

Network Update

Your Own Internet Listserver

by Bill Wyman,
University of Colorado—Boulder

Listservers

And what is a listserver, you ask? A listserver is an email-sending robot, a software program that sends email to a number of people who have subscribed to a list on a topic of their choice. It's a slam-dunk by this point in history that you are already subscribed to one or more such email lists, with topics ranging from raising border collies and baking the perfect chocolate brownie to spectral anomalies in high-velocity interstellar hydrogen clouds and teaching Old Norse to sixth graders. There is nothing engaging or attention-getting about listservers in and of themselves. For the most part, they just click away in the background somewhere, dutifully passing on to us one email posting after another, day in and day out.

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The chances are good that you haven't given listservers a second thought—unless, of course, you have been on a list that you wished you could quit and did not know how. This is the moment at which many a user of email, who might otherwise have lead a happy life and fared well, must try to figure out how to talk to a large system, such as VAX or UNIX. With luck, you'll get help from a Large Systems Person (LSP) and be off the list in no time. Whew. If you get deeper into email, you may eventually want to try your hand at managing your own list. Until recently this would have required that you develop at least a working knowledge of VAX or UNIX listerving programs (like *Macjordomo*) and their nostalgic command-line interface. Yikes. Fortunately, however, a dedicated Mac lover has created an alternative that comes with a name both pun-full and apt: *Macjordomo*.

Macjordomo

Macjordomo is a Macintosh freeware program that allows you to set up your own Internet listserver in a laboratory or department. Assuming you have a spare Macintosh (nothing fancy, just an SE-30 or a IICI), Ethernet connectivity, a copy of *MailShare* (or any other POP3/SMTP server software) and a gateway to the Internet, *Macjordomo* allows you to set up and administer up to nine email lists for your own use and for the use of your colleagues, staff, students, and associates. (If the mention of *MailShare* makes you scratch your head, see my article "*MailShare: Your Own Internet Post Office*" in Volume 28, Number 1, Winter 1995 of the *Journal*, pp. 105ff. *MailShare* is free, too.) There is an advantage to using *Macjordomo* in conjunction with *MailShare*. Both can run conveniently on your AppleShare network server, the same one you are using now for sharing files, printers and even dial-up access, and you can keep an eye on the entire process. You can create and manage email accounts on your server for the subscribers to the email lists you set up. For your email account holders, it's one-stop shopping on your server for all of their regular email, plus postings to and from the list or lists to which they have subscribed.

Macjordomo allows you to give your email lists intuitive names rather than awkward abbreviations. Let's say you decide to name your listserver host flteachers.yukon.edu. (I discussed how to do this in the last issue of the *Journal*.) You can then set up an email list for each interest group that says plainly what it is and will be easy to remember, like German-Teachers. The full address for this email list is simply German-Teachers@flteacher.yukon.edu. Any email message sent to that address from a qualified email address will be sent out automatically to every subscriber. You can restrict qualified email addresses just to those of the subscribers to the list (subscribers-to-subscribers), or with a few clicks of the mouse you can make the list "open" so that anyone can post a message for the subscribers (many-to-subscribers).

Customization Options

You will find many other customization options in *Macjordomo*, just like the options commonly available on large systems listservers. Not every subscriber to an email list wants to receive and read postings one after the other in real time. You can easily accommodate these folks by instructing *Macjordomo* to gather messages for particular subscribers into a digest. Then you can specify that the digest be mailed out when it reaches a certain size or at some interval, like once every week. Other subscribers don't mind at all if they are interrupted by the very latest news from an email list through-

out the day. In fact, they may insist on it, and these news hounds will keep your server hopping.

List Management Features

Managers of email lists differ in how much control they may want to exercise over their lists. At one end of the spectrum is the open list. Anyone can send an email to an open list and subscribers will get it exactly as it was written. This kind of management may be appropriate for a list whose purpose is to receive questions from a general population, such as all students on a campus, and direct them to a group of advisors who collaborate on providing answers (many-to-subscribers). The advisors can also use the list to discuss an answer among themselves before replying to the student. Under other circumstances, you may want to set up a list to which you are the only one who can post a message (one-to-subscribers). This read-only or distribution list option, too, you will find in *Macjordomo*.

An email list can be managed tightly for content by establishing a moderator. Incoming email is submitted to an email list to which only a designated moderator has been subscribed (like `German-Teachers@flteachers.yukon.edu` in our example above). The moderator reviews and edits each submission, and after it is approved, sends it on to another (unpublished) email list that might hypothetically be named `OKforGerman@flteachers.yukon.edu`. *Macjordomo* takes over from there and sends the approved message to all subscribers. For them all of this receiving, approving and resending is completely transparent. You have the same option for handling subscription requests. If you leave subscriptions open, anyone can subscribe to the list automatically by sending a simple email message. Checking a box in the *Macjordomo* setup changes that so it is up to the designated moderator to approve each subscription request. You can change these options and settings even after a list is up and running to adapt to new conditions or requirements.

Caveats

Are there any "gotchas" you should know about before you plunge into *Macjordomo*? Not many. If you decide to team *Macjordomo* up with *MailShare*, keep in mind that you will have to keep the *MailShare* host connected to the network and running day and night because email transactions never sleep. (I have included some judicious precautions you will want to consider when you run *MailShare* in the *Journal* article cited above.) However, this does not mean that you need to keep *Macjordomo* running all the time. You can fire it up whenever you want, dispense with all the submissions waiting, and then

quit. This can be very thrifty if you are reliant on a commercial service provider for your Internet email connectivity, or if they keep the meter running on your campus. *Macjoromo* can run in the background on your own desktop Macintosh, but keep in mind that it, too, needs some of those cycles to do its work, and that may cause your foreground tasks to run a little slower depending on the volume of email messages coming and going.

Availability

Macjoromo is free and widely available on the Internet. An easy way to get it is to point your Web browser toward <http://leuca.med.cornell.edu/Macjoromo> and download a copy. Setting up *Macjoromo* proves to be straightforward. Setting up *Macjoromo* proves to be straightforward, but if you get stuck, there is an email list with more than 500 members for questions and comments' at macjoromolist@afar.med.cornell.edu. For the personal touch, you can also contact its creator, Michele Fuortes, for technical support and help at mfuortes@med.cornell.edu.

Enjoy your Internet listserver! ■

Bill Wyman heads the Computing Support Division of Academic Media Services at the University of Colorado—Boulder.