk for a while before posting, and that they may be subject to initial suggestions, guidance and even censure from more established list members. Newcomers are recruited through direct referral, or word of mouth, or through their finding the list via popular mailing list sites such as Yahoo groups. Their membership can be automatic, or go through list moderator approval, so as to avoid “trolls” disrupting the list. Butler et al. highlighted a range of motivations for participation, ranging from altruistic and public service ones to knowledge-building to personal promotion and visibility. The workload of active, invested participants is thus not negligible—especially for list owners and moderators, who, in addition to the social aspect, also have responsibility for technical housekeeping, maintenance and management. However, the administrative workload has been considerably lightened by the introduction of automated list management software systems, such as Listserv. The term “listserv” is sometimes used antonomastically as a synonym for “mailing list”, but it is strictly speaking probably the earliest in a series of list management and administration tools—another early example being the freeware Majordomo (Listserv was developed as freeware in 1986, but it's been proprietary since 1994). Even without subscribing to extreme technological determinism, it is difficult to deny that listserv-type software has changed mailing lists to the extent that a technical and quantitative change has become a qualitative one. This becomes evident if we go back to non-electronic mailing lists. The distribution of hard copy material from various individual contributors to the list at large relied on one or more editors/compiler to collect, copy and distribute individual members' contribution. Cutting and pasting, photocopying or even retyping various documents, which then had to be sent via the post office, was an artisanal labour-intensive task involving cost, time, effort. Early electronic mailing lists, while drastically easier and faster, still required not negligible specialist technical skills, time and patience: the list administrator had to redirect manually each mail message to the distribution list, whose continued maintenance was an endless chore. While the principles of interaction via one-to-many redistribution of materials remain almost the same from traditional to electronic mailing lists, the advent of an electronic infrastructure and tools allowing for extremely large volumes of participants and messages, and obviating the

need for a heavy "physical" infrastructure/means (paper and postage etc), has effected the industrialisation of social networking via mailing lists, and brought with it a different set of affordances and constraints, or in McLuhan's term extensions and amputations. From a relatively circumscribed practice, mailing list interaction has grown to a massive mode of online interaction, deeply altering existing practices and paradigms of social networking. Since mailing lists are one of the oldest instances of online social networks, they have had ample time to diversify into sub-groups with resulting complex social structures and dynamics. Individual mailing lists present a wide variation in interactivity, cohesion and commitment levels, ranging from debate-intensive lists to announcement lists. Over time, a list can slip from initial enthusiasm to near-inactivity, and individual participants move back and forth from peripheral to central participation. Mailing lists also differ in their level of insularity, and in the percentage of face to face interaction they foster.

Since mailing lists are one of the oldest instances of online social networks, they have had ample time to diversify into sub-groups with resulting complex social structures and dynamics. As in all online social networks, it is not always straightforward to determine the social composition of mailing list participants, even if there's no reason to believe that demographics are different from those of online social networks at large. Even when gender, sexual orientation, age, class, race, nationality and other variables are declared, or even if they are the main topic of discussion, it's relatively complicated, but not impossible, to verify participants' claims, as shown by Susan Herring's analysis of computer-mediated discourse. It is more interesting to analyze the specific ways in which both individual and collective discourse and ethos develop on mailing lists.

One of the more visible stratifications is induced by the list's generational hierarchy, where established posters may act as gatekeepers, wielding power over newcomers; these "newbies" may have different degrees of mailing list literacy and different community expectations and norms, mutated from other forms of online discussion. The growth in popularity of social web communities such as Facebook is bringing both a reduction of mailing list numbers and participation, and anxiety over paradigm change, most often expressed through generational flame wars—which ultimately can bring a further reduction in group size and activity, especially if the newcomers have not prevailed, thus curtailing necessary recruitment to sustain turnover.

The future of mailing lists is not necessarily dim. Even in today's changing context of increasingly diversified online community fora, mailing lists remain a viable proposition, especially for purposes suitable to their asynchronous, push technology affordances. Due to their extreme technical simplicity and for their cheapness and low bandwidth usage, mailing lists are still popular as vehicles for announcements and newsletter distribution, or information request.

See Also: Automated Network Analysis; Communication Networks; Listerv, Community/Groups/Cliques; Computer Networks; History of Social Networks 1960 – 1975; 1976 – 1999; 2000 – Present.

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