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1.0 Introduction

The following article only attempts to outline the major steps you must take in establishing a LISTSERV discussion group. It assumes that if you are in any doubt you will be able to obtain help on demand from an expert in your local computer center or from an experienced colleague. The expert may be called the "postmaster," the "LISTSERV owner," or something similar. If you are fortunate enough to find a helpful expert, cultivate him or her. The discussion lists LSTOWN-L@INDYCMS and ARACHNET@UOTTAWA are designed specifically to provide list owners with access to LISTSERV experts and experienced list owners (see Appendix A).

The following also assumes that you will be in charge of the group (i.e., you will both manage or supervise the daily operations and be responsible for its success). LISTSERV groups, particularly those that are moderated, require someone who is attentive (if not devoted) to these operations and an adept editor. Note that the mechanical and the intellectual tasks required by an electronic discussion group cannot be cleanly separated; the editor/owner should be willing and able to undertake both.

Keep organizational matters as simple as possible, and as loose as possible, at least until you have a sure grasp of what your group is all about. As editor/owner, you will certainly have influence, but much will be determined by the membership as a whole. In electronic communications, "vox populi vox Dei" is as good an initial motto as you can have. At the same time, total license communicates lack of attention and concern, even lack of wit. The experts, such as we have them, agree that a successful group requires an active, though not dictatorial, editorial persona.

At some point, you may want to use your discussion list as a distribution mode for an electronic journal, or you may decide to edit your discussion to the extent that it is actually an electronic journal. This option requires a serious time commitment on your part and detailed knowledge of your local mailer/editor software.

If the tasks presented below seem daunting, take courage from the fact that many novices have gone before you and survived (like

the authors of this document) not only to tell the tale, but also to recommend the journey to others with enthusiasm. Editing a discussion group (or what one of us likes to call an "electronic seminar") can be a highly fulfilling experience. Many of us think that we are witnessing, and may influence, the development of a new medium with considerable promise for all disciplines. The newness of the medium provides many opportunities for the exercise of the imagination.

Now for the practical matters.

2.0 The Steps to Start

Determine that there is a need for a discussion list in an area you are interested in (see Appendix B). There are several thousand discussion groups already established. One of them may already be fulfilling the need that you perceive.

2.1 Determine Your Time Commitment

Decide that you can commit 20-30 hours per week for the first week or two in list planning and set up. Determine that you can commit two to eight hours per week for list maintenance thereafter. Two hours per week is the minimum you will spend in maintaining an unmoderated list. You can expect to spend as much as eight hours per week maintaining an active edited list.

2.2 Learn About E-Mail and Editor Software

You will also need to be familiar with the mailer and editing software of your personal e-mail account. You must commit sufficient time to learning how your e-mail mailer/editor works.

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You can run a discussion list from almost any kind of mainframe/operating system combination (e.g., VAX/VMS, UNIX, IBM/VM/CMS, and IBM/MVS). However, there are problems unique to using each system. The LISTSERV software runs only on IBM mainframes running VM/CMS on the BITNET. If your e-mail account is on the BITNET, simple familiarity with your mailer/editor is sufficient. You will run your discussion list from your own e-mail account in interaction with the LISTSERV software running on an IBM machine. For other combinations consult with your LISTSERV owner, LSTOWN-L, or ARACHNET colleagues.

2.3 Find a LISTSERV Site

Locate a computer site running LISTSERV software (see Appendix C). Your own site, or one quite close to you, is highly preferable. At the start, you will need to have many

conversations via e-mail, telephone, or in person with your LISTSERV owner (the person responsible for maintaining the LISTSERV you will be using).

2.4 Read the Documentation

Send the command INFO LISTSERV to the LISTSERV at that site. Retrieve the documentation files and read them. This documentation may not be easy to understand, but you will profit from a broad familiarity with it (see Appendix D).

2.5 Subscribe to a List for List Owners/Editors

Consider subscribing to LSTOWN-L@INDYCMS (technical help for owners of LISTSERV groups) and ARACHNET@UOTTAWA (editorial help for owners/editors of LISTSERV groups and electronic serials), which you may join before your group is actually in operation. You may also want to join an active, well-run group, such as HUNANIST@BROWNVN or PACS-L@UHUPVM1.

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2.6 Arrange to Use a LISTSERV

Contact the LISTSERV owner at the chosen site and ask permission to use the software and disk space for archives and files. Many, if not most, sites will give you the processing time and disk space free of charge. Dependence on operating grants or being subject to other forms of supervision is to be avoided if at all possible.

If your site does not have LISTSERV, but does have an IBM mainframe running VM/SP with a Columbia Mailer and it is connected to the BITNET, then you may want to ask your computer center to acquire the LISTSERV software. The software is available from Eric Thomas (ERIC@SEARN), the author of the package. While the software is free, your computer services will need to commit a small amount of time and personnel for set up and maintenance.

2.7 Set Up the List

You will need to decide on or articulate the following issues related to setting up the list (see Appendix E for the parameters used in setting up LISTSERV lists).

2.7.1 Name the Group

It is conventional to have all names end in "-L" (as in "Ethics-L") to denote a list, but as many or more groups break with this convention as hold to it. Time spent on choosing a good name is

time well spent. Be sure to check with your LISTSERV owner to see if the name is already in use.

2.7.2 Determine the Purpose of the Group

It is a good idea to have a purpose in mind, although you should be prepared to expand or modify your original intentions, as we suggested above.

2.7.3 Identify Potential Members

For whom is the list designed? For some lists, potential members will have to be sought (e.g., through notices in professional journals or announcements at conferences).

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2.7.4 Choose the Subscription Method

Should members be able to subscribe themselves or be subscribed only by you? Open subscription allows people to come and go freely as they wish, without bothering you. Closed or "reviewed" subscription allows you to decide whom to admit or, perhaps more significantly, to ask potential members for information and to have a reasonable chance of getting it. You might, for example, ask for a statement of interests or professional biography, which can then be circulated to the membership and so help forge a community.

2.7.5 Set the Scope of Discussion

What kinds of questions and topics do you want to be entertained? In general, it is far better to have the scope quite widely defined, so as not to put many restrictions in place at the beginning.

2.7.6 Decide Whether to Moderate the Group

Should the group be moderated or unmoderated? The role of the moderator more or less combines the duties of editing a newsletter or journal with leading a seminar. The advantages of a moderated group are chiefly focus and coherence. These benefits can be of prime importance in a very active group, but moderation takes care and time. An unmoderated group is completely subject to the vicissitudes of its members, but it requires almost no attention once it has been established. If your group has a very specific focus (such as a particular piece of software) you will not feel the need of a moderator as keenly.

2.7.7 Regulate the Source of and Access to Messages

Do you want the group to be open to messages from non-subscribers? Do you want non-subscribers to be able to read the contributions from members of your group?

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2.7.8 Establish Services

Will your LISTSERV owner allow computer space to run a file server? How will you use the file server, and to what extent? If your group is to be primarily conversational, you may not need the file server for anything other than the monthly logbooks automatically kept by LISTSERV. If your group is primarily concerned with distributing stable information, you will need a sufficient allotment of storage space. Beware of offering your members too much personal attention, as this can consume much of your time.

2.7.9 Get Editorial Help

Do you want to set up an editorial board or its equivalent? Can you get others to help you (e.g., assist in long-range editing tasks)?

2.7.10 Write an Introductory Document

Write a brief instructional document to introduce new members to your group. This document should contain a concise description of the group based on the decisions you have made. It should also provide elementary instructions on how to use LISTSERV (e.g., to order files from the server). You may also want to articulate your editorial policies. Even if the group is unmoderated, you may have to intervene occasionally to guide discussion around an offensive or otherwise difficult topic, and, on such occasions, it is useful to have a statement of policy to refer to. (ARACHNET provides examples of such documents.)

Distribution of the instructional document can be done automatically by LISTSERV. Ask your LISTSERV owner to help you alter the DEFAULT \$MAILFORM so that instead of the standard "Your subscription . . ." memo, the LISTSERV will distribute your instructional document to each new subscriber as they subscribe. Talk to your LISTSERV owner and experienced list owners to learn what other functions can be automated.

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2.7.11 Establish Error Handling Procedures

Who will handle errors? Will your LISTSERV owner have time? With the help of LSTOWN-L, it is possible for you to cope with errors yourself. Error handling is discussed below.

2.8 Get the LISTSERV Owner to Set Up the List

Ask the LISTSERV owner to set up your list. Then you should test it.

2.9 Announce the List

Send an announcement of your new list to NEW-LIST@NDSUVM1 and to ARACHNET@UOTTAWA. If your group touches on computing in the humanities and you wish it to attract general attention, you should also send an announcement to HUMANIST@BROWNVNVM. If your group is related to any other existing discussions you may want to forward copies of your announcement to them.

3.0 Daily List Maintenance

The following briefly outlines what tasks you can expect to perform. Of course, different styles of management lead to different amounts and kinds of work. This work will be much easier if you have a computer and modem at home, since by nature it is easily done in bits and pieces during odd moments.

3.1 Monitoring Contributions

The unmoderated list will need monitoring for inappropriate postings and network problems every other day or so. Although you cannot recall an offensive posting that has already been circulated, you can and should respond directly to anyone who makes such a posting (posting directly to the list about such problems is considered bad etiquette, unless it is a general problem). A light touch is better than a heavy hand, but list owners/editors must occasionally take decisive action.

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The moderated list may need attention daily, depending on the amount of activity. Contributions may simply be passed on to your LISTSERV software without modification, or you can use digesting and other software to clean up messages (e.g., to remove verbose message-headers) and to package messages loosely by subject. Digesting and other helpful software can be obtained from colleagues, such as those on ARACHNET.

Depending on how your list is set up, you may need to monitor and respond to requests for subscription and to distribute the introductory document to new members. These tasks may be done every other day or so.

3.2 Dealing with Errors

You will need to monitor and respond to errors arising from addressing problems and misbehaving software. There are three kinds of errors: (a) for "reviewed" subscriptions, errors you make when you give LISTSERV the addresses of new members; (b) for subscriptions made by members themselves (e.g., illegal node ID's sent by software at the user's site); and (c) for other sorts of network failures.

Whatever the cause, an incorrect address will usually be rejected by network software (rather than simply dropped), and the offending message will be returned (usually to you, the list owner). In the beginning, you will doubtless need help from a network expert. The worst consequence of such errors is a "network loop," in which messages are echoed back and forth between LISTSERV and mail software elsewhere on the network. As a result, members can get deluged by junk mail rather quickly. Note that loops and other causes of junk mail are much less likely in moderated groups, since the editor is always there to act as a filter. Loops can still occur in a moderated group because of local mailer problems, in which case your subscribers will need to talk with their local computer services people.

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4.0 Conclusion

Even as we write, new uses for computer mediated communications are being developed. The possibilities are only limited by the imagination and confidence of the people who use the machines. The LISTSERV software provides the opportunity for motivated and enthusiastic people with minimal technical skills to imagine and create new vehicles for communication.

Appendix A. Useful E-Mail Addresses

ERIC@SEARN--Eric Thomas, the author of the LISTSERV software.

NEW-LIST@NDSUVM1--A list for the announcement of new lists.

LSTOWN-L@INDYCMS--A list for the sharing of information between LISTSERV list owners.

HELP-NET@TEMPLEVM--A list for the discussion of common e-mail problems.

ARACHNET@UOTTAWA--A list for owners of academic discussion lists and editors of electronic serials.

Appendix B. How to Obtain a List of Discussion Lists

To obtain a list of all BITNET LISTSERV lists with a short

description of each list, send the command "LIST GLOBAL" to any LISTSERV address (e.g., LISTSERV@BITNIC).

To obtain the "List of Lists" (a comprehensive list of discussion lists that are available on the BITNET, Internet, and UUCPnet), first and foremost, be sure that you have sufficient disk space on the computer account that you will be requesting it from since the list requires approximately a megabyte of space! To have the parts of the file sent to you (it is broken into 11 parts to facilitate sending it over the BITNET), send a message or mail to LISTSERV@NDSUVM1 with the command "GET INTEREST PACKAGE NEW-LIST."

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Appendix C. How to Locate a LISTSERV Site

Copy the following text and send it to LISTSERV@PSUVM (or NDSUVM, KENTVM, or another LISTSERV site with the PEERS database). Leave the subject line blank. Substitute your state for the word "State" in the search.

```
//
Database Search DD=Rules
//Rules DD      *
Search State in Peers
sendback print all
/*
```

You will be sent a file called DATABASE OUTPUT. This file will contain information on all the sites running LISTSERV software in the state you searched with. This information will include the name and e-mail address of the person responsible for the LISTSERV.

If your state yields no results, try adjacent states.

It is also possible to search the PEERS (or other) Database interactively. To obtain the LDBASE software which will allow interactive searching issue the following commands.

For VM/SP CMS systems:

```
TELL LISTSERV AT node GET LDBASE EXEC
```

```
TELL LISTSERV AT node GET LSUIUCV MODULE
```

The command to start the user interface is simply "LDBASE" to access your "home" server, or "LDBASE node" to access the LISTSERV server at another node.

For VAX/VMS systems:

```
SEND LISTSERV@node GET LDBASE COM
```


The command to start the user interface is "@LDBASE." This will install the required files in your directory and display more detailed instructions about the program.

Other systems may not presently access the database in interactive mode.

The Exec is self-documented, and it will ask you for the user ID and node ID of the server you wish to access, after which it will try to establish a network connection to that server's database. This may fail if a line is down or if interactive database access has been disabled at the installation you are trying to reach.

Appendix D. Some Useful LISTSERV Documentation

To get any of the files described below, send the command "INFO topic" to any LISTSERV, where "topic" is the word in the Topic column of Table 1 below.

Table 1. INFO Topics

Topic	Filename/Filetype	Description
Present	(LISTPRES MEMO)	Presentation of LISTSERV for new users
GENintro	(LISTSERV MEMO)	General information about Revised LISTSERV
REFcard	(LISTSERV REFCARD)	Command reference card
KEYwords	(LISTKEYW MEMO)	Description of list header keywords
FILEs	(LISTFILE MEMO)	Description of the file-server functions
COORDinat	(LISTCOOR MEMO)	Information about LISTSERV Coordination
DATABASE	(LISTDB MEMO)	Description of the database functions

Appendix E. Some LISTSERV List Options

The characteristics of a LISTSERV list are set in the LIST file (e.g., the file for GOVDOC-L is GOVDOC-L LIST). The options

available are described in the KEYWORDS memo available from any LISTSERV (see Appendix D). Some options mentioned in this article are described below.

Sender=[Public,Editor]

If "Sender=Editor," all mail sent to the list address will be forwarded to the person addressed in the Editor field, who can then forward the mail back to the list if the posting meets approval.

Editor=[e-mail address of editor]

If "Sender=Editor," this field is required. Only mail sent from this address will be posted to the list. All other mail sent to the list address will be forwarded to this address.

Subscription=[By_owner,Open,Closed]

If "Sub=By_owner," all subscription requests will be forwarded to the first address in the "Owner=" field (and the attempted subscriber will be so notified). If "Sub=Public," anyone will be able to subscribe to the list. If "Sub=Closed," no one will be able to subscribe to the list, though any of the list owners will be able to add new subscribers.

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Ack=[Yes,No,Msg]

Defines the default value of the "Ack/NoAck" distribution option for new subscribers. Subscribers will still be able to change the option with the SET command. If "Ack=Yes," messages will be sent when the user's mail file is being processed. Additionally, a short acknowledgment with statistical information on the mailing will be sent. This is the default. If "Ack=Msg," messages will be sent when the user's mail file is being processed. Statistical information will also be sent via messages, but no acknowledgment mail will be sent. If "Ack=No," a single message, but no acknowledgment mail nor statistics will be sent when your mail file is being processed.

Errors-To=[Postmaster,Owner,e-mail address]

Defines the person or list of persons that are to receive rejected mail for the list. The default value is "Postmaster," and it is recommended that the owners change it to "Owners" or "Owners,Postmaster" as soon as they become familiar with LISTSERV and the different types of e-mail errors.

Default-options=Repro

Putting this field in defines the default value of the Repro/NoRepro distribution option of your list to "Repro." This has the effect that anyone posting a note to your list will receive a copy of their note. The normal default ("NoRepro") means that a poster only receives a message acknowledging receipt of his/her posting.

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Recommended Readings

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