

# Re-inventing the mailing list is one way to reduce email stress

April 28 2015, by Adam Conner-Simons

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We all feel it—that panicked sensation when we check our inbox and see the deluge of emails awaiting our attention. The average person receives

upwards of 150 emails a day, and it often seems like no amount of tagging or filtering can close the floodgates.

One major source of stress is the never-ending conversation threads made possible by group emails. Mailing lists can be a fantastic medium for substantive discussions, but often they deliver too much of what we don't want and not enough of what we do.

Believe it or not, such tools have barely changed since the pre-Internet days of Arpanet 40 years ago: You either opt in or opt out, you get dozens of irrelevant emails, and the views of a few loudmouths usually end up drowning out the rest.

But what if there were a better way?

In an age of Facebook and Reddit, users expect a sense of control over how they consume their content, and yet that control and personalization often doesn't extend to their own inboxes. Now, researchers from MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (CSAIL) are trying to change that with a new prototype system called Murmur that aims to improve the mailing-list experience by incorporating popular social-media features like upvoting, following, and blocking.

CSAIL PhD student Amy Zhang, lead author on a new paper she presented this week at the ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems in Seoul, says she'd always been struck by the fact that people use mailing lists for such a variety of reasons - a sentiment that was echoed by her team's surveys of more than 400 individuals from 30 different academic, social and geographical mailing lists.

"Email occupies a strange space between work and play, where it's inherently more professional than something like Twitter, but will still include content that's not directly work-related," says Zhang, who wrote

the paper with MIT Professor David Karger and University of Michigan Professor Mark Ackerman. "Even if you set guidelines for a mailing list, it can be difficult to get everyone on the same page, which leads to some users feeling inbox overload and others wishing there was more substantive discussion."

The answer, Zhang says, is to create an experience that's as customizable as the ones we have on social media.

For example, a sizable portion of respondents said they wanted to have more meaningful conversations on list-relevant topics—but were deterred from initiating because of the perception that they were "spamming" people.

With Murmur, which is still in active development, tentative senders will be able to post a message to a specific subset of friends on the list who could give it the equivalent of a Facebook "like" or a Reddit "upvote", such that it automatically spreads to more list recipients. You can also explicitly exclude certain people from emails you send, which could come in handy for office surprise parties or happy hours.

Such functions emphasize what Karger describes as one of the core goals of the project: to make mailing lists - and email more generally - a better experience for people who want to have more substantial discussions.

"Mailing lists have their roots in some of the world's earliest conversations about key topics like programming and technology," says Karger, citing newsgroup platforms like Usenet. "They remain an integral avenue for communications, and so I think it's important that we make the necessary tweaks to keep them vital and relevant."

As far as receiving messages, many respondents expressed a feeling of "interruption fatigue" and wished they could choose how much content

they receive. Murmur addresses this by letting you "follow" or "mute" particular users, threads and topics, and even providing the option of specifying how many emails with certain tags that you receive in a given day or week.

"It's interesting to revisit the idea of mailing lists and what is it about this antique tool that people can't give up," says Gloria Mark, Professor of Informatics at the University of California at Irvine. "What's great about the team's system is that it's still preserving the qualities of email that people find attractive, but also borrowing the features from social media that make it so successful."

Our emails have long been a topic of concern for providers. Google's new Inbox, for example, tries to help by using machine-learning techniques to bundle our messages into "important" and "unimportant" folders. But Karger objects to what he describes as "paternalistic approaches" to organizing our emails.

"Google has all these mysterious classifiers that create a pretty opaque experience for users in terms of how our emails are categorized," says Karger. "I like the idea of putting the human in direct control and having the computer serve more as an assistant."

The earliest listservs, based on the first email program SNDMSG, were geared toward particular interests such as programming and science fiction. In comparison to systems like message boards, people were drawn toward listservs' ease of use and simplicity in being able to send one [email](#) to communicate to a large group of people.

But as more customizable [social media](#) platforms have come to dominate our lives, Zhang says that the medium's one-size-fits-all mentality has become outdated and suboptimal.

"In an age where we can actively decide what communications are worth paying attention to, it's remarkable that mailing lists have continued to maintain such a binary approach," Zhang says. "You're either guaranteed to get everything, or you get nothing at all. Something like Murmur might not be a perfect solution, but at the very least it gives users a greater sense of ownership over their communications."

**More information:** The paper is available online:  
[people.csail.mit.edu/axz/papers/maillinglists.pdf](http://people.csail.mit.edu/axz/papers/maillinglists.pdf)

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