The Rewards of Managing an Electronic Mailing List

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ABSTRACT

THERE ARE TWO "HUMAN DIMENSIONS" TO every mailing list. The first involves initiating and managing each list, how that management is accomplished, and why someone would take on this work. The second is why list members participate, and what they get from their participation. After a general overview of how list management software works, there will be a discussion of these dimensions as they relate to management of two lists, WALDEN (Women Academic Library Directors Engaged in Networking) and SWEDE-L.

INTRODUCTION

The electronic mailing list is now ubiquitous, and there are few librarians who have not been involved with at least one. Lists for librarians are many, the use is extensive, and just keeping up with messages can (and has) become a significant part of many librarians' work day. There may be mixed feelings about the quantity of messages but, though the electronic deluge may aggravate us from time to time, we have come to appreciate what these lists can do for us both professionally and personally.

Electronic mailing lists are, of course, one example of how communication among library professionals and among academics generally has been enhanced through electronics. The communication itself is not new, but now it is accomplished faster, more easily, among more people,

and certainly less expensively than was previously the case. In addition, electronic interactions can ease, and even promote, other forms of subsequent communication such as that of face to face. Further, an electronic list can lead to communication that would not have happened otherwise, such as this personal e-mail message which followed a posting on SWEDE-L. "You wrote: Though my brother Sven has moved back there as an adult . . . he's a translator isn't he? i met him in malmö at a conference last spring, something kept ringing in my brain that i knew the name. . ." (Larsson, personal communication, August 17, 1998).

LIST SERVER SOFTWARE: HOW IT WORKS

How, then, is a typical list managed? Fortunately, server software exists that handles most routine chores. "A mailing list server automatically manages subscriptions and broadcasts postings to all subscribers" (Shankar, 1998). ListProc by CREN, the Corporation for Research and Educational Networking, is one mailing listserv commonly used in academe (CREN, 1998). Another is LISTSERV® by L-Soft, software which was "originally introduced in 1986 . . . [and] was the first mailing list manager" (L-Soft, 1998). However, even with server software in place, humans also are necessary in making a list work.

To begin with, someone (usually the list owner, although it could be someone else) must install and maintain the list server software itself on a computer system that can dedicate the necessary electronic space for handling and storing the list traffic. Not all academic or other institutions have a mailing list server, especially not smaller institutions such as Trinity College of Vermont (the author's former home institution). For this reason, a server does not manage the WALDEN (Women Academic Library Directors Engaged in Networking) list. SWEDE-L, on the other hand, is managed with ListProc software, and the commands which follow are in the ListProc format.

Generally, the list owner is the person with overall responsibility for the list. The list owner establishes and reviews operational rules for a list, sets up and maintains the server parameters that correspond to those rules, monitors traffic on a list, and does technical troubleshooting when needed, most commonly in conjunction with e-mail address problems. The list owner also monitors and enforces the participation rules for the list subscribers, particularly in terms of keeping discussions civil and on topic. A list owner may share these tasks with others as she or he determines and assigns.

Among the implementation decisions the list owner must make is if the list is to be *open* (anyone who wants to join may) or *restricted* (only a specified group of people may join). Another decision to be made is if the list is to be *moderated* (in which case someone reviews subscriber

messages before forwarding these messages to all list subscribers) or *unmoderated* (messages that subscribers send are posted directly to the list by the server without human intervention). The WALDEN list, given the absence of list server software, is moderated while SWEDE-L is unmoderated.

A *subscriber* "(sometimes called a list 'member') is someone who has [submitted her or his e-mail address] to a list and receives messages posted to the list. A subscriber may also post messages for distribution to other subscribers" (University of Washington Computing and Communications [University of Washington], 1998). Without an established subscription for a person, the list server will not post messages from that person.

Subscribers on library-related lists are rarely, if ever, anonymous to the rest of the list (WALDEN and SWEDE-L are not intended to be anonymous). This is in contrast to "lists" such as chat rooms on America Online (message poster anonymity is the norm).

List *commands* such as SUBSCRIBE or UNSUBSCRIBE are sent to the *list server*. Thus, to subscribe to the hypothetical TOPIC-L (assumed here to be managed with ListProc), you address a message to listproc@host.edu. Moreover, messages to the list server must be formatted in a specific way. For example, to subscribe to TOPIC-L, your message to the list server *must* be "subscribe TOPIC-L <your-first-name> <your-last name>" for the server to correctly interpret the command. A polite "please enter a subscription for _____" will not work.

Another list command that a subscriber can use in ListProc is DIGEST. "By offering a digest version of the list, you allow your subscribers to receive a packet of the day's postings as one e-mail message, rather than receive individual messages throughout the day" (Dornfest, 1996).

However, list *messages* that are to be distributed to other list participants must be sent to the list itself. To continue the above example, a message to be posted on TOPIC-L must be sent to topic-l@hostu.edu. "Messages sent to [the list] . . . are routed to the ListProc server. The ListProc program receives and processes it, checking for errors and following the rules established by the list owners. The result for valid messages is to forward a copy to each one of the list's subscribers" (University of Washington, 1998).

THE WALDEN LIST

My experience with the WALDEN list, as already mentioned, is not an example of using list server software. Rather, it exemplifies what can be accomplished using only the distribution list capability of most electronic mail software, even though the process does incorporate tasks that would have also been necessary with the use of list server software.

At the semi-annual dinner of WALDEN at the 1994 Midwinter

Conference of the American Library Association (ALA), I volunteered to manage the group's mailing list, which at the time was handled entirely via surface mail. (An earlier round of trying to make the mailing list electronic failed because, at the time, having an e-mail address was not as common as it is today.) I was given a word processing disk with files containing the most up-to-date mailing list and address labels. The WALDEN membership in January 1994 was just over 130 members, and the group itself was eleven years old. Now, five years later, the list of 172 names (as of August 3, 1998) is maintained only in electronic form for distribution purposes, and WALDEN has its own Web site as well (www.together.net/~kborei/walden.htm).

A Brief History of WALDEN

"In 1976/77 eight of the 81 [Association of Research Libraries] directors were women. In 1995/96, 41 of the 101 directors were women, a significant gain but well below the ratio of women to men in the field" (Hildenbrand, 1997). Over lunch on the San Antonio Riverwalk at the 1983 ALA Midwinter Conference, Susan Brynteson and Lou Wetherbee, at the time new directors at the University of Delaware and George Mason University respectively, noted that women academic library directors were not only still few in number but also had different outlooks and challenges from their even fewer predecessors. This revelation led the two directors to form the WALDEN group (Brynteson, 1997). "WALDEN originally was intended for those women who direct libraries at academic institutions having an enrollment of 10,000 or more students; but today, women library directors at four-year academic institutions of all sizes are invited to join . . . . The group has no official affiliation whatsoever, it has no officers or other structure, and depends entirely on volunteers to organize the dinners and to maintain the mailing list of 'members'" (Borei, 1998).

For the first six years, the WALDEN group (then only a couple of dozen strong) met once a year for two-day retreats to discuss professional issues that directly concerned women directors of large academic libraries. Since 1991, as the group has grown, some members have met for dinner at ALA conferences. Typically, dinner is arranged by a WALDEN volunteer from the conference host city, and each dinner attracts approximately thirty women; many of them who have attended before and who continue to value the unique informal networking that these occasions provide.

MAINTAINING THE WALDEN LISTSERV

Again, the WALDEN listserv is not a typical server-handled electronic list. Rather, it remains primarily a one-way distribution medium, an

electronic alternative to the U.S. Postal Service, and an extension of my own e-mail address file. In fact, it could be called a "distribution" list as opposed to SWEDE-L being "interactive" (McMillan, 1997). I perform all the maintenance of the WALDEN list as well as any message distribution. In the future it might be possible to change the nature of the WALDEN list to a discussion format using a listserv. Meanwhile, support for the discussion-list concept already exists among WALDEN participants:

> I definitely think a WALDEN discussion list would be a good idea. . . . There may be an appropriate discussion list for library directors out there, but I'm not on it if there is. I used to subscribe to LIBADMIN, but it had too [much] . . . stuff I wasn't interested in, so I stopped monitoring it. The focus on academic libraries (and limit to directors only) that we could offer thru a WALDEN list would be very useful, I think. (D. C. Masters, personal communication, December 9, 1998)
>
>   I would be interested in seeing the list expanded to a discussion list at some point in the future. Traffic might be light and/or sporadic, but I think it is a group I would go to first for responses to questions/problems/issues. (L. S. Sherby, personal communication, December 15, 1998)

Keeping the list participants' electronic addresses current is a task that would need personal attention even if a list server were handling the WALDEN list. The address management work has not been incidental, especially since dropping someone from the list is not a casual option. Another problem is that participants fail to inform me when their e-mail addresses change. Thus, when I send out a mailing, I get back as many as half a dozen "error" messages, and these are not always easy to decipher or to correct. I have done some educated guesswork, some detective work (with more and more academic institutions developing informative Web sites, the detecting process has recently become much easier), and intermittently, I send a message to the list asking, "do you know this person's correct e-address?" (usually someone does). As a result, only a few women have inadvertently disappeared from the list in the last five years.

In spring 1998, I decided to display the WALDEN address list on a Web page (Borei, 1998a). In preparation for this, I re-confirmed each entry, including any information to which error messages would not alert me (full titles, institutions, and telephone numbers). Subsequently, I have received reports that WALDEN members have used this Web list to find specific directors, to keep up with professional appointments, and so on.

In part because of the WALDEN Web site, though also by word-of-mouth, more women directors are becoming aware of WALDEN's exist-

ence and of its networking possibilities. The semi-annual dinners re-
main the group's most significant general activity at the moment. Al-
though there has been some talk of, and enthusiasm for, resuming the
early retreats, a more common response to that idea has been a regret-
ful, "it would be too expensive."

The principal use of the mailing list is to publicize WALDEN. An
additional, if infrequent, use has been for the posting of job vacancies of
potential interest to the membership—that is, for library directorships
and similar-level positions. We have agreed that the list is not to be used
for commercial purposes or for purposes that are served by other
established vehicles. In this way, the list facilitates the broader benefits
that the participants believe they gain through WALDEN:

> One of the great benefits of WALDEN to me has been the network of
> colleagues that I feel I can approach with a connection, even though
> we have never met. As an example, when we hired our new Provost/
> VPAA, to whom I reported in fall 1996, I contacted the library direc-
> tors from the two previous institutions where he worked. One of
> them was a WALDEN person, so it was easy to send her a message
> with that context as a way of introducing myself and asking her about
> working with him/reporting to him.

> I also have used the list of "Words to the Wise from the WALDEN
> Women" several times—with a library school course in management
> that I taught as a part of a one-half day retreat I did with the division
> heads in our library. Sharing experience is really helpful to a new
> director and to others in leadership/management roles in the orga-
> nization. I think the WALDEN dinners are a great networking activ-
> ity and especially helpful to new and acting directors. I haven't found
> a natural forum for directors to find one another at ALA . . . . It's
> really helpful to touch base with counterparts across the country and
> talk about the current issues that are taking our time and attention,
> e.g., assessment, accreditation reviews, student learning outcomes,
> information competence/literacy, technologies, etc., and get advice
> from colleagues. (D. C. Masters, personal communication, Decem-
> ber 9, 1998)

> I have found Walden very helpful for networking. It has been impor-
> tant to me as a new library director to find like folks to talk about
> issues . . .on a personal level. It's a great group of people and it's
> nice to meet colleagues from parts of the country that I might not
> otherwise run into. (L. S. Sherby, personal communication, Decem-
> ber 15, 1998)

> I read your e-mail this morning and it caused me to reflect . . . on the
> early days of WALDEN. Years ago, when Susan Brynteson and I
> thought it would be a good idea to convene women directors, it was
> because we thought the younger among us could benefit from the
> skills and experiences of older directors. I think we also felt that
> there was a paucity of informal networking opportunities for women
> in the professional organizations. So we launched the early WALDEN

> get-togethers as an experiment to determine if there was either a
> need or an interest for such a group. Time seems to bear out that
> there was a felt need.
>
> For me personally, WALDEN was rewarding . . ., and I benefitted
> professionally and personally. I was able to call on others for ideas
> and support of an informal nature. Perhaps for me, one of the best
> things that happened as a result of WALDEN was making new friends
> that I might not otherwise have met. (Wetherbee, 1998)

A unique use of the WALDEN list occurred in March 1997 when I
posted Janice Kirkland's e-mail containing her "Women Director Career
Factors One-Minute Survey." Kirkland asked that the survey be posted to
the list in the hope that responses would provide an encouraging ending
to an article in process, and I deemed this to be an appropriate use of the
list.

Kirkland instructed WALDEN members to: "Please mark the three
(3) [of the eleven provided] most important factors in your career ad-
vancement 1, 2, and 3. Hard work is assumed and so is not listed." Forty-
five percent of WALDEN participants responded, and the results were
included as part of Kirkland's subsequent paper, "The Missing Women
Library Directors: Deprivation versus Mentoring":

> The . . . survey was intended to seek career factors that women direc-
> tors had found most valuable in their advancement—factors that
> would be the reverse of deprivation and the glass ceiling. . . . The
> question was "What are the three career factors most important in
> your rise to a directorship?"
>
> Of the 135 [WALDEN] members, 61 responded . . . . The five
> factors most frequently chosen . . . were mobility (34), mentors (25),
> academic majors/degrees (21), professional organizations (20), and
> tenacity/perseverance (19) [informal networking, such as through
> WALDEN, was chosen fifteen times]. The three least-often selected
> factors were technology (10), role models (7), and publication (4)
> which seems surprising in view of the widespread pursuit of technol-
> ogy and the continuing stress on publishing in academe. . . . Several
> directors noted that all or most of the factors were important, and it
> was difficult to choose only three. Therefore, some survey responses
> should be regarded as approximate, but the gap between those most
> chosen and those least chosen was wide and clear. (Kirkland, 1997)

In an e-mail to me, Kirkland observed that, had it not been for the
existence of the WALDEN list, she would never have been able to con-
duct the research for this second part of her paper in a timely and afford-
able manner. That is to say, she would not have been able to conduct the
research at all (Kirkland, 1998).

In a different vein, on September 21, 1998, I suddenly and uncer-
emoniously found myself without a job, the position of Director of Li-

brary and Information Services at Trinity College of Vermont having been eliminated. That day the list served a personally gratifying purpose for me, in that I was able quickly to send a message to the WALDEN list describing what had happened, something which I could do on that list only because I am the list owner. In return, several supportive responses from my peers were received. It would of course be true to say that the elimination of the library director position from any academic institution is a matter of general professional interest but, while that is a valid point, I must admit that my personal interest at that moment outweighed my professional concerns. For me, this particular communication was my biggest reward to date for managing the WALDEN list.

In summary, I first volunteered to manage the WALDEN list (then only in print) because there was a need for "someone" to do it and also because taking on the list offered an opportunity to establish myself with that group (an objective which I have very much accomplished). I moved the list to electronic format out of laziness as much as anything (easier to dispense information). The Web pages were created because I enjoy creating them and, with every new Web page, I learn more about the Web's possibilities. The overall benefit is that I truly believe that I am making a contribution to my profession and in an area of the profession that strongly matters to me.

SWEDE-L DISCUSSION LIST

My involvement with SWEDE-L is quite different from my WALDEN role and not just because it is more of an avocation than a direct contribution to librarianship. However, the SWEDE-L experience is described here because it is a list managed by a list server in addition to being open, interactive, and unmoderated.

With SWEDE-L, I began several years ago as a primarily noncontributing subscriber to a list that appealed to me because of my Swedish background. Then, in February 1998, a call was posted on the list for a ubiquitous "someone" to do a Web-based FAQ page (Frequently Asked Questions) for the list, and I volunteered "if no-one else comes forward." No one else did.

To create the Web pages, I worked (on my own time) with the other three members of the SWEDE-L management team (Mike Andersson at the University of Washington in Seattle, Patric S. Lundberg at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and Megan Lynch in the commercial sector), none of whom I have ever met or had, at that time, even talked to on the telephone. From them and others I received electronically a number of very useful ideas for, and feedback on, my various drafts of what has grown into an extensive site of multiple pages. This site is used and not just by SWEDE-L members. (In fact, I suspect that list members

themselves on the whole still prefer the online discussion for which they
joined the list to begin with, even if that means that almost every topic is
in some way re-discussed at regular intervals.)

WHAT IS SWEDE-L AND WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

SWEDE-L is run using ListProc server software mounted at the Uni-
versity of Washington. As is true for all mailing lists, and as is also true for
WALDEN, participation on SWEDE-L is bound by an explicit list pur-
pose and by certain rules and expectations. To illustrate a more formal
statement than WALDEN's of a list's purpose and rules, the following
repeats some of the language that I compiled from various sources for
the SWEDE-L list FAQ:

> This is a mailing list for people with any sort of interest in Sweden. It
> is a fairly informal gathering place where we can share news, ques-
> tions, information, thoughts, and ideas about Sweden, its culture, its
> relationship with the rest of the world, and anything else Sweden-
> related we might wish to talk about such as Swedish food. . . . The
> language on the list is primarily English, and knowledge of Swedish
> is not necessary.
>
> The list was started in April 1994 by Jonas Andersson, then at Cen-
> tral Michigan University. The number of subscribers well exceeds
> 300 worldwide though most membership is concentrated in the
> United States and Sweden.
>
> Like every e-mail list in existence, you should expect to get
> everyone's opinion on a subject that you bring up, regardless of
> whether you actually asked for it . . . . Also, remember that a fairly
> large contingency of SWEDE-L subscribers are communicating in
> their second language; and misunderstandings and offending state-
> ments may well be explained easily if this fact is considered.
>
> All Swede-L list participants are expected to observe the basic list
> rules and courtesies [including staying on topic, not posting com-
> mercial messages, and not forwarding "spam" such as chain letters].
>
> Although a number of new subscribers are added each month,
> others unsubscribe, with a net effect of a relatively stable subscriber
> total over the years since May 1995. There seems to be no correla-
> tion between specific discussion topics and unsubscription rates.
> There does seem to be a link between list volume and the number of
> people who leave ("too many" messages at one time causes people to
> unsubscribe). . . .
>
> SWEDE-L is not a moderated list in the sense that the list owners
> see messages before they are posted (they do not). They do monitor
> for rule infractions and step in when rule breaches occur (Borei,
> 1998d).

In discussing his management of a different list (AegeaNet), John G.
Younger observed in December 1997 that "some members, assuming their
right to free speech in public applies also to the list, have thought they

could be rude or insulting with impunity (not so), while, at the other extreme, some members want me to censor those who post . . . silly, stupid, or extraneous messages (sorry, I like silly messages)." However, he goes on to say, as does the SWEDE-L list owner, that these situations are relatively rare and are usually corrected with a private note to the poster.

There is no question that subscribers value the SWEDE-L list, and they often say so. Three sample messages read as follows:

> By the way, while I am in the process of thanking for [the Swedish meatball recipes], I really should add a belated thanks to the whole list, not just for being a generally agreeable list, but also for inspiring in me the confidence and also mentioning emigration records. I used that info and confidence that I could actually make sense of the Swedish records to finally be able to find my grandmother's mother's emigration record from Malmö (same grandmother with the meatball recipe). Without this list, I would not have tried as my Swedish is limited to what is in a dictionary and what is cognated to German. So, thanks Swede-listers! (Fagerburg, 1998)

> Hi Swede-l:ers: To me the list has been helpful in times of homesickness . . . . If the topics are boring I just don't bother reading them or responding to them. Many people decide to unsubscribe because of that reason, but then I think they miss a lot of the interesting topics that have been, and will be, discussed. Most of the time there's nice information that I believe everyone can find beneficial, when interested in things Swedish. (Pollard, 1998)

> I would just like to thank each and every one of you for the help in finding my relatives in Nyköping. Thanks to the "Origin Of The Species" and some thorough readers, I have located three cousins alive and well in Nyköping and Norrköping. When I joined the "List" I thought I would learn about Sweden and the customs of my grandfather's country. I had no expectations of finding relatives still alive. What joy you all have brought to me! Thank you again. I only wish that all of you searching for lost relatives or information on family genealogy will be blessed as I have. (Anonymous, 1998)

In addition to genealogical questions and food discussions, participants also commonly ask, and receive responses, about learning the Swedish language; about travel destinations in Sweden; Swedish holidays, customs, culture, and laws; and Swedish sport team performances and rivalries.

THE SWEDE-L LIST OWNER'S EXPERIENCE

Because I do not actually manage this list, I conducted a telephone interview with the current (since 1995) list owner, Mike Andersson at the University of Washington. In terms of time, Andersson thinks his investment in managing the list is minimal, averaging out to something around five minutes daily in addition to reading messages as any list participant would. The "self-analytical" investment can be more intensive, he says,

especially when he has to consider possible list rule infractions (personal communication, November 5, 1998).

Even though the SWEDE-L list is not moderated, Andersson and his list co-owner, Patric Lundberg at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, do monitor posted messages for list rule infractions such as commercialism, off-topic straying, and perceived lack of civility. Such infractions, which are infrequent, are handled through personal e-mails off list, as are commands sent to the list rather than to the server. It is Andersson's perspective that the most difficult part of this list-management task for him is being "consistent in enforcing the rules" of the list—i.e., not to be unduly influenced by something which is more a matter of differing opinions than infractions. Very few people are ever asked outright to leave the SWEDE-L list after an unsuccessful resolution process, although it has happened. Andersson observes that, although he and Patric Lundberg have never met, they have developed "an extraordinary working relationship" in communications via e-mail and, occasionally, the telephone.

A number of SWEDE-L members are academics, including several librarians and, although Swedish foods are the number one topic on the list, another recurring topic on the list is education. With this is mind, the bottom-line reason why Andersson agreed to take over as owner is that he enjoys the SWEDE-L list, and "I didn't want it to disappear" as a communication medium for like-minded individuals worldwide.

CONCLUSION

"Communication is the lifeblood of the library." (Manley, 1998)

Everything that goes on in libraries is communication of one kind or another. For instance, books, journals, and electronic databases are one-way communications by authors to people they do not know, communications from the past with the present and with the future. More obvious communications are day-to-day interactions with peers and with those whom we serve. The electronic mailing list adds to the library professional's communications arsenal a tool that distinguishes itself in its speed (instantaneous or nearly so), directness (it reaches only those who ask to be reached), and economy both in time (one message written once reaches many people) and in money (no paper or stamp costs). (Institutional computer storage and software costs are contributions which have not been calculated for this discussion, but these will be minimal in any case and, for academic institutions, this should be considered as appropriate support for professional development.)

The potential role of e-lists in academic scholarship is now being discussed in the literature and on the Web. The following is a common reaction: "Three and a half years ago 'AegeaNet' promised merely to be

a useful research tool; I thought it would be convenient only for acquiring bibliography, facts, and learned opinions. I never thought I'd find friends, fresh ideas, and an electronic extension of my imagination in cyberspace" (Younger, 1997). Kate Wittenberg (1998) reflects on the possibility of e-lists having a structured role in continuing research: "To be sure, much of the promise of online publishing is speculative at this point. Our experience suggests, though, that at the very least, scholars are enthusiastic about trying new forms of online dialogue. New technology, used intelligently, carefully, and creatively, may offer us an opportunity to define a new model for scholarly communication—and ultimately redefine the academic process as a whole."

    Managing electronic mailing lists does require some measure of time and effort from one or more individual(s) for each list and, at least within academe and within librarianship, list management is most commonly accomplished on a volunteer (unpaid) basis. However, the professional contribution that the existence of such lists makes within librarianship is significant, as is the personal satisfaction for the list manager(s) in making that contribution. Without question or doubt, electronic mailing lists have significantly enriched the lives of library professionals.

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