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## **Information is Perceptual: Librarians' Online Communities**

### **Introduction**

Librarians handle information. Information is part of who we are and what we do. We require more information to deal with our information. Thus, librarians create professional organizations and communities for discussion of information issues. With the rise of information technology such as electronic mail and the Internet, librarians have utilized these new information genres for their sharing of information about handling information.

Even a small group of people can create and effectively utilize a discussion list or message board for a particular project. This paper focuses on lists and boards that have been created for long term discussion of library related topics and have become an online community that exists for people to join or leave, participate or lurk, over the course of years. Presently, there are numerous library related email discussion lists in operation and their topics range from strictly social<sup>1</sup> to type of library work<sup>2</sup> to a specific library issue<sup>3</sup>. There are also lists created for members of professional organizations and their divisions, roundtables, and committees. While dial-up bulletin boards were popular in the early days of the Internet, it is only relatively recently that increased bandwidth and easy access to the Web has made online message boards feasible

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Librarian Parents (libparenting) talks about parenting mostly but the list members are librarians.

<sup>2</sup> This could be the position, such as children's services or the type of library, such as public or academic. Public Libraries serving Young Adults and Children (PUBYAC) is an example of a list that targets both position and type of library, although librarians with related jobs, such as school media specialist or book author often subscribe as well.

<sup>3</sup> I consider XML in Libraries (XML4LIB) and Graphic Novels in Libraries (GNLIB) to be examples.

discussion outlets. But in the library world, the use of message boards seems to remain in the realm of library course delivery. A notable exception is the Community Center of WebJunction<sup>4</sup>, a site intended to support the work of public libraries, which hosts discussion boards organized around a variety of library topics. Yet there is a noticeably low activity level on the boards whose topic overlaps that of an already established email discussion lists<sup>5</sup>. This leads to the central question of this essay, what are the real and perceived differences between email discussion lists and online message boards? In an attempt to answer this question, the author sought the input of users of these technologies within the realm of library related discussions.

## **Survey**

For an informal study of user perception of email discussion lists and online message boards, a Catalyst survey was established with nine questions<sup>6</sup>. A call for participants was then dispatched to six of the library-related discussion lists to which the author subscribes. These particular lists were selected for the open atmosphere that would accept “off-topic” posts and the variety of list hosts which represent different software and/or settings as well as different archive structure<sup>7</sup>. The call for participants was also posted on a message board on the WebJunction website. It would have been

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<sup>4</sup><http://www.webjunction.org/do/Navigation.jsessionid=34EDB222684D60C3EBC598E1AABB6529?category=388>

<sup>5</sup> The author served as a directed fieldwork student at WebJunction in October-December 2005. Her area of focus was revitalizing “sleepy” discussion boards, during which she observed this phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A, row 1 for the nine questions.

<sup>7</sup> The six lists were Graphic Novels in Libraries (GNLIB), New Librarians (NEWLIB-L), New Member Round Table of ALA (NMRT-L), Next Generation Librarians (NEXTGENLIB), Public Libraries (PUBLIB), and Public Libraries serving Young Adults and Children (PUBYAC).

ideal to post the call to more message boards, but the author was unable to locate additional message boards with a library focus<sup>8</sup>.

The survey was open for just over five days and had 195 respondents, many with substantial commentary. There would possibly have been more participants, but the email distribution software for two lists divided the URL address into multiple lines, causing several participants to receive an error message. Some would-be participants sought assistance, but presumably more simply stopped after receiving the error message. Since the goal for the survey had been approximately 80 participants, the large number of responses was an interesting development. The high level of participation indicates the generous and involved nature of many librarians who are active in the online community. It may also indicate some issues around online communities. A few participants took the opportunity to voice concerns about the structure and/or content of message boards and mailing lists.

### **Information Architecture**

To establish the “real” differences between email discussion lists and online message boards, a descriptive definition is in order. Email discussion lists<sup>9</sup> utilize software on a server to distribute messages to all subscribers of the list<sup>10</sup>. Messages arrive in subscribers’ mailboxes either as they are written or collected in a digest form and sent daily, depending on the user’s self-selected settings. Most discussion lists maintain an archive of list discussions that are accessible via the Web or through email

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that both GNLIB and NEXTGENLIB are hosted through Topica, which offers subscribers the option of viewing the discussion in a message board format at their site. It is unclear how many subscribers choose that method.

<sup>9</sup> In the survey, the author used the term “listserv.” Several respondents were quick to point out that LISTSERV is actually brand name software owned by the L-Soft company.

<sup>10</sup> For a more complete description, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic\\_mailing\\_list](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electronic_mailing_list).

commands. An online message board is a website on the Internet where users can post messages, typically organized into topical forums with subject threads<sup>11</sup>. Some boards keep all postings visible while others archive messages periodically. Users must visit the website for new messages, although many boards offer email notification or RSS feeds to help identify new content. In the case of both technologies, the messages and archive can be set to be viewed by members only or open to all users on the Internet. With the latter option in effect, postings and emails can often be retrieved by search engines such as Google.

In the survey, 47% of respondents were comfortable using both technologies, while 47% had more comfort with discussion lists and close to 5% had more comfort with message boards<sup>12</sup>. When asked about a technology preference for discussions, 60.5% indicated discussion lists and 17% indicated message boards, with another 17% having no preference<sup>13</sup>. The obvious preference towards email discussion lists was expected based on the fact that the survey was mostly advertised on discussion lists and due to the limited number of library related message boards. The most insightful information came from the respondents reasoning for their comfort level and preferences.

Respondents typically described a feature of the technologies in a way that revealed their preference. Because discussion lists send messages directly to the user's email inbox, respondents described lists as easy to access and deal with or as too intrusive and demanding. Message boards were described as too many clicks to access

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<sup>11</sup> For a more complete definition and a bit of history, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Message\\_boards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Message_boards).

<sup>12</sup> For a snapshot of statistics on three questions, see Appendix B.

or as a technology that allows you to work in your own time frame<sup>14</sup>. The features of each technology obviously appeal to different work styles. Even more intriguing was the number of descriptions that used the same terms applied to one or the other technology. The following words or ideas were used by at least two different respondents to describe their experience and applied to both technologies:

- Overwhelming
- More organized
- Easier to lurk/be passive
- Requires you to be active
- More private
- More public
- All in one place
- Easy to use technology.

It does not seem that the technological features of a list or board can account for the overlap in descriptions. Since the same terms can be used repeatedly to describe both technologies, the actual difference between the two is the differing perceptions of the users.

## **Information Systems**

The level of comfort in using a technology is often directly related to time spent working with information technology systems in general. The experience level of survey

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<sup>13</sup> The remaining 5% selected “other” and wrote in a preference. While a couple said “face to face” or “instant messaging”, most of these respondents listed weblogs and/or RSS technology as preferred for group discussions.

<sup>14</sup> A note on human nature: Several respondents used the word “lazy” in their reason to prefer email lists over message boards.

respondents ranged from a few months using these technologies and up to 19 years<sup>15</sup>. Several made statements such as “I grew up with this stuff” or “I used the older, more difficult systems” to indicate why they are comfortable with both current technologies<sup>16</sup>. One respondent made the thought provoking comment that a user’s preference may be simply the “imprint” of their first technology used in college<sup>17</sup>. What a user perceives as being a superior communication system may very well be because that was the first system they used.

Another important aspect of the users comfort in using a technology is the system used for receiving and storing the information. Many respondents rightly pointed out that the level of sophistication utilized in the discussion list or message board software leverages their comfort and preference of one technology over another. An example is a message board organized in a linear fashion versus one threaded by subject. Not a few respondents mentioned that the threading feature of Google Mail has made participation in discussion lists easier since they find the most relevant topics<sup>18</sup>

## **Information Retrieval**

In the survey, the majority of respondents had accessed discussion archives, 80% for an email discussion list and 58% for an online message board. Some of the most animated responses in the entire survey were descriptions of experiences

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<sup>15</sup> A few respondents listed 15 or more years of experience, often citing dial-up bulletin boards and newsgroups as basic message boards.

<sup>16</sup> One respondent suggested that age should have been asked because of generational differences in technology use. The author had considered this previously, but felt the more relevant question was how long the respondent had utilized the technology.

<sup>17</sup> Appendix A, cell I143.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on Google’s mail service, see <http://mail.google.com/mail/help/intl/en/about.html#different>

accessing, or attempting to access, discussion archives<sup>19</sup>. Perhaps because the respondents work in libraries, there were many comments about keywords versus browsing, subject lines versus entire text, and authorized vocabulary. Several made complaints about discussion lists that still use email commands to access archives instead of a web-based query interface. Others complained about message boards being too overwhelming and oddly organized to relocate threads. Many respondents have adapted by creating their own archives of relevant messages on their hard drive.

Wise survey respondents pointed out the critical role of subject lines in both technologies. The user created subject line of a message will determine which users choose to read the message (i.e. is this about a topic relevant to me?). The subject line is also used as keywords for retrieving from archives. Therefore, how the user architects the subject line will affect the usability of the system and the efficiency of the retrieval mechanism.

### **Information Future (or Conclusion)**

One respondent accused the survey of establishing a false dichotomy because the solution “is a full featured tool--a message board that supports email features.”<sup>20</sup> Granted, there are message boards today with such features. But the majority of users, at least in the library world, perceive email discussion lists as preferable for various reasons. The most frequently stated reason was because email “comes to me”, in other words, is a push technology. Yet even in this informal survey, there were rumblings of change. Many respondents wrote about blogs and wikis as discussion tools and the advantages of RSS feeds, the latest in push technology. Users who have a preference

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<sup>19</sup> The most telling response was “I always hope not to have to, as it involves figuring out how they're set up.” (Appendix A, cell H61.)

for message boards enjoy being able to visit a blog and/or wiki website at their discretion. Those who prefer discussion lists are enjoying RSS readers that bring the newest messages directly to their attention. Advantages of the new technologies are perceived by a variety of users.

A number of survey respondents described the benefits of participating in online library communities. Several cited lists and boards as a way to stay on top of the profession. Others commented on the sense of connectedness they have with others working across the nation and even the world. A pleased respondent described using these technologies like having hundreds of librarians at your fingertips<sup>21</sup>. As new tools become available, librarians will continue to find valuable uses for technology that can enhance their professional well-being.

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<sup>20</sup> Appendix A, cell E26.

<sup>21</sup> Appendix A, cell I73.