FORENSIC EMAIL LISTSERVS: THE OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE OF EMAIL COMMUNICATION

by
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The diverse forensic community is being brought together through the internet. Many debaters, coaches, and interested others are using the various "listservs" actively (CX-L, eDebate, Parli, APDA, CUSID, IE- L, etc.). A listserv is an email robot that forwards mail. Thus, when I send a message to eDebate@list.uvm.edu I send it to over 1100 college debaters, coaches, and their friends. If I belong to the eDebate list, I receive every message sent to that list. It is like every speech and debate person just got a free printing press to talk to many, many other forensic enthusiasts. This new communication environment has been a challenging one for those who are well schooled at disagreement, criticism, and disputation. For people interested in communication, sometimes our listservs have been noisy and impolite. Nevertheless, as we often believe that the answer to bad speech is good speech, listservs have become more and more important in facilitating information flow throughout the forensic community. Invitations, results, news, and ideas all circulate rapidly through these groups.

This short essay will introduce you to some of the various forensic listservs (certainly not all of them) and how you can subscribe to them. We will also then look at communication guidelines which can improve your participation in these groups.

INTRODUCTION TO A FEW LISTSERVS

There are a number of lists not in this compendium, simply because I do not know about them. Please help me construct a more complete list by letting me know what I am leaving out, contact me at asnider@zoo.uvm.edu.

HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE - POLICY AND LINCOLN-DOUGLAS

CX-L is the main policy debate listserv I am familiar with. It has been, perhaps, the most turbulent of the listservs. It now operates on a verification and "introducer" system. You need to supply a valid ID or be recommended by someone in order to be signed on. This helps to screen out false names and advertisers.

Jordan Buchanan, the list-owner of CX-L put it this way on 19 May 1998:

"In order to post messages to the CX-L, it is necessary to verify the name you used to subscribe to the list with. We believe that having a firm, real-world identity associated with each subscription to the mailing lists encourages people to use the forum in the most educational and responsible manner possible. Currently, there are [three] ways to verify your identity: 1. Simply ask an "introducer" to verify your name and e-mail address. The introducer must be a person that already knows you and can establish that your name and e-mail address go together. Here is a current list of introducers: [list removed]. If you don't know any existing introducers, you can make a photocopy of your school ID, drivers license, or other reasonable photo ID. Write your e-mail address on this paper and send it to me. Fax: (914) 271-4292 (include cover sheet with my name) Mail: Jordyn A. Buchanan 120 Spring Valley Road Ossining, NY 10562. People that verify their identity by mail and would like to be introducers, should also include their phone number. If you do this, you automatically become an introducer. 3. If your e-mail address is issued by an organization that maintains a central directory of names and e-mail addressees accessible through the Internet, simply inform jordyn@debate.net of its location. This directory can be used to verify your name."

The Lincoln-Douglas listserv is LD-L. It is a loosely structured but very active list. Here is some information from a welcome message of theirs:

"LD-l is a majordomo list server devoted to High School Lincoln-Douglas Debate. Any postings on Lincoln-Douglas Debate, or on issues relating to Lincoln-Douglas Debate, or may be of interest to the high school LD community is welcome. As listowner, I hope to take as little a role as a moderator-type as possible. LD-l is an unmoderated list. No censorship exists, messages go straight from your keyboard to the terminals of the world.

In order to post a message to LD-l simply send a message to:

ld-l@world.std.com

To add yourself to this mailing list, send the following command in email to "Majordomo@world.std.com" with the following command in the body of your email message:

subscribe ld-l [youremail@address]

INDIVIDUAL EVENTS

There is a college individual events listserv offered by Cornell University. You can contact this address to subscribe or get information.

owner-IE-L@cornell.edu

If high school students would like to start an individual events listserv they should feel free to contact the author at asnider@zoo.uvm.edu.

COLLEGE POLICY DEBATE LISTSERV

eDebate, hosted by the University of Vermont, is the major college policy debate listserv. Here is a bit of its welcome message:

"Welcome to eDebate An Email List Dedicated to Intercollegiate Policy Debate. eDebate is open to anyone who wishes to subscribe. The list is unmoderated, meaning that anyone is free to post about anything, with only community pressure to focus the discussion and decide what is relevant on an intercollegiate debate list. The University of Vermont debate program is kind enough to sponsor the list and maintains its web accessed archives. And Jamey

Dumas, now of England, is the manager and is responsible for the day to day running of the list."

Anyone can subscribe by going to http://list.uvm.edu/archives/edebate.html

COLLEGE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATING LISTSERVS

There are three in North America and they serve three different organizations.

PARLI is the listserv of the National Parliamentary Debate Association. " For those interested in subscribing to the parliamentary debate (Parli-L) mailing list … Dr. Robert Trapp at Willamette University is the sponsor of the list. To subscribe, send an e-mail to: listproc@willamette.edu

In the body, **type**

Sub Parli your first and last name

You'll then receive an e-mail with information about the list."

APDANET is the listserv of the American Parliamentary Debate Association.

APDAnet carries discussions about university-level debating in the United States. You can send a message to the APDAnet mailing list by addressing it to: apda@pucc.princeton.edu

CUSIDNet is the listserv of the Canadian University Society for Intercollegiate Debate.

How to Subscribe to the CUSIDnet Mailing List: "Send a message to:

cusid-request@anadas.com

In the body of the message (NOT the subject line!), enter the following text: subscribe yourid@yourinternetcompany.com

(Replace the sample email address with your email address.)"

One other interesting listserv is the one which serves the World Universities Debating Championship.

You can send a message to the WORLDSnet mailing list by addressing it to:

worlds@anadas.com

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT IN LISTSERV PARTICIPATION

Listservs can be very useful, allowing the easy exchange of news, ideas, and information. On the other hand, they can lead to vicious and vexing arguments, or "flame wars" between those who disagree with each other on any number of points.

This section shares some advice that has been offered by various parties.

The eDebate list advises the following:

$ Think before you post. Should your message only go to a few people, or should it go to the entire list? Can you find an answer to your question without posting to the entire list? Is this a message that you want archived forever for everyone to see?

$ Don't be afraid of posting. The list works because people post. It doesn't matter whether you coach at Harvard and won CEDA Nats, or if you've just gotten home from your first tournament and don't care who coaches at South Carolina. One of the wonderful things about the list is that anyone's voice is welcome.

$ Who are you replying too? The list is set so that most email programs default to replying to the sender of a message. But, every so often, someone manages to send a message to the list (up to 1,000 people) that was meant for a private audience (like team strategy and research assignments).

$ E-mail is a tricky medium. Just like any other medium one can become very adept at communicating persuasively, humorously, and effectively. But it also easy to misinterpret another's message or to fail to get across what you really mean. Relax and take time before you reply, and make sure you think twice about how you are putting what you want to say.

I have personally been one of those challenged by email listserv participation. Based on my personal experience (not all of it good) as well as a survey of other standards for proper nettiquette, here are some pointers which are worth considering.

1. Keep the welcome message you received.

It will answer a lot of questions and provide you with an explanation of the list's policies. Then, you won't have to ask unnecessary questions.

2. When you first arrive, lurk and learn.

Lurking is when you subscribe to and read a list before you begin to participate. This does not mean that you should not participate early and often, but that you should observe carefully how the list operates. You can learn the conventions, the characters, and the subjects involved. If you have questions, ask the list owner or someone who seems cooperative. Ideally, most of your basic questions will be answered in the FAQ. After lurking briefly, begin participating at a level comfortable for you, but watch out for becoming too involved too fast.

3. Post properly.

Learn which messages go to the list processor and which go to the list itself so that you do not clutter the list. Make sure your subject line is clear and easy to understand. If you are commenting on an ongoing thread (subject being discussed by several people over time) make sure it is identified. Make sure your subject headings are descriptive...people may decide whether to read a posting or not based on your subject heading. When you are commenting on something already said, summarize briefly what it is you are talking about for your readers in order to give them context.

4. Avoid unnecessary text.

Don't post just to say, "Me, too!" Quote only relevant material from a message you are responding to, not the entire message. Every byte you send out costs people time and money. If you have a document or a lengthy posting let people know that you have it and that it is available. Then, they can ask for it individually instead of everyone getting it when you post it.

5. Text lacks non-verbal components.

Much of what we communicate we do non-verbally, especially expression of intention, things like humor, sarcasm, satire, etc. If you intend to communicate these things, make sure to use tagging [examples: :) :P ;) :(>:( ]. Likewise, when you write a response you are not aware of how the person at the other end is reacting to your message. Thus, caution is advised.

6. Respond to people, not typed words.

While mediated by technology, we are all still human beings...imperfect, incompletely informed, but worthy of dignity and respect. Our typed words tend to be much harder edged than our interpersonal relations would be. We may respond to words instead of to people, and thus are often more critical and judgmental. Our words can be more threatening, and the responses we read can seem to be more critical and judgmental than we feel they should be. Take this into consideration. Before posting an angry message, hold onto it for a few hours and then read it again later....if it seems appropriate then, go ahead and send it.

7. There is more to do than disagree...even for debaters.

The listserv is not a debate between two sides competing for ballots and points. Because of the disputational nature of the debate activity, the focus often tends to be on criticism and disagreement. Realize that it is possible to come to agree with people who have different ideas and to appreciate constructive criticism. Do not be afraid to have your mind changed on some issue and to publicly admit that this has happened, even if you would never do that in a competitive debate. In a general forum like this we "win" when we "learn" from the ideas of others. You will not be assigned affirmative or negative, so do not be afraid to openly look at both sides of an issue, analyzing objectively arguments which are not your own or necessarily in agreement with you. Many debate professionals are proud to attempt to be objective judges in the debate round, so we should also be proud of recognizing better arguments on the list.

8. Spam NOT!

Spamming means broadcasting a message over lists and news groups to which it is not directly relevant. Examples of bad spam in our past: the cookie recipe story, chain letters, used computer equipment sales, a hoax about corporations donating money based on how many email messages they received, etc. If you must spam, prepare to get flamed.

9. Flame and be flamed.

Flaming is verbal abuse of someone. Criticism of ideas becomes a flame when it involves a personal attack on the individual. The best way to not flame is to be careful you are characterizing the idea (wrong, illogical, factually incorrect, flawed, etc.) and not the person (evil, stupid, ignorant, dishonest, liar, etc.). Flaming is part of the internet, but if you flame people expect to get flamed back. Of course, if you are a flamer, you cannot complain about getting flamed with any credibility.

10. Be nice to newbies.

A newbie is someone who is new to the internet or new to the list. Help them out, answer their questions, offer them backchannel advice if they want it. Complaining about short, meaningless posts by newbies only multiplies the problem. Be patient and realize that we were all newbies once.

START YOUR OWN LIST

Listservs can be a good way for friends, team members, league officials, district chairs, and others to stay in contact with a group of people easily and conveniently.

One way to start a free listserv is by using a service like Listbot, which allows you to set up a free list. http://www.listbot.com/

WARNING:

This article does not endorse or guarantee any service, software, or web site. Always investigate for yourself before trying anything on the internet.

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