2. LABORATORY SYSTEMS AND COMPUTER SIMULATIONS

Chaired by Margaret D. Anderson, *State University of New York, Plattsburgh*

Establishing a SCiP list for year-round discussion: Keeping the information ball rolling

SARAH E. RANSELL

Florida Atlantic University, Davie, Florida

and

MARGARET D. ANDERSON

State University of New York College, Cortland, New York

Many academic and other professional institutions are expanding their communicative range and inclusiveness in discussion by establishing Internet-based computer conferencing systems. This paper will discuss characteristics of a SCiP discussion list that could serve the needs of SCiP members, including the possibility of virtual conference sessions in 1995, a year-round discussion group, and a system for recruitment of new members.

Many academic and other professional institutions are expanding their communicative range and inclusiveness in discussion by establishing Internet-based computer conferencing systems. Newly formed discussion lists are being created almost daily, and their impact is, as yet, not well understood. Some researchers have argued that the general phenomenon of computer-based communication has changed behavior more radically than either the main-frame revolution of 30 years ago or the personal computer revolution of 10 years ago (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Mantovani, 1994; Sproull, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). This paper will discuss characteristics of a discussion list that could serve the needs of present and future SCiP members, and it will consider the ways in which SCiP might be changed as a result. The potential purposes of the list are discussed, including the possibility of virtual conference sessions in 1995, a year-round discussion group, and a system for recruitment of new members. The paper will also examine the pitfalls surrounding the

establishment, maintenance, and use of discussion lists, especially with regard to the dissemination of potentially proprietary information and the use of electronic mail for data collection in research.

One of the most renewing aspects in the life of any organization is the widespread dissemination and discussion of member-relevant information. Without a constant exchange of ideas, organizations can become static and, more importantly, not meet the needs of its membership. Internet-based computer conferencing systems can be used to stimulate discussion and facilitate input from as many participants as possible. The introduction of such systems can affect an organization on at least two levels. The first level involves increasing the efficiency of the organization; the second level involves changing social contact patterns (Kiesler et al., 1984; Mantovani, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). The first extensive computer network, the ARPANET, begun in 1969, was intended to let researchers share physical resources, but the most extensively used feature of the system was electronic mail (e-mail; Licklider & Vezza, 1978). In essence, computer networks made it possible to view people, as well as databases and processors, as resources on a network.

At the 1992 meeting of SCiP, MacPsych became the first SCiP-recognized discussion list and archive for psychology concerning the Macintosh computer (Huff & Sobilloff, 1993). Members needed a forum for discussion outside the annual conference, and the new list subsequently grew rapidly in size. The list introduced here, SCiP-L, arose out of a perceived need to expand com-

The authors thank the officers and members of the 1994 SCiP steering committee for their comments and suggestions during implementation of the initial SCiP discussion list: Doris Aaronson, Paula Goolkasian, Bill Palya, Doug Eamon, Bob Allan, Robert Proctor, Peter Hornby, Cindy Null, Drake Bradley, Darrell Butler, Michael Levy, and Ellen Rosen. Thanks also is extended to Jeff Snyder at Florida Atlantic University Information Resource Management. Those interested in joining the SCiP discussion list should send an e-mail message to mailserv@acc.fau.edu (the message should read: subscribe scip-l your name). Correspondence regarding this paper should be addressed to S. E. Ransdell, 2912 College Ave., Florida Atlantic University, Davie, FL 33314.

munication among SCiP members and is available to anyone interested in any issue regarding computers and their use in psychology.

Phasing In the System

Before a system involving all members was implemented, the system was tried out on a small scale. The first author established a VAX-based ListServ system at the Florida Atlantic University campus in Davie, Florida, and served as the initial moderator and coordinator of the system with the help of the second author, an experienced network administrator (see Anderson & Hornby, 1989). ListServ is one piece of a software package called Pascal Memo Distribution Facility (PMDf). Other packages available for list distribution by VAX e-mail are Multinet SMTP, Wollongong SMTP, and, in the public domain, MX Mail Exchanger.¹ E-mail is currently being delivered at FAU by a 6-node VMS cluster, which includes a VAX 6320, a VAX 4600, and a VAXstation model 60. The system will switch to a Sun Sparcstation soon because the UNIX operating system can be dedicated solely to e-mail. The SunSparc 1000 machine has about 6 GB of disk space and will be able to handle a vast amount of e-mail communication.

Members of the steering committee were given the ListServ notes system address and asked to exchange ideas for how best to implement the system on a larger scale. For several weeks leading up to the November 1994 meeting, steering committee members helped evaluate the system for use with up to 1,000 SCiP participants. Initial issues for discussion included short- and long-run goals of the list, sharing tips on computer use or offering a short course by e-mail, planning the steering committee meeting agenda, exchanging technical expertise, establishing an electronic employment bulletin board, using a SCiP-owned computer to run the list, availability of the e-mail list for commercial use, critiquing a survey to be sent to members, and the duties of the SCiP officers. Because the initial members were also on the SCiP steering committee, most of the messages in the first few weeks ($N = 53$) were about steering committee agenda items (43%). Twenty-eight percent were about list ideas, 13% were about ideas for a SCiP list survey, 10% were about distributing the SCiP e-mail list to others for commercial use (it was voted down), and about 6% of the messages were questions about using the list. Other issues that the list may eventually address are recruitment of new members, research funding bulletins, future goals of the organization, fine-tuning the conference experience (real and virtual), and establishing the best input, output, archiving, and organization of the list. Appendix A shows an example of possible features of the list for future discussion.

The List Before the 1994 Conference: Bringing in the Members

The second phase of development for the list included surveying the 1994 SCiP membership about their needs

and concerns for a computer discussion list. Groups of about 180 people, randomly selected from the member list of people with current e-mail addresses, were invited to subscribe in two "waves." The final sample of "working" e-mail addresses was 225 out of 367 addresses on file. Half of the first wave were asked to join the last week of October and were surveyed after about 1 week of use of the list. The other half of the first wave were surveyed at the same time as they were asked to subscribe. The remaining members were asked to subscribe and respond to the survey in the first week of November. Since SCiP members are all proficient in computer use to some extent, it was anticipated that the survey would represent a broad range of interests and levels of expertise.

Appendix B shows the demographics and responses of the first SCiP list members to the survey.

Response rate given incorrect addresses in list was about 25% before the conference. Only 68% of the current e-mail addresses were still up-to-date. About 75% of the members who responded were already on at least one other discussion list. Aspects most valuable were those related to speed of accessing solutions to practical problems; aspects least valuable related to personal use directed toward the entire list. Exchange of ideas and experience in instruction and research using computer technology was clearly the highest ranked function for a SCiP list.

Implementation and Evaluation

A continuous log of the discussion during the initial steering committee phase, and the later membership phase, was used to evaluate the needs of the SCiP list users. The authors will continue to chronicle any substantive changes in the organization that may occur in the long run. Possible changes include wider participation in SCiP conferences (including virtual participation in 1995), a larger number of paper and symposium submissions in 1995, a greater proportion of student participation, and a larger and more diverse SCiP membership base (including international participants).

Pitfalls and Controversies

Some of the largest drawbacks of the accessibility of information made available by a discussion list are the potential invasion of privacy (i.e., being deluged by unwanted mail and requests for information) and the violation of copyrights and dissemination of proprietary text (i.e., *BRMIC* articles, conference program, conference proceedings). These issues must be considered when establishing and maintaining any computer discussion list.

The problem of information use and management can be handled by a filtering system that allows list participants to request files/mail from a menu by checking the RE: portion of the file for content. The Teaching of Psychology (TIPS) network follows a similar system for limiting information based on the "re:" description of a file. The problem of e-mail as a way of collecting research

data must be handled in the same manner as any other data collection tool. Institutional Review Board approval for such surveys must be granted, which means, among other things, that the subject's confidentiality is protected. Some research suggests that e-mail as a media for data collection may yield lower response rates than face-to-face or paper-pencil surveys (Sproull, 1986). However, a cost-benefit analysis suggests that e-mail is a cost-efficient means by which to collect large-scale survey data.

The second problem is more difficult to address. Any text that exists in a traditional published form cannot be transmitted electronically without copyright permission. Prepublications, drafts, proposals, and so on should be identified as such on the first page of text. An abbreviated version of the 1994 SCiP program was sent to list members, but the entire program was only made available to those who were current SCiP members. Copyright changes have been proposed by the federal government for electronic communication, but, so far, no laws have been passed (DeLoughry, 1994). The amendments to the Copyright Act would extend the current law to cover the electronic transmission of materials. The Act would also prevent those who buy electronic materials from distributors from distributing copies of them to others.

Conclusions

Many SCiP members have expressed the opinion that an Internet-based general discussion list is long overdue. The implementation plan outlined here was proposed as a way of evaluating the impact of the list on SCiP. It is anticipated that the list will expand participation in our organization. It may also change both the efficiency and the social contact patterns of information flow. Some of these changes are likely to be productive, some controversial, and others potentially detrimental. The possible detrimental effects of a list are likely minor considering the potential the system has for promoting communication. The time seems ripe to explore these changes as SCiP anticipates computer use in the 21st century.

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NOTE

1. PMDF is distributed by Innosoft International, Inc., 250 West First Street, Suite 240, Claremont, CA 91711, (909) 624-7907. Multi-net SMTP is distributed by TGV, Inc., 101 Cooper Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95060-4526, (408) 457-5200.

APPENDIX A

Features of Future Use of the SCiP Discussion List

Examples of Electronic Services

Requests for reprints, preprints, and other postal mail copy.
Requests for federal grant funding information and deadlines.
Requests for presubmission manuscript reviews.
Gateway services and information about other lists.

Examples of Electronic Bulletin Boards

Information for graduate/undergraduate students.
Employment bulletin.
SCiP steering, program, and review committee bulletins.
Publication and career announcements.

Examples of Electronic Discussion Groups and Projects

Pre- and postconference discussion of sessions.
Virtual conference planning groups.
Conference symposium development groups.
SCiP membership drives.

APPENDIX B

SCiP List Survey Results

Respondents' mean age is 47 (80% are men). Countries represented: 90% US, 10% other (Germany, Holland, Canada, and Australia); 17 states represented. Job titles: 70% professors, 20% researchers, 10% students.

1. If you are a SCiP list member, how long have you been a subscriber?

- not a list member, 13%
- just joined, 73%
- joined in last month, 15%

2. If you are a SCiP list member, how often have you participated in the list by:

- (a) initiating a message—modal = *never*
- (b) responding to a message—modal = *never*
- (c) reading others' messages—modal = *always*

3. Indicate the approximate number of other discussion lists you have ever subscribed to that are related to psychology/computers: mean = 2 other lists (75%)

Most common lists named: TIPS, PSYCOLOQUY, MACPSYCH, COMPSYCH, SPSS-X, NEUROPSYCH, FACT-L, ED-STAT, ED-TECH, COGDOX, CHAOPSYCH, TOOLBOOK, HYPERCD, and PSYCHTALK.

4. What are some of the characteristics of discussion lists that are *valuable*? (SPEED)

—answers to concrete problems, technical information, different perspectives, real-world issues, "how-tos," user support

APPENDIX B (Continued)

and software updates, virtual user groups, course/lab software applications, idea exchange, research instrumentation problems, immediate news.

What are some of the characteristics of discussion lists that are *not valuable*? (GOSSIP)

—personal exchange to the list, vendor/commercial “messages,” “rumor” lists, those w/out RE: information, chitchat, flaming, impulsive responses, preaching, issues that go on forever.

5. Please rank the following possible functions of a SCiP discussion list from 1(*most valuable*) to 10 (*least valuable*).

Results of Ranking

1st—Exchange of ideas and experience in instruction/research using computer technology

APPENDIX B (Continued)

2nd—Software information and review

3rd—Gateway services and information about lists

4th—SCiP committee information

5th—Publication/career announcements

6th—Employment bulletin

7th—Discussion of conference sessions, virtual conference development discussion, conference symposium/paper development

(Manuscript received November 14, 1994;
revision accepted for publication February 9, 1995.)