

Conservation Cyberspace Communications and the Way We Work

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See also a companion presentation by Mitchell Hearn Bishop,
and a glossary prepared by Jeanne Drewes.

The premier Internet forum for preservers of cultural materials was launched at Stanford University in June 1987 by Walter Henry; by September 2000, less than 14 years later, the Conservation DistList had 4,600 participants in 67 countries. It is part of the huge and expanding resource in cyberspace called Conservation OnLine (CoOL), which also is managed by Walter Henry from his Stanford University Libraries office. The influence that the CoOL ensemble and other cyberspace resources is having on our field is impossible to measure, however it is evident to some of us that conservators who ignore this new information technology risk being significantly less informed than their Internet-user colleagues.

It is insufficient merely to access the Internet; one must do so efficiently and wisely or the trip can be frustrating. I hope that everyone here has a copy of the Glossary that Jeanne Drewes prepared. Terms that you don't find in her handout will be available online at one or more of the Websites also listed there. Jeanne is the Assistant Director of Access and Preservation at Michigan State University Libraries.

Mitchell Bishop has just described a smorgasbord of Internet offerings to satisfy various appetites. Now I will share the insights of practicing conservators who have been dipping into cyberspace. I want to whet the appetites of colleagues who haven't yet sampled it, and to suggest how all of us can become gourmets at this information banquet. Let's start by getting a sense of what portion of the present audience goes online. Please respond with a show of hands to two questions:

- 1) How many of you use computers at work at least occasionally, for example to prepare reports?
- 2) Now, how many of those people ALSO correspond via e-mail, subscribe to a listserv, or search the Internet in other ways for information related to your work?

Between August 2000 and April of this year, I posted three messages on the Conservation DistList (DistList for short) and two on the Object Specialty Group's List (OSG-L). I asked, in various ways, for comments about using the Internet for research, for asking and receiving advice among colleagues, and for job hunting. Altogether I heard from at least 43 individuals via e-mails from the USA, Canada, Germany, Italy, Australia,

and elsewhere. (The geographical origin of an e-mailed message is not always easy to discern.) Only one person chose to respond by telephone, and nobody resorted to “snail-mail,” (jargon for paper letters delivered by post office employees). Since several commentators requested anonymity, and since time is short, I won’t read their names. I am very grateful to all who responded.

Most began using the Internet in the mid 1990’s, and – as one might expect from this group – everyone seems to have found it useful. (For contrasting view, I spoke with a senior colleague who has been using a computer to write work reports but has never gone online. This person seemed to fear that learning how to use the Internet will take too much time, and that using it will be more distracting than helpful.)

Nowadays, younger members of our field may get their introduction while in training. An objects conservator in Germany reports that she teaches “young students of Conservation how to use the Internet to get information.”

Respondents to my queries described individual experiences with the Internet, which are what this presentation will emphasize. In passing, though, I’d like to mention one well-planned group effort. In July 1999, the Council of the Society for Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC, familiarly called “spinach”) approved a policy of conducting official business by e-mail. Last year, the Council took this a step further and drafted e-mail voting procedures to assure that voting online is fair.

Getting back to individuals, here are two examples of the many positive Internet experiences that my respondents wrote about.

From an objects conservator in USA: QUOTE “I have obtained helpful practical information via the Internet. My best example is in obtaining MSDS sheets and product information from suppliers.” (NOTE: Others also referred to the ease of obtaining materials safety data sheets, etc., from suppliers.)

From a paper conservator in a museum in USA: QUOTE “There is no objects conservator in this region. I had to perform a simple mend on a wooden sculpture and wanted advice as to what adhesive would be best. Through reading the DistList I became aware of [X] as a helpful colleague. I e-mailed him with the details of the object and he responded with very specific and helpful advice which enabled me to complete the mend successfully and with confidence.”

The overall impression I got from my respondents is that many conservators successfully access generally-available practical information via the Internet. Specialized listservs are popular, too, for example a conservation scientist in Canada mentioned the Material-L and Research lists. When it comes to accepting e-mailed advice for hands-on treatments, however, many people expressed the need to be wary. This is especially so

when the advice comes from people you don't know. The Canadian conservation scientist noted that, QUOTE "As always, it is up to the person doing the work to weigh the options, and to seek clarification of uncertain points, whether the info is from [the] Internet or a written document."

The following 3 comments point out some risks.

From a documentation specialist in Italy: QUOTE "...there is a problem on the Web. ...it is hard for the reader to know whether an expert has posted online something based on fact, or someone posing as an expert has posted something invented. (This is especially a problem for people who are looking for reliable information on a subject that they know little about.)"

From an objects conservator in Canada: QUOTE "[Regarding] help in hands-on research or treatment, I would say ...that I have rarely received information that I can trust. ... I find that practical conservation advice on the consdistlist is, ... in the great majority of cases, inadequate ...[because] it is difficult to get a sense of the problems that the objects to be treated have, there are no pictures, there is rarely a discussion of various treatment options or of the justification for the proposed treatment, and there is little information on the author's experience."

From another objects conservator in Canada: QUOTE "One must always be critical of advice received. An example would be treatment advice that does not warn of possible negative consequences of the treatment, or health hazards associated with the treatment." This contributor also thinks that those who post a query should wait awhile when considering the advice they are offered, because a tip from the first person to respond may be expanded, amended, or contradicted in comments received later.

Almost none of the contributors to this presentation, however, said they ever responded to confusing or incorrect information posted on the Internet by posting an alerting message.

A general objects conservator in Canada said, QUOTE "I'm ashamed to admit that I have never acted on what I believed to be poor or inadequate advice. I read the Conservation DistList very quickly, print off bits and pieces for later reference, and move right on to the more pressing issues in the lab."

An archaeological conservator based in the USA said: QUOTE "I think that I have not yet woken to the significance of how much is now interactive because of the Internet – and that one can respond more readily to Internet authors than one could to [the authors of] printed books [and articles]...."

Concern about who is offering and receiving advice has caused the subscribers of

one listserve to restrict access. Participants of OSG-L must be members of either the Objects Specialty Group or the Wooden Artifacts Group, though occasionally other individuals are permitted to subscribe. Access to the OSG-L archive, too, is restricted.

Here is one respondent's reason for preferring that the OSG-L be restricted: QUOTE "...I don't feel I have to stop to take the time to limit or alter or qualify what I am communicating because I assume the readers, or at least the bulk of them, have a common perspective, background and similar knowledge." This person adds, QUOTE "there are definitely things I might post to the [OSG] list because it is for members only that I might not post to the Cons Dist List for example, or another public site." NOTE: The Conservation DistList is not really a "public site," since the moderator decides who may participate. The DistList archives, however, are open to anyone who has access to the Internet.

Only some subscribers to OSG-L participate in its online discussions. A few of those whom I call "silent listeners" explained their reticence via personal e-mails to me, with evident relief at being able to express their concerns in private. The gist of what they said is that they are too busy to take time from work for online chatting with colleagues (although they seem willing to read what others post), and/or they have been intimidated by OSG-L messages that seemed too pontificating or scolding. NOTE that negative comments offered constructively can seem excessively harsh online, since they lack the mitigating effect of a kindly facial expression or tone of voice. Personally, I find that it helps to delay a negative critique and reread it before posting it.

An objects conservator in the USA said this about, QUOTE, "prescribing treatments over the Internet without having first examined the object. It seems rather like calling or e-mailing a doctor or dentist and asking for a prescription prior to having an examination." This person wonders, QUOTE "What are the liability issues for conservators in prescribing treatment advice without examining the object?"

The legal issues regarding cyberspace communications are complex and evolving. How they effect us would make a good topic for another talk.

My query regarding job openings posted on the Internet elicited the biggest response. Within a month I received 23 replies, all but two unequivocally positive. Even the two people who sounded less enthusiastic also check the 'Net for jobs, though one (possibly in the USA), said, QUOTE "Most museums don't post their job vacancies, which makes it real hard specially in such a young field." The other, (in Canada) opined, QUOTE "I have found word-of-mouth is the most effective means of finding jobs."

An employer's perspective was offered by a senior conservator at a large conservation lab in a West Coast museum. This person listed several advantages for posting job and fellowship openings on the Internet, via the DistList and relevant

conservation specialty lists:

QUOTE “

- it is immediate, no waiting for the next publication date
- it is free ...
- it is far reaching, international in nature
- [it requires] no updating mailing lists, postage, envelope stuffing, or hoping people read the ‘please post’ request.”

“The only disadvantage,” this person added, “is that the targeted audience may not check the websites where we post notices.”

Even those who check for appropriate jobs without success appreciate being able to obtain information about job requirements and salaries. Another bonus with Internet job searches is that it is easy for the peripatetic conservator to stay in touch; an e-mail address can be more permanent than a home address. I was surprised to learn how many respondents were willing to travel great distances, even jump continents, to accept jobs that they found enticing. The job-posting sites that contributors mentioned most favorably were: Conservation DistList / CoOL; Global Museums, Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), and the site called “Conservation Employment Australia” that is maintained by Vanessa Roth. This, QUOTE, “free noticeboard serving the materials conservation community in Australia and the Asia Pacific region” is being run from Finland now, where Vanessa is studying, but she assured me it still works fine!

The following quote is from a conservator in Canada who wishes to remain anonymous. I think it nicely sums up how our field benefits from cyberspace communications: QUOTE

“I have found the Internet to be an incredibly useful resource for gathering information related to conservation, including, but certainly not limited to, looking for work. Like many young conservators, for the first few years after completing my conservation training, I worked in a series of short-term internships and contract positions in a number of ...cities before landing my current permanent position (which was also an Internet posting). The conservation resources in general on the Internet are absolutely critical for staying current in the field, particularly for those of us living in regions with few conservation professionals with which to network.”

Conservation OnLine is fast becoming a global village for the world of material culture preservation. Will our vast international forum and archives remain available on the Internet when its founder and current moderator, Walter Henry, ceases to run it, and/or when Stanford University Libraries ceases to finance and host it? Dear Walter cannot be cloned, I fear, so we must look for ways to assist him now and assure the continuation of CoOL. The international contributors to this presentation have made it clear that many of us already rely on cyberspace communications to help us do our best work.