

## Discussion Lists—Yet Another Way of Connecting People Around the World



As this column has mentioned in the past, one of the best parts of using the internet for research is the ability to tap into a truly remarkable community of individuals—brought together, not by geography, but by knowledge of and interest in a particular subject. One of the oldest parts of the online community is the discussion list, which allows easy distribution of messages among a collection of interested individuals.

Discussion lists certainly predate web pages, since lists are completely text and e-mail based. Their use does require some care and attention, however. After joining a discussion list, remember that whatever e-mails you send will go to everyone on the list, which can easily number in the hundreds or even thousands of individuals. I always recommend waiting at least a week, if not more, before posting to a new list: it's important to understand the culture of a list before making a fool of yourself in front of so many people whose opinions you value. Luckily, in many cases, it's possible to search the archives of lists without bothering anyone, and these archives often contain untold riches. Be sure to read and follow the rules/directions of a given list to be a good list member. Make sure you read how to unsubscribe too.

Discussion lists have several basic structures. There's a machine that manages the list, and one or more people who manage the machine. When you "subscribe" to a list, your name is added to the roster of all individuals who receive each message. When you post a question, response, or comment to the list, the message is sent to every e-mail address on the roster. You can receive each message individually or receive a single "digest" message containing everything posted that day.

The largest and oldest maritime discussion list is **MARHST-L**, which began in 1994, sponsored by the Marine Museum of the Great Lakes at Kingston. Subscription information can be found at <http://www.marmuseum.ca/marhst.html>. This discussion list is pretty busy—expect at least two dozen e-mails per day. That said, the list contains an impressive group of experts—names you

probably will recognize from your maritime library's most notable works—and searching the last decade of messages will yield all kinds of great information.

**The Gunroom** is a list loosely devoted to the works of Patrick O'Brian, but includes much general maritime content. It can be accessed at <http://www.hmssurprise.org/>, and additional archives are available at <http://mat.gsia.cmu.edu/POB/>.

**Google Groups** (<http://groups.google.com>) allows you to search through thousands of discussion lists hosted by Google, plus the **Usenet** 'bulletin board' archives. Usenet was a precursor to discussion lists and was acquired by Google in 2001. There are some one billion searchable messages here.

One of the newest relevant discussion lists is **H-Maritime**, begun at the end of 2005, at <http://www.h-net.org/~maritime/>. H-Maritime is a member of the H-Net network, a collection of about 175 discussion lists in the humanities and social sciences hosted by Michigan State University. Most of these lists are by and for scholars and faculty members, and at times may limit membership to those groups. They often include valuable book reviews, announcements of relevant conferences, and academic job postings. The H-Maritime archives are searchable through the URL above.

Discussion lists can be hit-and-miss for research. You may find mentions of resources you'd never known of before, or you may join a community where you can post questions and answers that interest you. Conversely, you may find your inbox filled to overflowing with poorly written, irrelevant, or incendiary messages. Like much of the rest of the net, you just won't know until you start exploring.

Suggestions for other sites worth mentioning are welcome at [shipindex@yahoo.com](mailto:shipindex@yahoo.com). See <http://www.shipindex.org> for a compilation of over 100,000 ship names from indexes to dozens of books and journals.

—Peter McCracken