Drinking from the Firehose / Adventures of a List Owner

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Drinking from the Firehose
Adventures of a List Owner: Becoming Editor of ACQNET
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There’s an old mountain saying my colleague Jackie related to me recently (she hears these from her father, a gentleman with impressive recall of Appalachian lore): When the “dog days” of summer arrive, if it rains the first day, expect forty more of the same; if it be a sunny day, expect a drought season. The dog days of summer around Boone have been really WET this year. With the rain has come more than the usual number of thunderstorms. As we all know, computers and telephone lines don’t get along well with lightening. Regardless of a surge protector, if the screen on my home computer starts spitting out funny little characters and I hear a rumble in the distance, I log off and unplug everything. Such an evening interruption would be merely annoying if I were cruising the Internet in search of gardening tips or bantering with a colleague. But I am a list owner now, and these thunderstorms are a real impediment to getting out the news!

In May 1994 I began editing ACQNET, a moderated list produced in newsletter format and distributed via the Internet. Most regular readers of Against the Grain know of ACQNET and many are subscribers. The idea for ACQNET was born at a Charleston Conference in 1990. ACQNET is aimed at the needs of acquisitions librarians. Cousins in collection development, serials, publishing and vending find useful information there as well.

I never in a million years thought I would be editing ACQNET. Christian Boissonsas, founder of ACQNET and a major acquisitions guru, has been keeper of the ACQNET flame since its inception. It has been difficult imagining ACQNET without him. I now realize, however, that ACQNET will likely receive more quality time from Christian as a contributor, now that he is not handling its day-to-day operation.

What is it like owning a list? It’s a big responsibility — like having a baby, adopting a puppy, or accepting a teenage stepchild into your home. (ACQNET has been around long enough now to be considered an adolescent, Christian observed recently.) It’s there twenty-four hours a day, waiting for attention. Since this is an extracurricular professional assignment for me, I do most ACQNET maintenance at home, in the evenings (often in the late evening). If there is a list owner out there who doesn’t do at least some list work at home, I want your job!

This brings me back to the problem of thunderstorms. List traffic doesn’t wait for thunderstorms, computer maintenance down time, or anything else. It arrives whenever someone feels like contributing something. There are peaks and valleys in activity, of course. Right before ALA there is a real flurry of announcements. After the summer ALA conference there is a lull, as people go on vacation. As time goes by I will certainly discover other trends.

I am constantly amazed by the increasing amount of e-mail I am able to handle. It’s been building incrementally, as I sign on to new lists, lose interest in others, and gain new contacts electronically. Leaping to list ownership, though, gives one a whole new perspective on e-mail load. Every time an issue of ACQNET is sent, I get back “bounced” issues that did not make it successfully to their destination. If I receive only ten returned issues, I consider it a good day; sometimes it’s more like twenty to fifty “bounces.”

Fellow list owners advise me not to agonize, since there is no way I can “fix” all these problems, particularly since the majority of them are caused by something on the subscriber’s end of the line. But I really want all thousand-some subscribers of ACQNET to get what they are hoping for, and every bounced message is a failure I want to correct. With time and experience I am sure I will get used to figuring out which types can be fixed, and which kinds are hopeless to unravel.

If you’re a subscriber to ACQNET or any other list, there are some things you should know so you can help us poor list owners who are laboring to get the word out to you:

1. If you have any problem or question, send a message to the list owner’s PERSONAL e-mail address. That will probably get you a faster reply or resolution to your problem. Please SIGN your message with your full name and preferably a signature block that shows your affiliation, a phone or fax number, and your preferred e-mail address. I have had people send me cryptic messages and I am at a loss to help them when I don’t know who they are! Make your inquiries to list owners rather than computer postmasters or librarians. The latter have even more e-mail to deal with than list owners, so don’t bother them unless it’s something really technical.

2. Be aware of the address you used when you originally signed up to receive an electronic publication. If you once used a BITNET address and your institution has since dropped BITNET, you have lost your subscription. This has been happening a lot lately, and accounts for probably half of the bounced issues I have to handle. Sometimes your institution forgets to tell you they are dropping BITNET, or else you somehow are out of the communication loop. Therefore, if you do not receive any issues of an expected list for more than a month, better contact the list owner and find out why. You might notice even sooner if the list is particularly active.

Related to this, if your institution changes e-mail systems or otherwise reconfigures your address, please let list owners know so we can update your subscription (or preferably, you should unsubscribe from your old address and resubscribe with your new one). I know of one place that has changed its e-mail system three times in two years! Talk about mass confusion . . .

3. If you move, retire or graduate, PLEASE sign off your lists before you go. Ditto if you have a fatal illness and
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can do so before meeting your maker — but hey, I’d understand if you didn’t get around to it. (That was a bad joke, sorry, but really, such things DO happen; we had to deal with it at my library when our director was killed in a car accident.) Library science students are particularly bad about forgetting to sign off lists to which they were required to subscribe.

4. Some systems are simply incompatible. I don’t know why. If you are having this kind of problem, we should have our systems people get together to help us figure it out.

5. If you try to use a command to change the way you are getting an electronic publication (digest, postpone, etc.) and it doesn’t work, you’ll get an error message back that includes instructions for doing whatever you are attempting to do. Sometimes these instructions are not very helpful. If you don’t get it right after two or three times, ask your list owner for help. As list owner, I receive copies of all listserv traffic related to ACQNET; if I see someone floundering nobly, I usually send them a personal message. That seems to do the trick most of the time.

Related to this: Be aware that there are two major list software applications familiar to librarians. ACQNET uses the UNIX "ListProc" (Anastasios Kotsikonas) platform and the commands are different from those used with the "LISTSERV" (Eric Thomas) platform. (The latter used to be associated with BITNET — but now is available commercially on various platforms.) "SET NO MAIL" does NOT work in ACQNET. Also, be careful to type ACQNET-L and not ACQNET-1. That little typo, stops commands from working. Also, send these kinds of commands to the listserv address (listserv@lester.appstate.edu), NOT the list address (acqnet-l@lester.appstate.edu).

Sometimes I never hear from the source of a problem, and I have to give up and unsubscribe that address. My fellow list owners advise not to indulge in electronic hand-holding; let subscribers do what they can themselves, and let them come to you if they’re not getting issues. While I agree with that in principle, I also am tempted to handle problems in whatever is the fastest, most efficient fashion.

I am grateful that ACQNET has such a steadfast following, considering that acquisitions librarianship seems to be constantly under fire these days. I am honored to have the job, thunderstorms be damned! If you have further questions about ACQNET, you know where to find me...

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