Maintaining the Radsci-L Internet Listserv: Its' Birth, Growth, Trials and Instructional Implications

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Introduction

Radiologic science educators have always had the desire for quick and accessible methods to obtain and share information between other educators, clinical professionals, and students within the worldwide medical radiological science community. The Internet connection provides the "superhighway" for this communication. In particular, "listserv" electronic discussion groups have the capacity to handle this function.

What is a listserv?

What is a listserv? It is an electronic mailing list that allows for the broadcasting of electronic messages from a central server, to a defined group of people, called subscribers. Sending your message to a single address, called the mailing list address, sends the message out to all the subscribers. The flow of messages is disseminated very quickly, and comes to the subscribers email boxes automatically. The subscriber can choose to read their mailing list messages are their convenience, replying to the message if desired. A response to the message will then get posted to all the subscribers. The messages are generally not available to the general public.

Listservs use special software, called mailing list manager (MLM) software to manage the message traffic on the server. There are many listserv software packages available; Listserv, Majordomo, ListProcessor, Listcaster and others. At its most basic level the MLM software should allow people to join or subscribe themselves, delete or unsubscribe as needed, and allow for getting mail in one long note, called digesting, versus individual messages at a time.

Listservs usually have a person called a list manager or list owner to manage the day to day activities required, such as dealing with error messages, providing assistance and guidance when needed. As the list owner of the radsci-l list, I handle the minor day to day operational and communication issues with the subscribers. The actual software applications management is handled by the college computer services staff.

Access to Listservs

Listservs can be accessed by anyone with an email account. Since email is essential free, anyone with access to the world wide web (web) using a graphical interface such as Internet Explorer or Netscape can join a listserv.

Radsci-L

Radsci-L has served the world radiologic science community since January of 1995. It provides a vehicle for all participants to share concerns about a wide variety of topics; from radiologic science education philosophies, teaching-learning styles and strategies, methods of professional clinical practice, to job postings, patient care, and beyond.

Steps to initiate a listserv

As an educator who gave birth and maintains the Radsci-L listserv discussion group, this presentation/paper will illustrate to the audience the steps involved in initiating their own discussion group. One need not reinvent the wheel. Try to locate an expert or someone who is familiar in listservs. It will most likely be the computer center systems manager or network manager. Or one can have your local Internet service provider (ISP) set up a listserv. Additionally, there are also listserv sites, such at Lsoft's commercial site, which will host a listserv for a fee of course. In general, if it is assumed you will be the list manager, try to keep the operational matters as simple and loose as possible.

♦ **Determine the need:** Check with your colleagues, locally and at the international level. Professional organizations can help. If there is no list, but a positive response is returned, then search the Internet. Several possibilities exist here. Directory of Scholarly and Professional E-Conferences `http://www.n2h2.com/KOVACS/` by Diane Kovacs Liszt, the mailing list directory http://www.liszt.com/; Yahoo's E-Mail lists http://www.yahoo.com/computers_and_internet/internet/mailing_lists/; Lsoft's CataList reference site `http://www.lsoft.com/catalist.html` ; and other search facilities may be of value. But, one needs to keep in mind that not all lists are registered. A query could also be sent to professional Newsgroups.

♦ **Arrange for a host computer site and cooperative systems manager:** It is ideal if the host site can be local. The college computer services center may be the logical choice. Discuss the perceived needs with the person who will manage the software applications. It is important that the systems person "buys in" to the project, and understands what the needs are. If there were not a local site, one would find that L-Soft Ease Services provides a quality service, for a fee of course. `http://www.lsoft.com/ease-head.html`

♦ **Obtaining, loading software and selecting a name:** Software can be obtained through a variety of sources. Some are free, others are not. The more popular mailing list software packages are Listserv, Majordomo, ListProc and Listcaster. Probably the most popular software is Majordomo as it is in the public domain, and is free. Mailing list software may be designed to run on a variety of systems, including Unix, Windows NT, and Window

95, and others. The Radsci-L listserv uses Majordomo, and runs under the Unix OS. More information, including where to obtain the software is located in Appendix A. Once the software has been purchased, and loaded on the system, it is advisable to test the functionality using a small number of users. Preferably, have a couple of users at the local site, and elsewhere throughout the country and world subscribe. Make sure the software works as desired before promoting to the outside world. The Radsci-l listserv was started using a free mailing list package, but soon changed to the Lsoft product. After the cost became prohibitive for the college, another change was made, finally resting on Majordomo. The migration to different listserv packages had some rough spots. Overall, the college, subscribers, and myself are content with majordomo at this point in time. While there may be some minor functionality loss with Majordomo compared to Lsoft's Listserv; from a cost standpoint, this is acceptable.

The list owner sets the name of the group. Try to make the name unique to the purposes of the group. Keep it simple, for it is easier to remember. Many mailing lists use the last letter in the name an L, indicating that the group is a listserv and not a web site, for instance. Hence, Radsci-L, which stands for the radiologic science listserv.

♦ **Promoting and announcing:** Once set up, advertise the list. Announce the list through Internet Newsgroups, professional journals/periodicals, professional organizations, professional meetings and conventions and through professional colleagues and friends. The Radsci-L listserv used this approach, and quickly reached a subscriber membership of over 450 people throughout the world. The discussion group impacts on a much larger number of people however.

It is advisable to register your new list. This registration will provide that listserv search devices will find your list. Once such registration site is Liszt which last advertised over 90,000 mailing lists in its database. http://www.liszt.com/submit.html

♦ **Setting management parameters:** As listowner, one must decide if the list is to be moderated or unmoderated. For a moderated list that all messages are first sent to the list owner for approval. This may be most cumbersome. However, some scholarly lists are set up this way. Other lists, such as Radsci-L are unmoderated. No filtering of content is done. Further, lists can be private or public. Setting the list to private simply means that only subscribed members can post to the list. Setting the list to public means that anyone can post a message to the list. Setting the list to private provides a more secure environment, such as prevention of spamming, and hackers sending email with virus attachments to the list.

♦ **Writing an introduction and welcome message:** Writing an introduction and welcome message is most necessary. When someone subscribes to the list, a short, one page or so introduction detailing the description, purpose (s), philosophy, goals, and a list of rules to include appropriate "netequette" behaviors is helpful. The message should also contain some simple commands that subscribers can use when communicating with the listserver. For example, the message commands to unsubscribe, get help files, finding archive files if available, and others may be helpful. Each type of listserv software is unique in the

command structure, methods of communicating with the list group and software, etc. It is advisable to mention in the document that this message be printed and saved for future reference.

- **Routine maintenance:** Much of my efforts as list owner, lies with helping people with software communication related issues. Some people forget how to unsubscribe, have difficulty subscribing or forget how to access the message archiver, to name a few. On the software application side, some individuals do not unsubscribe when they change email addresses, or change service providers. These problems cause error messages to appear in my email mailbox. Some of these things, I can handle. As the majordomo software runs on the Unix OS, issues related to the system level are referred to the systems manager.

  One helpful hint is provided here. Weekly or biweekly, send an administrative message to the subscribers. This message could be in the form of frequently asked questions (FAQ), or recipe on software functionality. It may contain helpful hints, changes in the software functionality or call attention to special concerns. Alternatively, one could submit FAQ's as files that subscribers could retrieve as needed. For the Radsci-L group, the biweekly administrative message seems to work well.

Value of Radsci-L

The Radsci-L listserv has been extremely instrumental in providing a vehicle for instructional staff, and professionals to communicate on a wide spectrum of topics. These may include instructional strategies, learning styles, questions and clarification about methodology of patient imaging, issues related to ethics, job postings, listing of radiologic science web sites, professional philosophy, and information gathering for classroom preparation (instructional research), to name a few. This rich resource may be viewed as an informal research tool. Most questions asked are provided with relatively quick feedback. Many or most of the radiologic science textbook authors are subscribers and respond to questions posed.

 While most subscribers are simply "lurkers", in effect soaking up and benefiting from discussions, there are many "regulars". The discussions can be lively, and represent diverse views. There are approximately 4-7 posts per day.

All of the messages since the birth of Radsci-L are archived on a web server, which can be accessed anytime. The archive is set up so those messages for each month are stored in a file. This proves to be of value in that a topical search can be done. The archiver can be accessed at http://wire.western.tec.wi.us/listserv/radsci-l.archive/ .

While all students have access to email, they appear to be reluctant to participate in electronic discussion groups. A large factor is time. Students are so busy trying to find balance in their lives, that listserv participation is not a priority. Their reluctance and apathy toward using listservs may also be due to the intimidating nature of the electronic medium, and the makeup of the subscribers. In an effort to reduce this anxiety, a student radiologic science listserv has recently

been set up by a colleague in Arkansas. This student listserv Radsci-S, has met with limited success at this point.

Another factor limiting participation in discussion groups may be the quality of instructional assignments given by faculty. A mandatory course requirement for my students are to subscribe to Radsci-S, and voluntary subscription to Rasci-L. Weaving Radsci-S listserv discussions into classroom discussions and have had some success. Offering an extra credit assignment related to a series of discussion group messages on a specific topic currently being investigated in the classroom has not been successful. So, at this point, the magic formula has not been found. However, even "lurking" by students may prove to be of benefit. As an aside, there is a growing trend in education to use "closed classroom electronic discussion" groups to foster student communication. This may prove to be of value in certain situations, especially in distance education.

Life cycle

The life cycle of this listserv as with many has undergone the following stages: initial enthusiasm, evangelism, growth, and sense of community, discomfort with diversity, smug complacency or maturity. Radsci-L has reached the maturity phase, with many people hovering around a sense of community.

Radsci-L listserv was the first electronic discussion group for the radiologic sciences. Now, several of the radiologic science imaging subspecialties have their own listservs. The first Internet presence that Western Wisconsin Technical College had was Radsci-L. It definitely put LaCrosse, Wisconsin on the radiologic science map. As a result, this has been positive from a public relations standpoint.

Conclusion

In closing, the personal trials, frustrations and feeling of accomplishment I feel, as list owner of Radsci-L is a mixed bag. Managing a listserv, using a somewhat limiting software package, with scarce human resources, means that much attention is directed to daily maintenance, taking on average about one hour per day. This project is truly a labor of love, as no compensation is currently provided. The feeling of accomplishment, however, outweigh the challenges. Many people write to me telling me of their appreciation that this forum is available, and maintained. Without the ongoing support of the college computer services department, this would not be possible.

Since anyone with an interest in the radiologic sciences is invited to subscribe to Radsci-L, one can simply go to the Radiography Program Website at Western Wisconsin Technical College and follow the simple directions. http://www.western.tec.wi.us/rad/ .

Appendix A
Resources:

1. A Guided Tour of the Internet
   Christian Crumlish, Sybex, 1995

Software:

1. Listserv - L-Soft sales@lsoft.com
        or see on the web http://www.liszt.com/submit.html
        runs under Windows NT, Windows 95, Unix

2. ListProc 8.2 - CREN (Corporation for Research and Educational Networking)
        http://list.cren.net/
        runs under Windows NT, Windows 95, maybe unix

4. Majordomo -public domain, free
        http://www.greatcircle.com/majordomo/
        need Unix, also Perl 4.0 or greater

5. ListCaster - Mustang Software
        http://www.mustang.com/
        runs under Windows 95, Windows NT

PowerPoint presentation http://www.western.tec.wi.us/raaschb/listserv99

The preceding information is believed to be accurate, but no written guarantee is granted.