

# A Tale of Two Networks:

*Possibilities and Perils for Mental Health*

*Internet Discussion Groups*



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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT.....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
METHODS .....	3
Subjects .....	3
Data Sources .....	3
Methods of Analysis.....	5
RESULTS .....	7
Original Goal of List.....	7
Membership .....	7
Reasons for Subscribing and Continued Membership.....	7
Content.....	8
Patterns of Participation.....	9
Modes of Expressing and Managing Conflict .....	12
The Role of the Chair .....	12
Summary.....	13
DISCUSSION .....	16
Analysis of List Dynamics.....	16
Role of the List Moderators .....	18
Implications for Managing Mental Health Electronic Discussion Lists.....	19
REFERENCES .....	22

## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamics of two electronic discussion lists: one established to promote the discussion of mental health outcomes research and evaluation and the other established to discuss the application of evaluation to issues related to mental health and the law. After a year and a half, participants in the former continued to discuss issues according to their original goal. The latter discussion list, on the other hand, had changed from being the more active of the lists to being one marked by conflict, withdrawal of participants and hardly any activity. This paper examines how usage of the two lists evolved differently because of their content and membership. And it suggests, for mental health policy makers, consumers, planners, and evaluators, how, through the use of moderators who keep discussions respectful and on topic electronic discussion groups can be harnessed to bring together diverse stakeholders into a learning environment.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a vast increase in the number of people connecting to the Internet and participating in electronic discussion groups. The Internet is the largest and fastest growing communication medium and consumer electronic technology ever - more so than the fax machine or personal computer (The Economist, 1995). Along with the increase in people connecting to the Internet, there has been a boom in the number of electronic discussion groups. It is impossible to know the exact number of electronic discussion groups on the Internet, however, estimates agree that the number is, at least, in the tens of thousands. Just in Usenet, a sub-family of electronic newsgroups, 14,000 different electronic groups exist, covering such areas of interest as environmental politics, goldfish, and Turkish culture (Furr, 1995).

In a society where people with common interests but different schedules are located in different parts of the world and in different time zones, electronic discussion groups (or lists)

are convenient mediums and tools for communicating with others with similar interests. Anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can participate in a list and, if sufficiently motivated, start one.

Moreover, electronic discussion groups can be used to solve certain well-structured, technical problems (Orlikowski, Yates, Okamura & Fujimoto, 1995). And, while they do not eliminate the need for face-to-face and telephone discussion, they can be used to prepare participants for such discussions. Finally, electronic discussion groups provide forums for discussion where none had existed, connecting participants who might never have had opportunities to interact.

This paper explores the dynamics of two electronic discussion lists. The two lists, were part of a group of four lists, labeled Topical Evaluation Networks, created to provide a forum where interested parties could explore issues related to evaluation in the field of mental health. The Outcomes Topical Evaluation Network (OUTCMTEN) was intended to be a forum for discussing "problems of assessing and analyzing outcomes of interventions aimed at improving mental health systems." The Topical Evaluation Network for discussing evaluation, mental health and the law (LEGALTEN), was intended to be a forum to "facilitate the implementation and use of rigorous evaluations at the interface of the mental health system, the criminal justice system, and the courts" (HSRI, 1995a). Both lists were open to any interested party. Neither was edited, or "moderated" in the language of the Internet. However, both were monitored by experts in the field, designated as "chairs," who were given the task of promoting and facilitating electronic discussions.

Both lists started out with a large number of subscribers and with a similar percentage of active participants (subscribers that posted messages). Yet after eighteen months, there were very few subscribers posting messages to LEGALTEN and about a fifth of the subscribers that had been there three months before had left. In contrast, total subscribership to OUTCMTEN grew by about 14 percent during the same time period, and by the end of 1995, the list was still relatively active.

Ultimately, this paper explores how one electronic group, whose members adhered to a spectrum of values, grappled with the issues surrounding individual preferences and styles vs. the stated purposes, topics, and guidelines for participation of the list and evolving norms for personal conduct. On LEGALTEN, at the core of most of the discussions was the debate around controversial forms of treatment particularly involuntary treatment. An interesting parallel discussion on the tone of the list took place during the discussions on involuntary treatment. Participants advocated different criteria for what was considered appropriate or inappropriate behavior on the list. Both discussions debated similar issues, including: Who had the right to determine what was appropriate behavior? At what point were the group's goals jeopardized by an individual's actions and who's responsibility was it to ensure the balance between individual and group goals? At the close of this paper, based on our analysis, we make recommendations for managing such conflicts and maintaining the usefulness of volatile electronic discussion groups like LEGALTEN.

## METHODS

### Subjects

The subjects in this study were the subscribers to the Outcome and Legal Topical Evaluation Networks for 1995. OUTCMTEN had an average of 418 members. LEGALTEN had an average daily membership of 298. Although there was some overlap in the membership of the two groups, the majority of list members belonged to only one of the two networks.

### Data Sources

Two types of data were collected for this investigation: (1) extensive archived textual data, and (2) retrospective interview data. It is important to understand the limits of the textual data as one tries to make sense of the group dynamics that evolved in LEGALTEN and OUTCMTEN. The archives only provide a limited view into the relationships among the subscribers since list members may have communicated with each other by means other

than the list. It is as if we studied the relationships among the participants of a large convention from the inside of a single conference room. We would be missing the conversations that take place for example, in other conference rooms, in the halls, during the food breaks, and in other conventions. The same dynamics occur on the Internet. Many of the members of LEGALTEN and OUTCMTEN subscribe to other electronic discussion lists and sometimes discussed similar issues in different lists. It is also common for subscribers of the lists to mail messages to each other privately. One subscriber from OUTCMTEN, for example, described continuing conversations started on the list at conferences or over the phone. In addition, the archives do not say much with regards to the history shared by the subscribers. In order to make up for some of these limitations, interviews of a number of participants from both lists were conducted.

### *Textual Data*

Each message transmitted via LEGALTEN and OUTCMTEN in the period from June 1994 to December 1995 was put into a Lotus Notes database. Four groups of messages were available after cleaning the data: OUTCMTEN 1994 consisting of 326 messages; OUTCMTEN 1995 consisting of 1277 messages; LEGALTEN 1994 consisting of 195 messages; and LEGALTEN 1995 consisting of 1475 messages. This analysis focuses on 1995, when the messages were automatically archived at St. John's University.

For each message, variables were created reflecting the date in the header of each message, the sender of the message, and the subject of the message.

### *Interview Data*

Data from face-to-face, telephone, and electronic mail interviews were used together with the text data from the St. John's University archives to begin to characterize group dynamics on OUTCMTEN and LEGALTEN, and to assess these lists' potential to foster discussion of evaluation issues from diverse perspectives.

The list "owner" (the Director of the sponsoring organization) and Technical Administrator of the lists were interviewed face to face. The Chair of LEGALTEN and a

disability rights activist who participated in both LEGALTEN and OUTCMTEN were interviewed by phone. All four interviews were taped and transcribed. Follow-up questions were conducted via electronic mail.

List subscribers were also interviewed. First, possible interview candidates were selected from the archives, then sent an electronic mail asking them if they would be willing to answer, via electronic mail, a few questions regarding their experiences on the lists. Those who agreed were sent a set of short, open-ended questions on topics of list expectations and outcomes. To identify possible interview candidates for OUTCMTEN, all of the messages that were posted between February 6 and April 7, 1995 were examined and the e-mail addresses of those who posted were collected. Requests were sent out to 42 people. Seven responded and agreed to be interviewed via electronic mail; of these seven, four responded to the questions. Likewise for LEGALTEN, all the messages posted during the months of June and July 1995 were examined and the e-mail addresses of those who posted were collected. Requests were sent out to 54 people. Ten subscribers responded, with nine agreeing to be interviewed via e-mail; of these, seven responded to the questions.

The data from the face-to-face, telephone, and electronic mail interviews were used together with the text data from the St. John's University archives to characterize group dynamics on OUTCMTEN and LEGALTEN.

## **Methods of Analysis**

The discussions on the two lists were analyzed according to the following variables and methods summarized in Table 1 below. The bulk of the analysis focused on the content and patterns of participation on the lists.



Table 1: Dimensions and Methods Used in Analysis	
Dimension	Method
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Original goal of list</li> <li>• Membership</li> <li>• Reasons for subscribing</li> <li>• Content</li> <li>• Patterns of participation and tone</li> <li>• Modes of expressing and managing conflict</li> <li>• The role of the chair</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of goal statement posted by <i>the Evaluation Center@HSRI</i>, list owner, and Evaluation Center Director</li> <li>• Review of introductions made by list members</li> <li>• Review of introductions made by list members, interviews with members</li> <li>• Content analysis of messages for periods indicated below</li> <li>• Analysis of number of messages posted in 1995, average number of messages posted per day, number of persons posting more than one message per day, number of times word “you” used, analysis of interpersonal interactions on list.</li> <li>• Content analysis of messages for periods indicated</li> <li>• Content analysis of messages for periods indicated and interviews with chairs</li> </ul>

### *Time periods for content analysis*

Based on a review of the message archives, it was decided that the greatest amount of information for the purposes of this paper would be gained from the content analysis of messages sent during periods when there was both an especially high daily message frequency and a high daily participation frequency. On OUTCMTEN, 385 messages posted during February 6 and April 7, 1995 were read and analyzed. On LEGALTEN, we focused on the months of June and July, 1995 during which 798 messages were posted. Other periods of activity were also read in order to understand the context of and history of conversations.

## RESULTS

### Original Goal of List

The purposes of each of the lists that were part of the Topical Evaluation Network program were described briefly in an informational brochure published by *the Evaluation Center@HSRI*. The purpose of OUTCMTEN was described as, “to develop a broad collective expertise with respect to problems of assessing and analyzing outcomes of interventions aimed at improving mental health systems.”

The Evaluation Center brochure described the purpose of LEGALTEN to be “to facilitate the implementation and use of rigorous evaluations at the interface of the mental health system, the criminal justice system, and the courts.”

### Membership

List members were encouraged to introduce themselves and describe their interest in the issues of the list. Not all list members did introduce themselves, however, and no systematic analysis of the introductions that were posted was conducted. A discussion of the differences in list membership based on the authors’ impressions is included in the Discussion section.

### Reasons for Subscribing and Continued Membership

#### *OUTCMTEN*

From the archives, the reason for subscribing to OUTCMTEN cited most by participants was to discover the issues related to, and interact with the key figures in, the area of program evaluation in mental health. In general, through a discussion with a variety of stakeholders, they expected to get information on methods for measuring outcomes for behavioral health care programs or services. For some, their expectations were only partially

met, while for others, they were exceeded. "As with any of these networks," explained one respondent, "the wheat-to-chaff ratio is pretty small. The extremely wide range of participants has been interesting sometimes, but has led to discussions that are irrelevant to me at other times." Another subscriber, impressed by how the list helped him work more efficiently, commented, "I got even more than I anticipated. The rapid responses helped shape my opinions and direct some of my work more quickly than would have been possible in any other way given the large numbers of states involved with this type of work."

### *LEGALTEN*

Participants originally subscribed to LEGALTEN for the chance to discuss and learn about evaluation issues at the intersection of mental health care and the law. Ultimately, however, list members focused not on evaluation, but instead the value issues underlying the relationship between mental health care and law.

### **Content**

### *OUTCMTEN*

The discussions on OUTCMTEN were very specific to evaluating outcomes in the mental health field. Towards the end of March, one participant summarized the discussions that were taking place and thanked those who were participating in them. In the words of his message, topics of discussion included:

- What is the average number of sessions that clients typically attend therapy for?
- What kind of assessment tools are used in the field?
- How do we identify the more effective and less effective therapists?
- How many sessions does it take to move from a distressed population norm (high stress symptoms/low well-being, for example) to an average population norm (average stress symptoms/average well-being)?

The discussion on OUTCMTEN about values was limited to two participants and lasted a single day. The values discussion arose when a subscriber of OUTCMTEN questioned an assumption stated by another participant in his introduction. The discussion was brief and concise apparently because the participants shared the same basic beliefs.

## *LEGALTEN*

Most of the discussions on LEGALTEN, focused on the values and beliefs of the participants. The subject matter was a great deal more controversial and personal and there was a greater heterogeneity among the participants with respect to their views on the subject matter and their communication norms. Topics discussed included involuntary treatment, electroshock therapy, the use of long term, forced neuroleptic medications, and isolation. This led to many more conflicts, many of which never were resolved and/or escalated into personal attacks. Thus, on LEGALTEN, there was a much greater need for negotiation skills for consensus building or conflict resolution than on OUTCMTEN.

## **Patterns of Participation**

### *OUTCMTEN*

#### *Number of messages and participants*

During 1995, 1277 messages were posted on OUTCMTEN. An average of 3.5 messages were posted each day, with a standard deviation of 4.37. An average of 3 subscribers posted messages each day, with a standard deviation of 3.55.

The number of active participants in OUTCMTEN made up between one and two percent of the total subscribers to the list. There was a gradual increase in total subscribership during the period in which data were collected. The average number of subscribers during the 1995 period was 418.

It was not common for participants to post more than one message a day. In 1995, for example, there were only nine days when one or more individuals posted two or more

messages. On only one day did the average number of messages posted per participant exceed two. The textual data show that this occurred when a new participant introduced himself and was then questioned by a psychiatric survivor regarding an assumption in his introduction. As a result of their ensuing conversation, which lasted only one day, the new participant posted three messages, and the psychiatric survivor two.

An examination of the distribution of messages per day with the number of messages posted per participant per day reveals that there is no apparent correlation between periods of high message frequency and periods of high participation. Only once does a period of high message frequency coincide with high participation. This occurred between February 6 and April 7.

### *Tone*

In general, participants would thank others for information, give positive reinforcement to questions, and when disagreeing with a point, emphasize that their comments were meant to be constructive. For example, after writing a message questioning the robustness of a measurement scale, a participant wrote: "In case this comes out sounding harsh (which some of these communications do, inadvertently) I am in no way challenging or disputing your scale; I am just trying to generate further discussion."

The discussions on OUTCMTEN were highly focused. OUTCMTEN functioned as intended; as a forum for discussing the evaluation of outcomes in the field of mental health. Discussions were about technical issues and attracted subscribers who shared the same basic assumptions, experiences, and communication styles.

## *LEGALTEN*

### *Numbers of messages and participants*

The total number of messages posted to LEGALTEN during 1995 was 1473. An average of 4 messages were posted per day, with a standard deviation of 5.96. There were three distinct periods of activity during 1995: the first in early January, the second during March, and the third between June and August. After the third period concluded, there were almost no messages posted on LEGALTEN. An average of 2.7 subscribers posted messages each day, with a standard deviation of 3.4.

On LEGALTEN, about one to three percent of the total subscribers were active participants. In 1995, there was a sudden jump in subscribership during the beginning of March (this was when the list was announced on America On-line) but then a gradual decrease in membership during the final period of heavy activity between June and August, possibly reflecting the frustration of several list subscribers with the direction LEGALTEN was going in. The average number of total subscribers to LEGALTEN during the period in which data are available was 298.

### Tone

Discussions on LEGALTEN tended to be more wide-ranging and intense than discussions on OUTCMTEN. It became a forum for discussing values as well as evaluation at the intersection of the mental health and criminal justice systems. It attracted participants from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and communication styles. Participants on LEGALTEN seemed to be more caught up in expressing their points of view, rather than engaging in a dialogue. Instead of directing their efforts to understanding and being understood, many participants limited themselves to repeating their own positions and criticizing others.

The confrontational tone of much of the discussion on LEGALTEN is indicated by the relatively high occurrence of the word "you." During 1995, there were 2467 occurrences of "you" on LEGALTEN, 114 percent more than for the same period on OUTCMTEN.

"One of the things that LEGALTEN did was really level the field," explained the Chair. "Everybody had their say, everybody had a chance to finish their thought as best they could, nobody had really any particular advantage over anybody else. Credentials, degrees,

and positions and all those kinds of things really didn't matter as long as people could make their point.”

## **Modes of Expressing and Managing Conflict**

### *OUTCMTEN*

In all of 1995, there was only one period when a discussion about the tone of OUTCMTEN took place. However, the issue of tone did not ever escalate into conflict. The participants did not use personal attacks, or intense language to express their points and alternate points were recognized. The tone issue was dropped altogether and not brought up again. As will be shown, this same issue was handled quite differently on LEGALTEN.

### *LEGALTEN*

On LEGALTEN, the language was a great deal more intense and extreme and at times could have been interpreted as a shouting match. Those who were unhappy with the tone of the list noted that it had become a "flame war," "an argument that never will be won," "a series of rants and name-calling," "talk-radio," passionate, political, and a "slanging match." On OUTCMTEN, with the exception of two posts, the exchange of messages in question was simply referred to as a "discussion."

## **The Role of the Chair**

### *OUTCMTEN*

During the time period examined, the Chair of OUTCMTEN participated once in a discussion regarding health insurance. His post generated several other messages both agreeing with and challenging some of his points, and these developed into a discussion on financial incentives in the mental health care system.

## *LEGALTEN*

The Chair of the LEGALTEN Network was interested in finding out about any new and important developments in the area of criminal justice and mental health (such as civil commitment) at the state and county level. He viewed the LEGALTEN Network as a way to be connected to people at those levels and to find out what exactly was happening there. Additionally, he viewed it as a way for the Evaluation Center, which sponsored the Topical Evaluation Networks, to gather data concerning evaluation technical assistance needed by persons working at the interface of mental health and the law. The chair of LEGALTEN imagined "a bunch of lawyers and psychiatrists and maybe mental health agency people talking with each other" collegially, "but it never happened." At first, he tried to respond to what people were saying on the list, but soon, found that he couldn't keep up and, as he described it:

The whole thing got away from me ... what I envisioned this being and what it became were really very different ... There was much more consumer and advocacy involvement than I thought there would be. On the other hand, I by no means regret that. I think it really enlivened the discussion. I learned a lot from it. I hope others did too, if they took it in the spirit that this is finally an opportunity to hear everybody's voice (Fisher, 1996).

## **Summary**

Table 2 presents a summary of the findings of our analysis. While the two lists were both designed to foster discussion about issues related to mental health services and systems evaluation, the lists evolved differently in terms of content and patterns of participation. The discussion on OUTCMTEN was more focused on its original topic while LEGALTEN gravitated towards discussion of the value of mental health treatment, a subject only somewhat related to the original goals of the list. Participation on LEGALTEN was more frequent and contained more instances of multiple postings per day by individual members,



when compared to OUTCMTEN. The most marked differences may have been in the content and tone of the discussions: OUTCMTEN participants predominantly discussed technical issues in a manner that facilitated discourse and learning while LEGALTEN discussion was dominated by heated debates and attacks that led many members to leave the list.

<b>Table 2: Summary of Findings</b>		
<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>OUTCMTEN</b>	<b>LEGALTEN</b>
<b>Original Goal</b>	To discuss problems of assessing and analyzing outcomes of interventions aimed at improving mental health system.	To facilitate the implementation and use of rigorous evaluations at the interface of the mental health system, the criminal justice system, and the courts.
<b>Membership</b>	More homogeneous	More diverse
<b>Reasons for subscribing</b>	To discover the issues related to, and interact with the key figures in, the area of program evaluation in mental health.	To discuss and learn about evaluation issues at the intersection of mental health care and the law.
<b>Content</b>	Methods for evaluating the effectiveness of various mental health services.	Involuntary treatment of homeless people, electro-shock therapy, the rights of individuals vs. group safety.
<b>Patterns of participation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of Messages Posted in 1995</li> <li>• Average Number of Messages Posted per Day (Standard Deviation)</li> <li>• Periods of High Message Frequency Characterized By Participants Posting More Than One Message a Day</li> <li>• Number of times the word "you" is used</li> <li>• Tone</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1277</li> <li>• 3.5 (4.37)</li> <li>• No</li> <li>• 1152</li> <li>• Technical discussions regarding mental health system evaluation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1475</li> <li>• 4 (5.96)</li> <li>• Yes</li> <li>• 2467</li> <li>• Predominantly intense and personal discussions on involuntary treatment and values in the field of mental health.</li> </ul>
<b>Roles Played by the List Chair</b>	Participant	Participant and Mediator

## DISCUSSION

### Analysis of List Dynamics

The different fates of OUTCMTEN and LEGALTEN can be explained in terms of a chain of events beginning with the topical goals of the two networks. The topics discussed on OUTCMTEN dealt with research and evaluation methods. The topics discussed on LEGALTEN dealt with aspects of mental health systems and treatments that can be construed as mechanisms of social control (Lemert, 1967). As a result of their different topics, the two networks appear to have attracted different members. OUTCMTEN seems to have attracted primarily scientists and research oriented clinical professionals. LEGALTEN seems to have attracted providers of mental health treatments (e.g., psychiatrists who had administered psychotherapy, drugs, and electro-shock treatment), persons who had directly experienced some of the treatments discussed (e.g., persons who had received electro-shock therapy) and persons working in the legal system (e.g., parole officers). It gave them a novel forum for making their voices heard.

Members of OUTCMTEN generally had been socialized by their scientific and professional training to engage in a more restrained style of discourse. As a result of very different personal histories and interests, some subscribers to LEGALTEN had very different value systems and styles of communicating.

As a result of these factors, discussions on OUTCMTEN were very technical and participants shared similar views and norms for communicating them. On LEGALTEN, topics of discussion were a great deal more controversial and personal. Members of the mental health consumer community took advantage of the unique opportunity that the electronic environment presented them - a level playing field - and actively questioned the values of the mental health and judicial systems. The discussions that resulted were very intense and differences of opinion were often exacerbated by differing communication styles.

Differences in opinion on very personal issues were exacerbated by stylistic differences in communicating those opinions. To express themselves, some subscribers used language that other subscribers considered distracting, too passionate, or inappropriate. Several

participants found the discussions on values extremely insightful, while others found the discussions repetitive, exhausting, counter-productive, and insulting. Attempts to use negotiation skills to reduce conflict and achieve consensus were often deluged by intense discussions led by a few individuals that often became personal attacks.

In discussions of difficult topics involving persons with widely divergent views, it is not uncommon for one party to misunderstand a statement of disagreement from another party as a challenge or personal attack. The offended party will respond in kind and soon the negotiation escalates into conflict. The use of polarized language, verbal immediacy and language intensity seem to have the same potential effects in electronic discussions. Given this environment in LEGALTEN (which again, for many of the participants, was not the original intent), this list was a stressful environment for many of the participants on all sides of the argument.

Given the unique and valuable opportunity for many to discuss mental health care issues with all relevant parties, including consumers/survivors/ex-patients, what does it take to develop a learning environment in electronic lists? As the experiences from OUTCMTEN and LEGALTEN illustrate, the level playing field that both lists provided participants was only one important element in developing a forum for constructive dialogue. Two other elements of equal importance were:

- The existence of a common set of communication norms so that differences could be understood by all parties.
- The need for the discussion environment to be safe for all participants.

These elements raise a number of important questions, such as: Whose responsibility is it to ensure that a level playing field, a safe environment, and a common language for communication exist? Should these be developed by the participants themselves or by the list owner? These are important issues for future research.

## Role of the List Moderators

One powerful mechanism that has evolved to deal with these elements is that of a moderator. Such a mechanism is supported by Lewicki et al. (1994). As they note, negotiation over critical issues may reach an impasse, where the parties are unable to move the process beyond a particular sticking point. At these points, third party intervention may be productive. At a minimum, third parties can provide and even enforce the stability, civility, and forward momentum necessary to re-address the problems at hand.

On LEGALTEN, attempts by the Chair to defuse conflict and create consensus were unsuccessful because individuals continued to issue personal attacks and the Chair was unable to enforce a safer environment. This need not be the case, however. Moderators with the power to take participants off the list have been able to maintain constructive learning environments where individuals are able to express themselves as they wish, as long as they do not personally attack anyone else. It is the role of the moderator to make everyone feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts.

The challenge to the moderators becomes finding the right balance between control and freedom to achieve the goals of the list. The ultimate amount of central authority depends on the purpose of the electronic group, often determined by its founder or founders, the nature of the participants, and the number of persons who refuse to abide by the guidelines of participation (on the Internet, such persons are sometimes referred to as “gate crashers” [Shea, 1994]).

It is very important to establish the purposes and rules of participation on a list from the beginning. Most lists accomplish this in their Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section, a message sent to all new members explaining the topic and the guidelines for participation on the list). Anyone can participate in the list as long as they follow the guidelines stated in the FAQ. It becomes the social contract between the list manager and the participants.

Once a list is able to start going on its own, moderators must be on the look out for *ad hominum* exchanges, known on the Internet as “flame wars.” The difficulty is identifying when a flame war is about to erupt and extinguish it as quickly and productively as possible.

Some lists attract more gate crashers than others, depending on the subject of the list. Social issues, for example, often attract gate crashers. Some lists try to prevent gate crashing by requiring that participants go through an elaborate subscription process. But this is often not very effective because on the Internet it is impossible to know who is really behind an email address. It also compromises the notion that a list is open to anyone who shares that interest, and that one should not judge someone at the door but by what they write.

Another way to prevent gate crashers or flame wars is to switch the list to fully moderated. In such an instance, all messages posted to the electronic discussion group are first read by the moderator, who then posts them to the group. Depending on the frequency of messages, this can be extremely time consuming for a moderator, and it takes away much of the spontaneity of an electronic discussion. But, it is effective when used temporarily to control a certain problem.

### **Implications for Managing Mental Health Electronic Discussion Lists**

For the policy makers, planners or evaluators interested in bringing together diverse stakeholders to discuss and learn from each other's experiences and to better understand each other, electronic discussion groups can be very powerful tools for achieving these goals. Yet if electronic discussion groups are not managed well, they could potentially worsen relations among participants.

As a result of its open structure, LEGALTEN was successful at bringing together a diverse set of views to a level playing field yet it was unable to maintain a safe and constructive environment for many of the subscribers. The experiences of LEGALTEN highlight that some rules of behavior needed to be established and enforced. With a basic set of rules, one can maintain an open environment where individuals can express themselves as they wish and group safety is enforced.

To leverage an electronic discussion group successfully, the policy and strategy planner is encouraged to consider following recommendations derived from this analysis of OUTCMTEN and LEGALTEN, and from the experiences of other list moderators. These

recommendations assume that the goal of the list owner is to create a forum where learning can take place. To establish the trust needed for maximum learning, all participants must feel safe to express themselves openly. Recommendations for achieving this are summarized below.

- Have a list moderator with the authority to unsubscribe any participant from the subscription list. The role of the moderator would be to encourage constructive dialogue.
- The rules for decision making used by a moderator should be made available to all participants and enforced evenhandedly in order to establish trust and respect from the participants.
- Each subscriber should be greeted to the list with:
  - ⇒ a description of the purpose of the list;
  - ⇒ an explanation of who owns and moderates the list;
  - ⇒ a description of the technical basics for participating;
  - ⇒ a description of what kind of behavior is inappropriate and what will happen if there is inappropriate behavior.
- Personal attacks should be prohibited.
- Persons who post personal attacks should be confronted privately, off-list, with a general message posted to the list reminding people that personal attacks are not permitted on the list. The general message should summarize the key points of the discussion and encourage dialogue to continue.
- Where personal attacks continue, the offenders should be removed from the list. A general message to the list should explain why the person was removed and encourage comments on the action.

- If a discussion veers towards conflict, negotiation techniques such as active listening (Lewicki, Litterer, Minton & Saunders, 1994) should be used to encourage subscribers to understand the other parties.
- Messages that adhere to the stated topical goals of the list and do not take the form of personal attacks should be distributed to list members without censorship.

The future of electronic lists depends on the success of those actively participating to make sure the potential of this technology is not constrained by poor usage. For mental health policy makers, consumers, planners and evaluators, the opportunity to hear and learn from each other can be invaluable. Managed well, electronic discussion forums, where people located all over the world can discuss, debate and develop consensus and policies on a level playing field, promise to be one of the most powerful uses of the Internet.



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