

# OLAQ

OLA Quarterly

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Volume 3  
Number 1  
*Library Support Staff (Spring 1997)*

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July 2014

## LIBSUP-L:More than just mail

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### Recommended Citation

Kalnin, M. T. (2014). LIBSUP-L:More than just mail. *OLA Quarterly*, 3(1), 14+. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1438>

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*OLA Quarterly* is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

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Since the 1960s, the Internet has evolved into the form we know today. First it was the domain of the university and the government. Now, it's everyone's tool—or toy. Those of us in libraries have been using the Internet for years in a number of different ways. We use it to search other libraries' online catalogs; we use it to communicate with our colleagues; we use it to schedule conference meetings and plan agendas; we use it to solicit information and opinions from our colleagues about our libraries' operations. This last use of the Internet is what I propose to examine.

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## LIBSUP-L:

*More than Just Mail*

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There exist on the Internet today many electronic mail discussion lists for libraries. AUTOCAT, Collib-I, IMUG-L, COOPCAT quickly come to mind. Each of these lists has a function and each provides a forum for discussion of library issues from a specific point of view. AUTOCAT is the forum for the cataloger—all questions

answered, sometimes within minutes; Collib-I is the forum for the general college library discussion—any and all questions and problems welcome; IMUG-L and MLA-L exist for the music catalogers among us; COOPCAT discusses the benefits and headaches of cooperative cataloging programs.

I propose to examine in depth another library-oriented discussion list: LIBSUP-L. LIBSUP-L is a discussion list aimed at but not limited to library paraprofessionals, also known as support staff. It runs at the University of Washington in Seattle and has more than 1950 subscribers worldwide. The list was founded in 1992 following a request in the journal *Library Mosaics* and is likely the first international electronic mail link for library paraprofessional staff. For this discussion, paraprofessional library staff members are those who work in positions that do not require the MLS or equivalent degree. I would like to examine three points about LIBSUP-L.

### WHAT IS IT?

Besides the obvious answer, "an electronic mail discussion list," LIBSUP-L is a forum for discussion of library topics and work-related topics from the paraprofessional's point of view. As the role of library employees has changed from the 1970s, so have the needs of library staff members. This is particularly true of paraprofessionals, or support staff, who hold about 60 percent of the positions in today's libraries. In the past, these positions were usually typist and filer positions, circulation desk attendants, and pages. That is true today, but in many libraries, paraprofessionals also hold positions once reserved for holders of the MLS.

Paraprofessionals are original catalogers, section heads, division heads, liaisons, reference staff members, and occasionally library branch managers. This change came about gradually and almost by accident. It caused a need for communication among staff. This need was filled by COLT: the SSIRT of ALA; *Library Mosaics*; and other local, regional, and state organizations. LIBSUP-L was followed by ASSOCIATES, an electronic journal; LIBTEC, a discussion list in Australia; and NET-NEXUS, an Australian paraprofessional electronic journal for library technicians. There are other local, regional, and national electronic journals evolving constantly.

### WHAT DOES LIBSUP-L DO?

Since 1992, LIBSUP-L has been a discussion forum for paraprofessionals. Within one day of its launch more than 100 staff had subscribed. By day two, another 100 or 200 had subscribed. At one time, there were more than 2,000 subscribers. The number has now become somewhat stable at 1,950, plus or minus. The list gains and loses members every day. Some of the first discussions were less discussion and more venting frustrations, but by the end of the first week, the discussions had moved toward finding solutions.

Many of the first discussions concerned working conditions. The library world was just beginning to see the rise of repetitive motion disorders; and ergonomics was a topic of some of the first discussions. As libraries were seeking solutions to these problems, LIBSUP-L provided a forum through which to share answers already found. The discussions also allowed those members who hadn't heard of carpal tunnel syndrome to locate information for use in their institutions. Ergonomics is still a discussion topic on the list because it is still of concern to newer members whose libraries are just beginning to automate and connect to the Internet. Other topics of discussion those first weeks and months were salaries, fringe benefits, cost of living, and other workplace concerns. They are still discussed today, although with less frequency.

As the list grew and changed, the discussion changed. Much of the discussion has been the result of subscribers asking for information:

"The members' library is moving from one online catalog system to another – what does anyone know about it?"

"Another member has been assigned to a committee to recommend purchase of a system – please write to let me know what your system is and what you think about it."

"I have a patron who wants a children's book but has only part of the title – can anyone identify it?"

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## LIBSUP-L

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Responses and answers flood the list within hours, and if enough subscribers are reading their mail, sometimes minutes. LIBSUP-L has also become a popular venue for surveys.

Several weeks ago, one fairly new subscriber asked for information concerning the use of PCs for cataloging instead of the terminals her institution used. It seems that her library was considering the change and asked her to gather information. Between the answers from LIBUP-S and another list, she was able to have the information within a day or two. It is common to read the results of surveys taken on the list or to hear from someone who asked for specific information and is pleased to report that the supervisor was impressed with the depth of knowledge "LIBSUPPERS" have. It is also common to see a request for someone from a specific library or area to respond to the member off list. That person usually needs specific information from only that library or area. One such request was to someone from either McGill or Laval Universities in Montreal, because the subscriber needed information on a specific bill submitted to the Quebec Legislature. Contact made and information received.

It would be foolish to claim that there are no problems with the list. It is unmoderated. There is, of

course, a filter that keeps most of the spam mail off the list, and particularly troublesome addresses can be ignored. However, should a member decide to use the list to chat, the posting will reach it and generate conversation, recrimination, and if it continues long enough, a message from the list owner about legitimate topics of discussion. Does this happen often? Not often, but once started it is self-generating. Unfortunately, we have had members resign because of it. Once, new subscribers hit a large chat session and were disgusted. Someone's supervisor picked a particular time to visit the list and hit that same chat problem. However, chat and its siblings are no worse on LIBSUP-L than on other lists to which the author belongs.

### **Is It Worth It?**

Here I must plead some bias. I am the owner of the LIBSUP-L list and do believe that it is. That said, however, LIBSUP-L provides a service not only to paraprofessionals but to everyone in libraries. As the examples above show, the list provides information, a forum for discussion, and a mechanism for locating specific information. As long as it provided these services, attracts new members, fills a need for communication and organization among paraprofessionals, LIBSUP-L will be worth the financial resources, personnel and time it takes to run it. ☐

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## The MLS

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cheated. Work life can be truly miserable if you have to spend it with the wrong people.

I do view staff differently since getting the MLS, not because of the degree, but because of the lengths I went to in getting it. I expect staff members to want to take advantage of the training made available to improve themselves and improve their abilities to provide better services. And I expect them to set goals to expand services we don't provide at present. I want them to challenge me and to support me in promoting the concept of public library throughout the community. While it was a profitable experience, I know that I didn't learn enough at

graduate school to see me through the next decade—nothing on the Internet back then, or dealing with the homeless sleeping in the library, or emergency policies or ADA regulations.

### **THE MLS AND YOU!**

If you are interested in earning an MLS, use your library reference skills to look into it. The ALA can provide a list of options. Their number is 1-800-545-2433. Whether you believe in the MLS or not, reality is that the career-track librarian must have it. "ALA-MLS required" is usually the cutoff in the job interview line. The MLS does have its place – right after your name. ☐