

ANALYSIS OF A MEDIA CHANNEL

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The current paper encompasses a monographic analysis of a media channel, including the organisational structure, spread, usage, the quality of contents and form, and functions of this channel. The channel under discussion is the list **sf2001@obs.ee**, observed during November 19–25, 2001.

METHOD OF DATA COMPILATION

Two main sources were used for compiling data: the list web site and direct inquiry of members. The **web-based archives** of the list (<http://www.obs.ee/cgi-bin/majordomo/info/sf2001>) provided an overview of the number, main topics and authors of messages posted to the list during the observed period. The site also included a short introductory of the list and owner information.

The list membership has not been previously studied; therefore I decided to gather information on the education, age, place, gender, interests, the role of the list and the period of membership directly from the members. For this purpose I sent all the registered members the following message and attached a short questionnaire:

I have sent the present questionnaire to all the users of list sf2001, on the addresses listed on the list web site.

I am working on an analysis on a media channel and have chosen this list as my research subject. For statistical purposes I would like to ask you the following questions:

How old are you?

Male or female?

Your education?

What are your main interests, hobbies?

Where do you live (Estonia, other country, town)?

What function does the list have for you – using a few key words?

How long have you been a list member?

I am grateful for all the answers. I also guarantee that I will use the obtained information anonymously and will provide feedback to anyone interested.

*With best regards,
Liisa Vesik*

The questionnaire was not posted directly to the list to avoid the risk of accidental backposting of some replies with potentially delicate personal information, as well as to avoid any discussion concerning the questionnaire and thus enabling impartial responses from the list members.

I received responses from 68 of more than 200 registered list members. Most of the replies were sent during the first three days after posting the questionnaire; I received the last one on January 7, 2004.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION OF THE CHANNEL

Listowner

The owner of the list is a private individual Taavi Tuvikene. The list is reportedly not associated with any organisation or institution; it is linked to the server under which it is registered only to the extent that the owner has a homepage there.

The list was established on May 6, 1996.

The list's "print run"

The number of messages posted to the list has grown exponentially. Within the last two years the largest number of messages was posted in August – possibly because most members have returned to work after summer vacation. Spring tends to be the period of the lowest number of postings.

Distribution

Due to its being an Estonian science-fiction list, the spread of the medium is limited (i) to the Estonian language speakers, (ii) to people

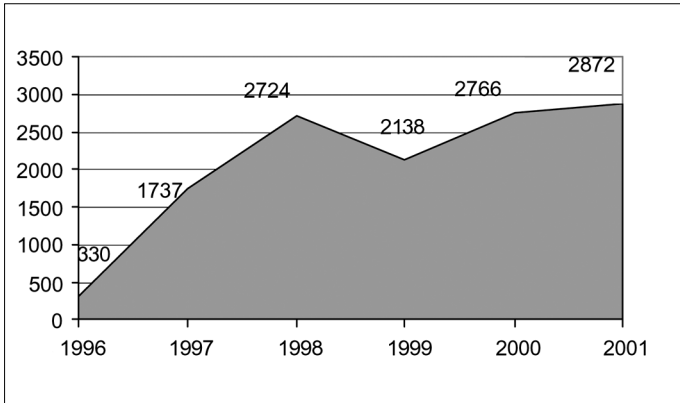


Figure 1. Dynamics in the number of postings in 1996–2001.

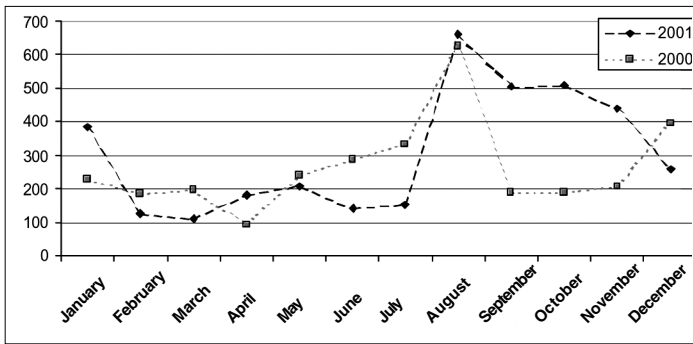


Figure 2. Dynamics in the number of postings per months in 2000–2001.

interested in science fiction, and (iii) to the number of people with frequent access to computers and electronic mail.

The number of registered members as of December 9, 2001, is 249. Two of the e-mail addresses are invalid (error message confirms of mail delivery failure) and at least two members have registered twice – i.e. each message posted in the list arrives at the mailboxes of at least 245 people. In addition to the possibility that the contents of a mailbox registered to one user is read by more than one person

(in case of a family's mailbox), the list is read in the web archives by at least 50 visitors. Many current subscribers of the list have noted that they used to read the list in the web archives before subscribing it; the opposite tendency, where list subscribers cancel subscription to read the list in the archives, is probably possible as well.

The absolute majority of subscribers have an e-mail address with .ee extension and reside in **Estonia**; users with addresses with other extensions (the total of 18) are linked to servers offering free mail services (yahoo.com, hot.com), and either live in Estonia or are Estonians living abroad.

Foreign members of the list reside in different parts of the world (Washington D.C., Helsinki, Copenhagen, etc.) with no determined community. Estonian members have largely concentrated around Tartu and Tallinn.

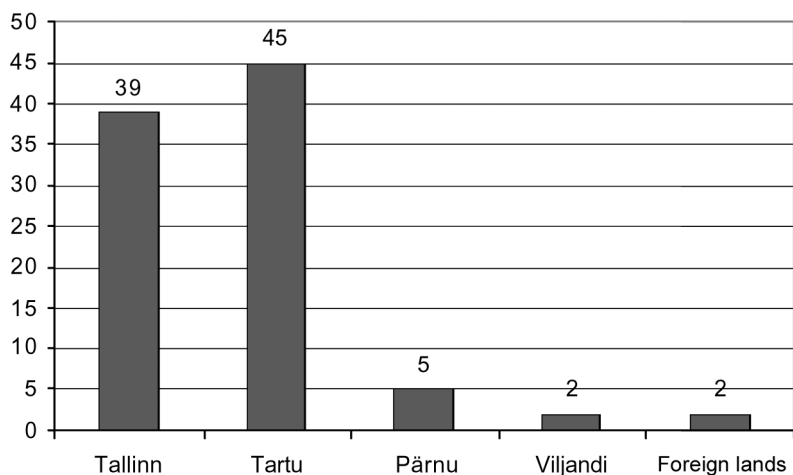


Figure 3. *Subscribers by place of residence. The figures include those (93 members) whose place of residence is known. In the Table, Tallinn and Tartu comprise smaller populated places in the surroundings. The users whose address has not been specified but whose e-mail address is registered under the University of Tartu server have been classified as residing in Tartu.*

General orientation

The list is a public non-moderated list, where the only restriction is the maximum length of the message. The general orientation of the list is:

“The list sf2001 is intended for a general discussion of topics on science-fiction and will be used for exchanging thoughts and impressions of science-fiction literature, movies, comic strips, magazines, for sharing and asking information on the subject, for mediating the purchase, selling and exchange of materials, etc. Here science fiction means scientific speculation as well as fantasy and horror. We welcome any response to the topics!” (<http://www.obs.ee/cgi-bin/majordomo/onfo/sf2001>).

GENERAL CHARACTERISATION OF USER GROUP

The list subscriber is most often a young man in his twenties. The average reader is 29 years old and has read the list from the very beginning or “for the past couple of years”, either a graduate or a graduate student (most of the sci-fi fanatics with secondary school education noted that they have studied at the university or at some other higher education school but have not completed their studies). Next to the shared interest towards science fiction their interests include computers (many use computers in their occupation), literature (which could be assumed, since most of the people interested in science fiction take interest in its literary forms; some list subscribers, such as editors, translators, are also into it by occupation). Quite surprisingly, many from the user group listed bicycling, skiing or other sports as their hobbies, also sports in general. Music was mentioned surprisingly often, while the interest towards various areas of science depended largely on the percentage of university graduates and students. Other hobbies included electronics (a hobby typical to men?) and photography.

One of the areas of interest, which could tentatively be categorised under this topic and which was revealed in the responses concerning the function of the list, is the interest towards people and society in general.

Male	48	185	19.51%	75.20%
Male?	137		55.69%	
Female	19	40	7.72%	16.26%
Female?	21		8.54%	
Either?	21	21	8.54%	8.54%

Table 1. Gender distribution of the user group in numbers and as a percentage of the total number of list subscribers. Male, Female – users, whose gender was revealed in the responses; Male?, Female? – list subscribers, whose gender could be guessed from their e-mail address. Either? – users, whose gender could not be guessed from their e-mail address.

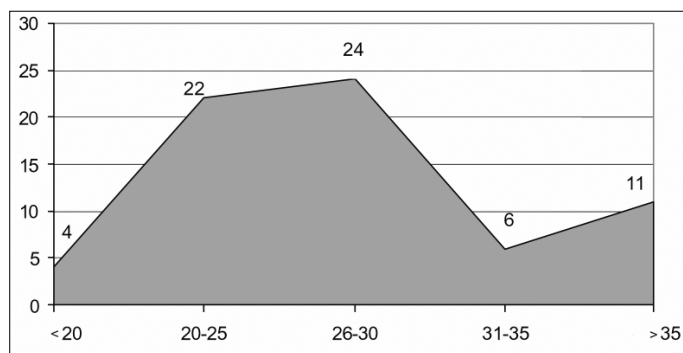


Figure 4. Age distribution of the user group per five-year periods. Data on 64 subscribers, average age 28,96 years.

Secondary school students	Graduated from secondary school	Graduated from specialised school	Students	University graduates	Total
2	10	2	30	34	78
2.56%	12.82%	2.56%	38.46%	43.59%	100.00%

Table 2. Distribution of user group by the level of education in numbers and in percentages. University and other higher education school students are categorised under a separate group.

Computer	Literature	Sports	Sciences	Music	Electronics	Photography
33	31	21	15	17	5	6

Table 3. The most popular interests of the user group. More than 100 different objects of interest were mentioned. More popular hobbies are grouped together under one heading; as it came as a response to an open question, the obtained figures indicate merely frequency. The interest towards science-fiction has not been mentioned here, as all the subscribers are presumed to have it. The *COMPUTER* subgroup comprises computers, programming, and *IT* field in general. *LITERATURE* comprises the interest towards fiction, reading, books, translation, etc. The *SPORTS* subgroup comprises the specific as well as general interest towards sports. *SCIENCES* comprises various fields of study – the humanities as well as the sciences and natural sciences. Subsection *MUSIC* comprises the general and more specific interest towards music.

COMMUNICATOR: AIMS AND FUNCTIONS

The electronic list offers everyone interested an opportunity to speak up within the range of the list's functions. The list does not convey the opinions of any formal institution, although it mediates the communication of science-fiction fanatics. The contents of the forum depends on the interest of subscribers, participation activity, as well as demands on closing a topic; there are no ordered pieces of writing from a specific author or at a specific topic.

Only a small number of subscribers, however, participate in the discussion. The **most productive authors** in the list in 2001 were Ago Vilo, Ants Miller, Avo Nappo, Jaana Järve, Juhan Habicht, Jüri Kallas, Kristjan Sander, Mati Tee, Meelik Koll, Raul Sulbi, Mario Kivistik, Raul Veede and Sven Kivisildnik, all of whom have been actively involved in publishing science-fiction literature. According to the passive users and others, one of the main functions of the list is to mediate the “expert” opinion; thus, people who express their opinions are the “opinion leaders” for others, and vice versa – people, who know what they are talking about, express their opinions.

For the current user group the main **functions** of the list are communicating news and information, mediating science-fiction (as well as other) discussions and opinions, educating oneself in (science-

fiction) matters and the practical usefulness of this knowledge. Users also value other list members and the quality of communication, the opportunity of active as well as passive participation.

Very generally put, the **three main functions** of the list are the following:

1. a mediator for the user group community;
2. informativeness;
3. entertainment.

Which functions are valued more highly, depends on a person, obviously, therefore, differing from satisfying the functions of contentment. Ten or so users noted that the informativeness of the list has not met their expectations.

CONTENTS CHARACTERISATION: ON THE BASIS OF ONE WEEK

For analysing the topics discussed in the list I read all messages posted in one week (November 19–25, 2001; see <http://www.obs.ee/cgi-bin/majordomo/info/sf2001>). During this period 105 messages in 9 threads were posted. In this context, a thread is a sequence of

Information, news	Being informed, feeling useful	Discussions, opinions	Entertaining, a change	List members	Passive user
32	19	31	14	13	7

Table 4. List functions for its users. The results were grouped under five main categories. *INFORMATION, NEWS* comprises the list as a mediator of information and the news. *BEING INFORMED, FEELING USEFUL* comprises references from the general to the relatively specific. *DISCUSSIONS, OPINIONS* comprise being able to express one's opinion as well as the interest towards the opinions of others. *ENTERTAINING, A CHANGE* comprises the enjoying of witty remarks, an opportunity to express oneself freely, but also its function as a change in the routine work of "serious matters". *LIST MEMBERS* comprises reasons based on personal relationship, why people have signed up to the list (acquaintances, the sense of community, etc.). *PASSIVE USER* refers to the mentioning of being a passive reader of the list.

replies and its branches posted in response to a message at a specific subject.

The most active weekdays of correspondence are (in descending order) Monday, Tuesday and Thursday; the number of postings on Wednesdays and Sundays is half as large, and the number of postings on Fridays and Saturdays half as large as the number of Wednesdays and Saturdays. The number of postings per day varies up to 7 times: from 3 to 20 letters.

The activity of **authors** varies to a great degree as well: three fourth of the members that wrote to the list during this period posted up to two messages, whereas 45% of messages were posted by three authors. Only one tenth of all the list subscribers participated in the discussion during the period.

These results indicate that the number of active opinion leaders in the list is small – less than ten – and they are sometimes, depending on the topic, seconded by a certain number of people, who express their opinion but do not participate in the longer discussion. In the week under discussion such opinion leaders were Jüri Kallas, Avo Nappo, Ago Vilo, Meelis Koll, Kristjan Sander, and Valentin Abramov.

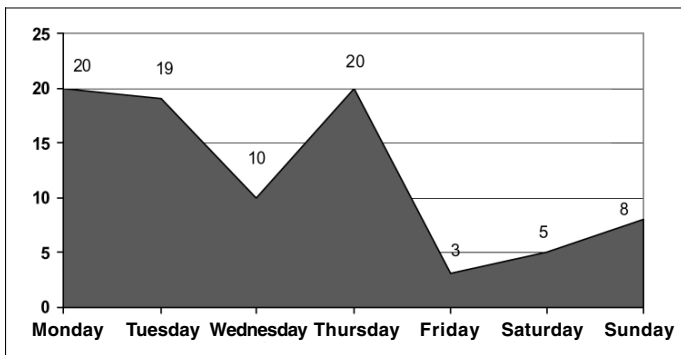


Figure 5. Dynamics in the number of postings in one week. November 19–25, 2001.

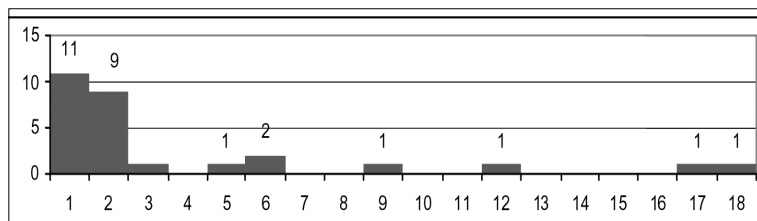


Figure 6. The number of messages per author (November 19–25, 2001). Axis *x* shows the number of messages, axis *y* shows the number of authors.

The no. of letters	Authors	Percentage of authors	Percentage of postings
1–3	21	75.0%	30.5%
5–10	4	14.3%	24.8%
>10	3	10.7%	44.8%
Total	28	100.0%	100.0%

Table 5. Dynamics of correspondence activity (November 19–25, 2001). One tenth of the list subscribers were actively involved in the discussion. Three fourth of the users post 1–2 messages, whereas one tenth of the authors post nearly half of the total number of messages.

Discussions involve a wide range of **topics**: often more than one topic is discussed; the discussions may flow parallelly, but may also grow out of another discussion. For the sake of simplicity the analysis is limited to one week, though the discussions of given topics are by no means limited to a certain period of time. During the observed week, 18 different topics were commented on (discerned by subjects), whereas most of the postings were sent in response to four subjects, one fifth of the messages discussed topics that received less than five responses.

Now, let me point out some of the topics discussed this week:

1. Politics in science-fiction, literature, and its impact on them
2. Sexual minorities and sci-fi literature
3. Social and political order in literature

4. Queer fantasy: Its meaning and representatives in sci-fi literature
5. Spam: Should the list be private?
6. Searches on specific subjects
7. Ideas to complement the database of sci-fi literature
8. Messages on topics not discussed in the list

The no. of replies	1	2	3	4	6	12	14	20	25
The no. of subjects	5	5	1	1	2	1	1	1	1
Percentage of the total correspondence	4.8%	9.5%	2.9%	3.8%	11.4%	11.4%	13.3%	19.0%	23.8%
	21.0%				11.4%	67.6%			

Table 6. Topics and their topicality in discussion. The number of replies posted in response to the specific topic, the number of topics that received the corresponding number of replies and their percentage in the total correspondence.

VALUES. “POSITIVE” AND “NEGATIVE” CHARACTERS

The joining value for the list subscribers is ‘science fiction’ - though there is some disagreement in which literature can be classified as such, how it is subcategorized and how to rate different authors. Most discords and attributed roles of “positive” and “negative” characters depend on the author’s views of the world, of the particular subject, of the particular author, of the particular style, but also of the author of the previous posting. Some respondents to the questionnaire admitted of having ‘favourite’ authors whose postings are always read, while the postings of some other authors are deleted without opening.

List subscribers tend to view positively the reunions of science fiction fanatics, *Stalker*, the Estonian science fiction award, the database of science fiction literature and the electronic journal *Algernon*. It must be noted that the opinion-leaders among the user group are actively involved in these activities. The indisputable negative characters are

people, who are not members of the list, but who have discussed matters of science fiction in the press (Berk Vaher, etc.)

COMMUNICATION STYLE AND DESIGN

The language usage of the list members is decent – the netiquette (see e.g. <http://lists.ut.ee/links.html>) is rarely violated; the most common violation is insufficient quoting of the previous message. Another unwritten rule is that it is bad form to send a message with an html-code. True, the language usage hardly corresponds to the spelling rules of the Estonian literary language: sentence initial capital letters are often omitted, the use of interpunctuation (either the lack of it as well as its repetitive use), emoticons or smileys, foreign abbreviations (IMHO – ‘in my humble opinion’), slang and colloquialisms, paralinguistic (ee, khm), numbers instead of diacritic letters and symbols (‘x’ instead of ‘ks’). Book titles are usually separated by inverted commas, but foreign text is not differentiated from the Estonian text. The titles of books and the names of authors, etc. are often abbreviated to initials in longer discussions (“Left Hand of Darkness” – LHD; Ursula le Guin – ULG; queer fantasy – QF), which is why newcomers may have some problems with understanding the discussion forum.

Signatures vary depending on the user; the variations depend on the user’s personal style rather than the fact that it is posted to this particular list. It must be noted that signature styles rarely conform to the formal rules writing. The signed name may not coincide with the sender’s name in the heading of the message; at the same time it enables to identify the author who writes to the list under different e-mail addresses.

A typical message includes a number of structural elements, only one of which is obligatory; the use of others depends on the author’s personal preferences:

- introductory greeting (may be omitted)
- reference to the message that will be quoted (may be omitted)
- the quote (is usually included in a reply to someone’s message or a particular argument)
- personal opinion, comment / question (obligatory)

- (a message may include more than one ‘quotation-comment’ pairs)
- signature (may be omitted)

Discussion proceeds from the message, where someone asks for information or expresses his /her opinion on a topic. The message receives replies, quoting the passage from the previous message that the author will comment on; the following responses may argue with the original message or some of the previously posted replies. The original title of the thread may not reveal the contents of the message after it has undergone changes: in some cases the responses to responses have digressed from the original subject, but the title has remained the same.

CONCLUSIVE ANALYSIS

List sf2001 is, no doubt, the most influential media channel of science fiction and people interested in science fiction in Estonia. The only rival to the list is perhaps the electronic journal *Algernon*, but the functions and solutions of the latter differ widely from those of the list.

As to expressing one’s opinion on specific publications, the list competes with BAAS, the database of science fiction literature in Estonian, where books can be rated but which allows no lengthier interactive discussions.

The list has proven the best medium for the exchange of thoughts on topics of science fiction. It enables its users to substantiate their opinions, quote the opinions of other members, rely on the list archives, if necessary, pose questions and express opinions interactively.

The main advantage of the list over other web-based mediums (notice boards, forums, chatrooms, etc.) is the opportunity to communicate interactively by exchanging longer messages. One of the indisputable pros of the web-based medium is also its low cost and increasingly easier accessibility.

The list members communicate with each other in Estonian and most of them are young educated men in Tartu, Tallinn and in the

surroundings. The list is not associated with any institutions, but mediates the views, opinions and interests of opinion leaders, including people who are actively involved in publishing and promoting science fiction literature in Estonia, since most of the list members are passive “consumers”. The general communication style of the list is informal rather than formal, whereas the authors use widely personal style. Although many of the list members are acquainted, it is not a closed community, where new members are rebuffed.