

Entomo-L: An Early Adventure into Social Media¹

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Abstract: Entomo-L is a listserv created in 1991 and hosted at the University of Guelph (Guelph, Ontario, Canada) for the free exchange of ideas pertaining to insect science. As part of the revolution in social media, it aims to be respectful of individual privacy and believes in the need of civilized discourse among its members. Although not without the pitfalls and imperfections of any human endeavor, the contents of Entomo-L from August 1993 to June 2020 are archived in an internet archive known as Wayback Machine. In late June 2020, following postings about the Entomological Society of America's Linnean Games, the University of Guelph ceased to host Entomo-L. Entomo-L has been hosted at The Pennsylvania State University, York campus since the fall 2020.

Key Words: Entomo-L, listserv, social media, entomology, University of Guelph,

Introduction

On several occasions I have been asked to write up a brief history of Entomo-L, a listserv for entomology which I initiated over 30 years ago and is still up and running as a social media tool open to anyone interested in insect biology. Here it is with some personal anecdotes and experiences.

Entomo-L opened the floodgate for which I initiated electronic exchange of information on Entomology in 1991. How was that done? Why? And some of the adventures along the way.

The initial idea for an entomological listserv was mooted informally at the Entomological Society of Canada and Entomological Society of Alberta meetings held in Banff, Alberta in 1990 (October 1 – 5). The conversation was by no means formalized with Minutes of the Meetings but was left with the green light on the road of seeing how the idea might evolve. Evolve it did! The idea was simply to engage entomologists world-wide with a means to exchange ideas and information.

The first version of Entomo-L was established at the University of Guelph with help from IT colleagues and various administrative permissions. I think the official launch was about 1st January 1991 with some trial runs with a few friends and colleagues at U of Guelph. After a few days, other entomologists across Canada were invited to join in. Entomo-L seemed quite popular as its existence became more widely known internationally. Our Brazilian counterparts were

¹ Received and accepted on August 24, 2022. Last revisions received on November 26, 2022.

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especially active in the very early days. Within the year Entomo-L had hundreds of subscribers world-wide. In 2015, subscribership had risen to over 1000!

What is a Listserv? and How did Entomo-L work?

A listserv is an application (yes, we had an “app” 30 years ago!) that distributes messages to subscribers on an electronic mailing list. Many listservs have names ending in “-L” as in “Entomo-L”. That seemed an appropriate convention to follow. Because I initiated the idea, I was the designated “listowner”.

Listservs have evolved over the years to provide an increasing array of options for subscribers and listowners. One of the options open at the start was whether or not to have Entomo-L moderated. If a listserv is moderated, then the listowner has the responsibility to vet each and every posting for content before it is released to the subscribership. After some brief discussions with friends and colleagues, I decided that Entomo-L should be totally free, democratic, open to anyone interested, and not potentially subject to censorship by me as the listowner.

Entomo-L had only a few rules of conduct and those were based on mutual respect among its subscribers. “Flaming” (i.e., making rude and inflammatory remarks about the postings of other subscribers) was forbidden! Content had to be entomologically relevant. Subscribers were asked to make replies to the postings of other subscribers on Entomo-L useful. Yes, Entomo-L had instances of “flaming” to deal with but over the years I think only 2 or 3 subscribers were excommunicated for “flaming”. Occasionally the content of postings would become non-entomological. If memory serves, the main problem stemmed from opinions about politics far removed from entomology *sensu stricto*. Subscribers were sometimes reminded that what I called “jibber-jabber” was not useful and that comments such as “I agree” were not really useful. Entomo-Lers were encouraged to correspond on specific points with individuals rather than to the whole world.

A response to me from August 1998. “Thank you for your message. I, too, dislike being bombarded by mindless responses. And thanks for hosting the list--helps keep me in touch with a field in which I no longer work”.

Privacy Concerns

Issues to do with privacy have become of greater and greater concern on the web. From the beginning, Entomo-L and the University of Guelph had policies of not sharing its subscriber list with anyone, including subscribers. Yes, I was asked on rare occasions to provide our subscriber list to other organizations, but never were those requests granted.

Advertising was technically not permitted, but Entomo-L carried announcements of books, other publications, media releases, employment opportunities and meetings (local to international) as appropriate to general and useful information for subscribers.

The Infinite Loop Event

I do not remember when it was, nor the exact details. The platforms through which Entomo-L operated have changed over the years. One of the earliest platforms was called NetNorth, linking Canadian academic institutions, and another was BitNet with its main emphasis on linking US institution. NetNorth and BitNet no longer exists as such. When the platform the U of G changed from its platform from NetNorth to BitNet a short-lived catastrophe arose. All messages from and to Entomo-L were forwarded from one platform to the other with the effect of creating a what I liken to a “breeder chain reaction”. Overnight, tens of thousands of repetitive e-mails were created on our Listserv, overloading the system, and crashing it. One of my graduate students at the time had a complex computer program running and thought that somehow, he had created the problem. Not so, of course! The crisis was averted as IT colleagues soon established the root of the problem and the two-way auto-forwarding of messages was corrected to simple one-way.

Lightning Strikes

Although there were occasional power failures on campus, they rarely caused anything but short interruptions for Entomo-L. On about two occasions Entomo-L became off-line for several days. During an electrical storm on campus, a maple tree just outside my laboratory in the Bovey Complex was blasted by lightning. Power to my lab was disrupted for a couple of days and the old Volker-Craig computer terminal was fried. The terminal was replaced, and power restored to Entomo-L.

On another occasion, Entomo-L went off-line for reasons unknown to me. Enquiries brought back an astonishing answer: a lightning strike in southern Queensland, Australia, had knocked out an electrical pylon and caused a major failure in the internet there. The cascade effect somehow reached Entomo-L in southwestern Ontario.

Contents

The general content has been of entomologists reaching out to each other for advice and information. Entomo-L carries announcements of books being published, employment opportunities, meetings and so on. Occasionally there has been some debate on the ranges, systematic placement, and nomenclature for particular taxa. Insects in the public press is quite often grist for exchanges on

Entomo-L. News, views, opportunities, and information. Nowadays, with the hugely increased bandwidth (the volume of information that can be sent over a connection in a measured amount of time – calculated in megabits per second (Mbps)) since the inception of Entomo-L, subscribers can readily exchange publications, archives, and images.

Respectful Participation

Most Entomo-Lers have been highly respectful of the protocols we used, and generally tolerant of occasional errors. A short warning, usually with a heading along the lines of “Please read, Listowner speaks” were well received and heeded. Quite early on Entomo-L received a few postings that were of a personal nature. In particular, I remember two subscribers trying to contact each other. The couple did not seem to realize that their apparently amorous exchanges were distributed to the world. No harm done, though. The ensuing private messages I received recognised the faux pas and made light of the event.

The Archives

Entomo-L records can be found by accessing the archives (see link below). It would be interesting for someone concerned with anti-science, cancel culture, administrative censorship, etc. to review the content of Entomo-L over the years for racism, sexism, and other evidence of prejudice. The link to the Entomo-L archives from August 1993 to June 2020 by month was compiled by long-term entomo-ler, Ken Bliss:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20200708024734/https://listserv.uoguelph.ca/cgi-bin/wa?A0=ENTOMO-L>

The end at the University of Guelph: How it came about?

In late June 2020 posting was made to Entomo-L to alert subscribers to a petition to the Entomological Society of America (ESA) to change the name of the general and competitive quiz for entomology students termed then “The Linnean Games”. The petition pointed out racist problems with some of Linnaeus’ writings. The issue had nothing to do with Entomo-L per se, but was of entomological interest, especially to the ESA. As listowner, and within two days, I had already asked subscribers to cease all postings to Entomo-L. Traffic ceased on about 29th June 2020. The University of Guelph administration instituted, without discussion and apparently based on traffic on other social media (such as “Twitter”) , its mandate to discontinue hosting Entomo-L.

Resurrection and the Continuing Legacy

Although Entomo-L went off-line from the University of Guelph, good will towards Entomo-L prevails. We are indeed fortunate that Jorge Santiago-Blay, working with his IT team at Pennsylvania State University in York, Pennsylvania assumed the leadership of Entomo-L in 2020. Entomol-L came back online in the fall of 2020.

Please join the hundreds of entomologists around the world who have continued to support Entomo-L at its new institution and under its generous ownership and moderation by Jorge! Thank you for your willingness to take on this rich heritage.

To join Entomo-L, please send your message to: listserv@lists.psu.edu with the text “subscribe Entomo-l your e-mail address your name”. For further questions, please, email Dr. Jorge Santiago-Blay at blayj@psu.edu , our new listowner and moderator. He has been a fantastic help in keeping Entomo-L alive!

Acknowledgements

I am pleased to thank all subscribers to Entomo-L over the years for their interest and support while the listserv was hosted at the University of Guelph. I thank Jorge for inviting me to explain the how Entomo-L has been a way to communicate on the excitement of biology through its subdiscipline of insect life.