Online Scholarly Discussion Groups

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COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

and the Online Classroom

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Chapter Ten

Online Scholarly Discussion Groups

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In this chapter I discuss the context, the means of analyzing, and specific mechanisms relating to online scholarly discussion groups. In addition, synoptic descriptions of a number of specific discussion groups serve to give concrete examples to neophytes about this burgeoning area of telecommunications in academia. Technical obfuscation has been avoided when possible; nonetheless, new terms and concepts must inevitably be introduced. For some, the descriptions of two of the actual mechanisms used by scholars to communicate online (Usenet and listservs) may be particularly onerous.

The network revolution is raging on college and university campuses across our fair orb. Remaining civilians must either step aside or enlist in the ranks of the network literati. The information that follows is an invitation to the latter group to “come on down!” and is intended to give them a working knowledge of the existing systems and the intriguing possibilities of online scholarly discussion groups.

The history of prenetwork scholarship has been dominated by tongue and paper. Those still communicating exclusively by voice and ink, save the ever-present and hardy population of Luddites (erstwhile
destroyers of machinery in early 19th century England), need to understand what some of the typical network mechanisms used for carrying on scholarly discussions are and how to access them. Similarly, as talking about a subject is functionally different from writing about a subject, there are functional variations between the operating mechanisms of network communications that need to be understood.

Understanding how to use the network is a technical exercise requiring time and the intellectual ability to follow directions only slightly more difficult than a good set of origami instructions (of course, you may need a translator because the instructions will not be in standard English!). Surmounting that problem, the obstacle of identifying which among the growing thousands of electronic conversations is of appropriate interest is a more difficult matter. As inventor, editor, writer, and publisher of the List Review Service, a modest newsletter designed to assist network denizens to locate relevant online discussions, my self-anointed expertise is at your disposal.

**SOCRATES TO SHMOOZING**

Socrates's tragic failure to attain tenure from the Athenian elite attests to the importance of fully understanding the mechanisms used for scholarly communication. Contemporary scholars who fail to respect their profession's rules of communication rarely commit suicide. Nonetheless, negative consequences may still accrue to those modern thinkers who choose not to respect the unspoken professional rules of their disciplines. Famed cold-fusion physicists Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischman have been looked on with disdain as much for circumventing the traditional peer review process as for questionable research results (Cowen, 1991).

The advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC), specifically the ready availability of international electronic mail (e-mail) networks, has not yet sounded the death knell to existing scholarly communication structures and mechanisms. Neither has CMC yet created radically new conceptual means of communicating. What has happened is that the distinct characteristics of informal dialogues, invisible colleges, oral presentations, and scholarly publication have begun to merge. To varying degrees, online scholarly discussions can easily encompass the informality of a casual dialogue, the pseudo-formality of conference presentations, the social mechanisms of the invisible college, and, increasingly, the rigor of scholarly publication. The following should demonstrate, by describing these mechanisms, how this is taking place.
The oral tradition of transmitting scholarly knowledge can be dated usefully as beginning with Socrates’s Athenian school. The written tradition was espoused by his student, Plato, who passed to his students the early written versions of Socratic thought. Within this body of classical knowledge is a recurring theme of reactivity: Knowledge is exchanged among individuals who, over time, react to and refine this transmitted information. This is exemplified by the classic dialogue.

I wrote this while attending what one of my non-librarian colleagues calls the “library techno-geek conference” (Third Annual Library and Information Technology Association Conference). In this exemplary setting, the Socratic dialogue has been only slightly modified into modern shmoozing; information is, to this day, being transmitted between scholars via informal and relaxed dialogues.

Scholarly presentations at conferences serve to alert attendees to the extending horizons in their area of interest. Though tending to the informal, such presentations acquire at least a patina of organization. Oral scholarly presentations often precede the official debut of an idea in a scholarly journal.

Articles published in these refereed journals seldom surprise their readership. After all, their purpose is to officially stake out intellectual territory by stating, “I was here first.” Similarly, they serve to point out to tenure review committees how often “I was there,” as well as “Who cares that I was there” (i.e., frequency of citation by other scholars). Publication of scholarly information in peer-reviewed journals is marked by formality and rigor and is often a direct result of the informal dialogues and oral presentations previously mentioned.

Another familiar mechanism of scholarly communication involves the term invisible college, originally used by the Royal Society of London in the 17th century, to refer primarily to the Society’s lack of a campus (Paisley, 1972). Crane’s seminal volume, Invisible Colleges (1972), looked at the sociology of modern communities of scholars and indicated that informal communication of scholarly information affects publication patterns in the formal literature. The phrase modern communities must now be updated to include the new telecommunications technologies that have created online communities of scholars. Usenet and list servers are two of the dominant mechanisms used to form virtual communities of telecommunicators.

**USENET AND LIST SERVERS**

Usenet newsgroups and BITnet (Because It’s Time Network) and Internet listserv groups are types of electronic discussion groups. Both
models are characterized by being, first, an alphabet-based means of communication (i.e., information transmitted as strings of words either read on a screen or printed out on paper), and second, reactive. These electronic dialogues do not possess the immediacy of real-time verbal exchanges. Conversely, they do not have the glacial characteristics of print dialogues in the professional literature.

“Usenet is the set of people who exchange articles tagged with one or more universally-recognized labels, called newsgroups” (Spafford, 1993, p. 1). From a Usenet reader’s point of view, one must actively seek out a Usenet newsgroup, then explicitly choose to read, or not read, individual postings. Active control over the amount of messages one wishes to receive is the functional component that distinguishes Usenet from list servers, which are described later.

List servers, commonly called listservs, are (usually) computer programs operating on mainframe computers, utilizing Eric Thomas’s Revised Listserv software. This software maintains lists of the electronic mail addresses of subscribers. Electronic mail received by a list server is re-distributed to all subscribers. List subscribers are thus passively supplied with the list’s common message traffic. Such mandatory serendipity can be costly in time. The Women’s Studies List (WMST-L), for example, distributes up to 100 messages in a given week (Muns, 1992a). Individuals with eclectic interests can easily suffer information overload just by subscribing to two or three active lists. This functional component of listservs, that of receiving all messages, has been referred to as “drinking from a firehose.” This is in contrast to the Usenet news reader who “sips from a tap.”

In their functional differences, listservs and Usenet serve as paradigms for the two main mechanisms of information distribution: passive (listserv) and active (Usenet). In actual practice, listserv messages may be simultaneously posted to Usenet newsgroups; Usenet messages may be distributed transparently to listserv subscribers; private or commercial computer bulletin board messages may find their way into both listservs and Usenet. For example, the listserv LHCAP, an online discussion of issues relating to the other-abled, regularly distributes an electronic dialogue as a single Handicap Digest, compiled from such diverse sources as private computer bulletin boards (e.g., FIDONET), the CompuServe commercial service, Usenet, and the listservs. An extremely important implication is that identical pieces of information (i.e., electronically posted e-mail) are distinguished by the mode in which they are received, that is, passive (listserv) or active (Usenet). In the very recent past there were apparent differences between the intellectual component of the information streams on Usenet and distributed by listservs. Typically, Usenet was thought of as the place where all the
pornography was posted, and listservs were stereotyped as used by academics to discuss weightier matters. With the increasing overlap between the information posted on all internet systems, it is these functional differences of the distribution mechanisms that are distinguishing, rather than any previously perceived differences in intellectual content.

Posted messages in electronic forums are dangerously less ephemeral than spoken conversations. In my review of a general anthropology listserv, ANTHRO-L, I used the metaphor of anchovies on pizza to describe the spicy nature of what I found to be a fascinating range of messages. The subject of cliterectomy appeared in a subsequent paragraph along with other examples of ANTHRO-L’s discussions (Muns, 1992b). An irate reader wrote to me, privately, wondering how I could so callously insult women, circling on a printed version of my review the two elements just mentioned. Whether the metaphor was appropriate, callous, or inadvertent is not the point. Utterances in electronic scholarly discussion lists become part of a printed and referencable record. Unlike spoken words which dissipate into the air (unless recorded somehow), electronically transmitted information glows on computer video screens for all to ponder, can be downloaded to diskette, and may be part of a listserv or Usenet archive of messages stored on more than one mainframe computer. In addition, when participants can number in the thousands, the probability of extreme reaction is near certain. Protests over one’s intellectual prowess, viewpoint, political correctness, and spelling are regularly paraded before the list’s readership within hours of the original posting, unless screened out by a list moderator.

ACCESSING FORUMS: USENET AND LISTS

The Usenet universe is organized hierarchically into seven major groups at its top level: “comp,” “sci,” “soc,” “talk,” “news,” “rec,” and “misc.” Within each group chains of e-mail postings on specific subjects are organized into “newsgroups.” “Comp” encompasses newsgroups discussing computer hardware and software. “Sci” covers research and practice in the recognized sciences. “Soc” newsgroups consider social issues and relationships. “Talk” is the umbrella for endless debate on anything (focus on debate). “News” delves into Usenet issues, such as standards, hardware, software, and Usenet sociology. “Rec” collects messages about recreation and hobbies. “Misc” deals with anything that doesn’t fit within the other groups.

Beyond this standard Usenet hierarchy lies an amorphous universe of other newsgroups. For example, there are an indeterminate and varying number of discussions taking place in what are designated as
the “alt” hierarchy of newsgroups. The “alt” newsgroups pledge fealty to no creature and range from the infamous sex newsgroups (e.g., alt.sex.stories which lists pornographic short stories), to the mysterious (e.g., alt.butt-keg.marmalade), to the mundane (e.g., alt.backrubs).

Many think that Usenet embodies the antithesis of the scholarly online discussion group. However, my local University of Missouri Usenet news feed contains a number of bit.listserv.name newsgroups mirroring network listservs. For example, the list PACS-L (discussed later) is mirrored by the “bit” newsgroup bit.listserv.pacs-l. The same scholarly discussions in PACS-L are simultaneously available as a Usenet newsgroup.

Because not all Usenet locations carry all Usenet newsgroups, the perception of what Usenet is may be biased by the local Usenet configuration, as it is the site, not the individual, that subscribes to Usenet. Users only have access to those newsgroups to which their site subscribes. The idea of a “site” becomes ambiguous, however, when one learns to connect to another computer (which may have an entirely different set of Usenet newsgroups) via the offending, censoring, or deficient home site.

Usenet, with modes of access varying from site to site, is not a subscription service. It is available to anyone with a connection to any Internet site maintaining a Usenet feed and appropriate software. Lists, on the other hand, are characterized by the fact that an individual does indeed subscribe to them. To subscribe to a list, follow these three steps: first, identify the existence of a list to which you want to subscribe; second, find the e-mail address of the list server maintaining the list; and third, send an e-mail message telling the server that you want to subscribe to the list it controls.

The annotated Directory of Electronic Journals, Newsletters and Academic Discussion Lists lists 1,152 e-mail addresses of lists and their servers (Kovacs & Strangelove, 1993). More extensive and up-to-date directories of online discussions are available on the networks themselves. The Directory of Electronic Journals is, in fact, a product of network sources. These online sources are of limited utility because the people who need them the most are those who do not have access to, or experience with, computer networks. The printed Directory of Electronic Journals (or any similar publication) is absolutely essential to the neophyte network participant.

Subscription requests to servers are usually sent as e-mail messages in the form:

To: LISTSERV@NODENAME
SUBSCRIBE listname yourfirstname yourlastname
For example, if John Doe wishes to subscribe to the aforementioned L-HCAP list, he would look up L-HCAP in the Directory of Electronic Journals and would find the BITnet address to be LISTSERV@NDSUVM1. Next, Mr. Doe could send an e-mail message to LISTSERV@NDSUVM1 telling the listserv program to register him on the subscription list for L-HCAP. An example of his request would look like this:

To: LISTSERV@NDSUVM1
SUBSCRIBE L-HCAP John Doe

The sender’s e-mail address is automatically included in any outgoing message, thus, LISTSERV@NDSUVM1 automatically “knows” where to send L-HCAP traffic. “John Doe” is how the program will address this subscriber in messages sent to and from the list.

One does not subscribe to the server, rather, the server is a gatekeeper that processes requests for addition to, or deletion from, the list. A common error is when requests to unsubscribe are sent to the list address, instead of to the server address. If a list is unmoderated, such messages of one’s inadvertent ignorance are then forwarded to all list subscribers.

E-mail is the primary method used to read and contribute to online discussions, thus, there is a premium on knowing a discussion group’s electronic location. E-mail address conventions, however, are light years beyond the scope of this essay. In-depth analyses of network mail pathways give new meaning to the word byzantine. The brave, or masochistic, are directed to Frey’s !%©, A Directory of Electronic Mail Addressing and Networks (1991) and LaQuey’s The User’s Directory of Computer Networks (1990) for some painfully thorough explanations and listings of network pathways and their corresponding e-mail address conventions. Even though LaQuey’s and Frey’s books are both extremely well written, the technically faint of heart are warned to stay away. Personal experience tells me that the most efficient way to solve most e-mail address problems is to contact local network support staff. And the most sure way of finding out someone’s email address is to ask them.

Many list owners set up their lists to automatically send introductory messages to new subscribers explaining in detail their editorial policy, how to communicate with their lists, general network e-mail etiquette (called netiquette), and how to obtain further documentation. Subscribers unafraid to actually try some of the directions in these introductory messages will experience a cascade effect. For example, the introductory material to list PACS-L explained to me, in plain English, how to obtain the text file LISTDB MEMO. LISTDB MEMO explained how to search the message archive files of a list. Searching the archives of list PACS-L taught me how to do an “anonymous FTP.” Using anony-
mous FTP (File Transfer Protocol) obtained the online version of *Zen and the Art of the Internet* (Kehoe, 1992), which directed me to further sources of information obtainable through networked computers.

**DATABASES OF MAIL**

Most scholarly discussion lists maintain archives of their e-mail messages. These databases of mail represent unique information resources. In practice, I have searched library-oriented discussion lists for comments on software and hardware that the library may be planning to purchase. A mathematician colleague recalled a mention of an obscure proof months ago on the mathematics list, NMBRTHRY, and a search of the list's archive of messages easily turned up the relevant citation. I regularly search list archives to determine a list's overall personality by inspecting retrieved index files. Index files contain single subject lines written by each message's author when the message was posted.

The scholarly value of these archives is still unproven as their prevalence and existence are relatively new. Further, wide variation exists in the availability of archives, as well as the means by which they may be searched. The subtle, yet critical issues of bibliographic control, future availability, and copyright are also unresolved. Nonetheless, these archives exist, giving subscribers access to more than just the passing current of messages. Online scholarly discussions are a matter of record.

**ANALYSIS OF FORUMS**

Librarians constantly evaluate information sources in order to filter out the noise of undifferentiated information. The basic question about any information source is "what good is it?" A variety of procedures and tools have evolved over time and have been used by information professionals, such as librarians, to deal with the glut of all possible information that could be made available to one's clients. I, and other individuals responsible for developing accessible information resources, spend a good deal of time reading reviews in order to identify possible useful sources. Certain evaluative tools are published solely to satisfy that need. No individual can examine all items, so such information leverage tools are necessary (e.g., *Choice*, Chicago: American Library Association, which annually reviews approximately 6,000 reference books). Books and journals are no longer the only types of items being evaluated by
such tools. Increasingly, reviews of nonprint items, such as compact disc (CD-ROM) and online databases, have become more prevalent.

When it is practical, prospective additions to any information resource pool are examined firsthand. The reference department in which I work tested 21 CDROM products last year alone. Properties considered in examining possible additions to a collection include an item’s format, structure, language, style, usability, source, intended audience, applicability to institutional mission, and cost.

It was a simple conceptual leap for me to apply my librarian training, as an evaluator of information resources, to electronic discussion lists. Thus was born the List Review Service, an irregular periodical, fee-free, online only publication, combining the elements of book and restaurant reviews. As a restaurant reviewer, I enter a list through the open network door, look at its offerings, sample its wares, make notes, then broadcast to my subscribers my impressions of the experience. As a book reviewer, I apply the rigor of professional librarianship to analyze the list’s possible information utility. My intent is to give potential subscribers enough information to determine whether or not to subscribe to the list, without having to use their own time to discover that for themselves.

The basic information within each review is divided into two broad components: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative components consist of a prose description of the list as well as suggested uses for it. The quantitative elements describe the level of message traffic over time and give the ratio of queries to nonqueries. This latter statistic was implemented as an attempt to objectively describe a list’s usefulness. Ideally, each posted question would receive an answer. A superior scenario would have multiple answers for each question. A list bogged down with many queries and few responses may not be of much use. The relevance of this statistic is determined by the reader of the review.

The methodology used for a list review has evolved with each published issue. There are no other established processes to specifically evaluate these new sources of information. In a sense, more than mere text needs to be evaluated. Lists are not just packets of messages; they are also communities of individuals dynamically producing those packets. Because of this dynamic nature, the problem of creating classification schemes for discussion groups is intriguing. In most cases, a listserv or newsgroup self-classifies itself by simply stating its intended subject area and audience. Alternatively, classification by an external analyst is usually something like the methodology of simple human judgment as employed in the Directory of Electronic Journals (Kovacs & Strangelove, 1993, p. 85). This should not be seen as a failing of that work, but as a signal judgment on the ambiguity inherent in classifying discussion
groups. The entire idea of an “online scholarly discussion group” begs for a discussion on the definition of the problematic term scholarly.

Discussion groups can be more easily classified by how they function. For example, a list may be moderated or unmoderated. The degree of moderation varies among individual moderators, but the idea of moderation at least implies human control over message traffic with some sort of message filtering taking place. The level of message traffic can also be used to functionally classify discussion groups. Rather than use terms such as heavy or light message traffic, in the List Review Service I simply post the number and length of all messages for a given time period, and once again rely on the reader’s judgment to determine its importance.

There are other existing analytical methods that can be applied to the list evaluation process. Forum analysis, for example, appears to be a useful concept for analyzing and describing online scholarly discussion groups. “I believe we need to develop audience heuristics that begin by placing the writer and audience on a different relational footing altogether: that begin by guiding the writer toward interaction with (not control over) audience” (Porter, 1992, p. 142). Electronic forums epitomize the interaction between writer and audience because they are, in essence, interchangeable. Forum analysis incorporates the description of an audience, the background of the forum, and the conventions by which communication takes place into a single evaluative statement.

Some lists require biographical sketches as a precondition for subscribing, such as the Library Research List (LIBRES-L). Such databases of biographical information could be used as an element of forum analysis in classifying the list by describing the subscribers. Orwellian “Big Brother” considerations aside, the assumptions are, first, that no one is lying (a risky assumption when the only clues one has is ASCII text), and, second, that knowing who the contributors are validates the information in a scholarly discussion. One of the inherent charms of most online scholarly discussion groups is that one need not be a card-carrying academician to contribute. Conversely, erudite academics judged solely by their posted e-mail messages can appear to be idiots. Heavens! Is it who we are? What we say? Or how we say it?

WHAT’S OUT THERE?

As of February 10, 1994, 4,615 Listservs were known to the network backbone server LISTSERV@UBVM. The Directory of Electronic Journals publishes a list of 1,152 discussion groups “of interest to scholars” (Kovacs & Strangelove, 1993). To date, I have disseminated 25 list
reviews. Even though user-friendly network software, with intriguing names like “Gopher,” “Archie,” and “Veronica,” is evolving to lead prospective users to online scholarly discussion groups (among other network resources), most participants find their way to relevant lists by word of mouth. In most cases, that mouth is online! The next section describes some of the sources that I have found particularly valuable for uncovering other, more discipline-specific online discussions.

The most useful online discussion groups for this purpose tend to be either in the field of information science/librarianship or communication studies. The librarian lists generally emphasize finding, evaluating, organizing, and disseminating what is out there. The communication studies groups tend to be best at exploring the processes of online communication, both philosophical and technical. Such generalizations have led to simplification of the coverage described in the following lists, indicating a narrower coverage of subject matter than actually occurs.

**Public-Access Computer Systems (PACS-L)**

The subject material covered by all of the other sources enumerated has been, or will be, covered by PACS-L. PACS-L, with more than 7,800 subscribers in 66 countries, is a forum for discussing the practical and theoretical issues surrounding the supplying of public access to electronic information resources. If any discussion group could be called “The Librarians List,” it would be PACS-L. Although it is moderated (i.e., messages are filtered by one or more list editors based on explicit submission guidelines), after two years of subscribing I still find myself frustrated by the amount of noise (postings irrelevant to the stated list topic) on this list. Its true value lies in that. Because everyone “knows” that PACS-L is such a monolithic list, it inadvertently serves as a virtual clearinghouse for information on the rest of the network. Most of what I have learned about cyberspace can be traced, at least indirectly, to PACS-L.

PACS-L consistently draws one’s attention to new lists, online directories, library catalogs, archives, software, information and library-related legislation, awards, conferences, books, problems, and philosophies. It is this wide range of material that makes PACS-L most valuable for the neophyte. Equally worthwhile are the conversations themselves, among mostly information professionals, about the theory, problems, and resources relating to public access. PACS-L also disseminates several online publications; one of which, *PACS Review*, is a peer-reviewed journal covering library science research results and issues.
The Communication Institute for On-line Study (CIOS)

CIOS maintains the online mother lode of network communications studies information via its Comserve server. Online documentation cites annual statistics of upwards of 300,000 Comserve commands from more than 25,000 users in over 47 countries.

Instead of lists, Comserve maintains 27 "Hotlines" covering distinct subject areas, such as mass communication (MassComm), communications in the health fields (HealthCo), computer-mediated communication (CMC), communications research methods (Methods), and so on. Like PACS-L, this breadth of subject matter makes Comserve another appropriate first stop for a beginner. Unlike PACS-L, the amount of information one receives can be ameliorated by selecting only a few Hotlines. A specific Hotline, Intercom, serves as a means of communicating common information to all Hotline subscribers.

New subscribers to Comserve Hotlines automatically receive a text file called STARTER KIT, which is the best introductory "how to" information I have ever received online. The STARTER KIT file explains how subscribers with e-mail accounts on VAX or CMS machines can obtain and use the EASYCOM software for those platforms. EASYCOM, a menu-driven interface for interacting with Comserve, makes searching for archived messages, retrieving files, and getting help a matter of choosing the appropriate menu item, requiring only that one respond to plain language prompts. The term plain language is used because EASYCOM can be configured to speak English or Spanish.

Interpersonal Computing and Technology List (IPCT-L)

IPCT-L's primary focus is on ideas. The questions—"What good is it?" "How good is it?" and "Why is it good?"—are rigorously explored by this list. As this list concentrates on the interaction between humans and technology, it serves to present, and in most cases clarify, network communication issues. In so doing it regularly points to, and extracts from, other lists that explore narrower viewpoints (e.g., copyright issues in the electronic environment).

This list's moderated dialogues are some of the most cogent and lively that I have encountered. The personality of the list is extremely civilized, which is not to say there are no sparks. Advanced communication theorists regularly exchange ideas with nuts-and-bolts educators, with the reader left to determine the value of the exchange.

Almost all lists explore these same issues of humans interacting with technology, but usually diffusely and only in passing. I have
dubbed this the "look at what we are doing and isn’t it neat" phenomenon. IPCT-L's explicit focus on such concerns makes it an excellent tool to help new networkers learn in a more coherent manner about the overall issues of the academic network environment.

**Electronic Journals List (VPIEJ-L)**

This technically oriented list provides a gateway to a discussion of the problems, and requisite resources, concerning online electronic journals (e-journals). VPIEJ-L points to e-journal locations and explains how they can be obtained. VPIEJ-L expounds on subjects such as e-journal format, the implications and appropriateness of using specific formats (e.g., ASCII, Postscript, TEX, SGML), and the issues of maintenance and dissemination of e-journal collections.

**Reference Librarians List (LIBREF-L)**

The policy of LIBREF-L is not to be an online reference assistant. Rather, LIBREF-L is the place to go to eavesdrop on the shared experiences and discoveries of reference professionals. Reference librarians are very good at uncovering things. This is the list that points to such discoveries.

As the list attuned to my specific profession, this is the one in which the List Review Service is regularly posted. I hesitate to recommend that nonlibrarians subscribe, due to heavy levels of message traffic (caveat emptor!), but LIBREF-L regularly receives announcements cross-posted from other sources of "things" that are available on the network. Notification of the availability of full-text, public domain works, new e-journals, data repositories, and network aids regularly debut on LIBREF-L.

**SUMMARY**

I have found the five discussion groups listed to be of great and immediate practical value for the task of harnessing the torrent of information generated by the huge numbers of discussion lists. PACS-L and Comserve are used as broad, interdisciplinary, general awareness tools. IPCT-L serves to keep one aware of people-oriented network issues. VPIEJ-L works as a resource for discussing technical issues. LIBREF-L seems to be best at pointing to a wide range of useable network items. By subscribing to four of the five, Comserve being the exception, I regularly receive 50-100 messages per day.
CONCLUSION

I have covered the basic context of scholarly communication, discussed some of the means by which online discussions take place, described an existing mechanism’s evaluative methodology for online discussions, and supplied a number of specific examples of existing discussion groups. What has been covered is introductory and incomplete, but should serve as a departure point to those wishing to place the words printed here in a practical context (i.e., wishing to put fingers to keyboard).

As a reference librarian, my job requires me to continually seek out and evaluate new information resources. Individuals with specific information needs seldom have the time or inclination to adopt such a systematic exploratory approach. By doing this for them, I have become both more facile with the mechanisms for accessing online scholarly discussion groups and more familiar with the growing array of specific groups themselves. I have also become more frustrated at the paucity of activity I see in my profession in analyzing these dynamic network resources. I sense that librarians as a group are missing an opportunity to fulfill one of the profession’s traditional roles as intermediaries between patrons and information. So, in addition to being (hopefully) at least a minor education for some, this discussion ends with a traditional call for action by my well-heelèd researcher colleagues.

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