

Behind the Scenes at SAS-L F. Joseph Kelley University of Georgia

Most SAS users, both newcomers and veterans, will eventually encounter SAS-L. This discussion group provides help, lively discussions, insights and all manner of incidentals, to the SAS user community. It is gated to the newsgroup comp.soft-sys.sas, so is available to an even wider range of readers. Discussions may be on program optimization, sampling methods, random number generation, operating system problems, practically anything (usually related to SAS). This paper is not about that.

This paper is about what goes on in the administration of a Listserv[®]-based discussion group – especially one catering to a wildly-divergent community.

In general, administering SAS-L or any other mail list is not especially difficult. Occasionally, there will be odd problems of one sort or another. Currently I am attempting to track down a bad address: attempts to contact the “postmaster” have failed and the address that is reported in the daily report is not subscribed to SAS-L. Oh well. Once that has been corrected, another will show up. In the remainder of this paper, I’ll discuss some of the ongoing list-admin kind of stuff I encounter.

Where is SAS-L? SAS-L is a listserver-based discussion group. It resides on four “peered” list servers:

- Marist University:
listserv@vm.marist.com
- Virginia Polytechnic University
listserv@listserv.vt.edu
- University of Vienna
listserv@akh-wien.ac.at
- University of Georgia
listserv@listserv.uga.edu

These sites are all “peered”, so a post sent to one will be propagated to all. In addition to the list servers, there is also a connection made with the newsgroup comp.soft-sys.sas so the newsgroup and the mail list will generally have all of the same information.

You may read SAS-L via email, a newsreader or the web. For the latter, there is the web interface to SAS-L provided at UGA: <http://www.listserv.uga.edu/>
At this location you may select “sas-l” and read and post as well as perform archive

searches. To post, you will have to “register”; this is to confirm your e-address.

You may also Use “Google Groups” to access comp.soft-sys.sas. From this you may read, post and perform archive searches.

What are the Archives? SAS-L was established (jointly) at the University of Georgia and Marist University in 1986. All the posts made since are archived at Marist; the UGA archives only go back to 1996. When performing a search, you should always place a bound on your search, for example, all entries on “sql” would be extensive if just done on posts of this year. Without a bound, they would go back to 1996 and the resulting mass of information would be all but useless.

What about SPAM? SAS-L is receiving its share. Sending non-text attachments is prohibited in SAS and there is a partial ban on HTML messages. The HTML message problem has several sources, the principal one being the many mailers that sent mail as both text and html. A message sent as text alone will get through. As will a message sent as HTML alone. If a message is sent as both text and HTML, the HTML portion is removed. Non-text attachments have been passed on to SAS-L, but this requires altering the “MIME-type” information, so such files are unlikely to be opened (correctly) by mailer software. The next release of LSoft’s Listserv software (1.8e) will prevent all html, including

legitimate messages. Additionally, messages posted by browsers may encounter the same problems. This would end a great deal of spam, but the number of discarded postings would probably be considerable. The question remains open and there is no decision at present.

Are there other methods? SPAM is seen as a threat to the net as a whole. Many efforts are going into devising ways of preventing it. I regret to say I am not optimistic. The ways of reducing or preventing SPAM on SAS-L are not as appropriate now as they were even 5 years ago. Listserv itself attempts SPAM filtering. It has some successes, but not as many as it once did.

Some sites have implemented mail filtering. The idea is to prevent the receipt of a virus or pornography or some sort of SPAM. There has been some success, but some of these software packages attempt to broadcast a message to every possible originator of the original mail message, alerting them that the mail has been rejected, and giving a reason. It would seem that the authors of these products are unaware of how mail lists work (the listserver simply distributes the message, it does not originate it). Some of these products send messages that are redistributed by the list itself. This is also SPAM, but harried mail administrators are not so happy being told their mail scanning software is now sending out SPAM. Further, the virus attacks of the past 12 to 18 months have often simply used mail address that happened to be in the address book of an infected machine. A forged mail header is written indicating this hapless individual *sent* the mail. But of course, they didn't. The mail was sent from someone else who happened to have their address. So the mail filtering software is sending out SPAM to persons who have not sent the mail telling them that they sent a virus to someone at site X. As mentioned, this method of sending a virus has been around for some months. It is not new. The mail scanning software is now responding to an obsolete definition. There have been

serious arguments with mail administrators over this.

Can you be removed from the List? Of course. The usual reason is that your mailer no longer accepts mail addressed to you. SAS-L can automatically detect and delete some of these, but the administrator has to remove others. Sometimes the problem is temporary, other times it is (or seems) permanent. Another cause for removal is constant returned messages – accompanied with a “mailbox full” message from the mail system. A brief delay is usually called for, but after that the account is deleted. Rarely, a mailer will be misconfigured and will begin sending the mail it receives *from* SAS-L *back to* SAS-L (one form of a mail loop). These are typically removed at once. “Out-of-Office” (“Vacation”) messages sent to SAS-L can also get one deleted (if something is automatically sending messages to SAS-L, it may be regarded as SPAM).

References. For those who wish to know more about the LSoft's Listserv software, you may want to review the online manuals at <http://www.listserv.uga.edu/docs.html>

Additionally, LSoft has extensive online manuals available at its own web site <http://www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html>

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