

MLA Newsletter Taskforce Report 17 April 2009

I. Executive Summary

The MLA Newsletter Taskforce attempted to address two main questions: 1) what is the purpose of the MLA Newsletter, and 2) what changes, if any, should be made to its content and distribution. The Taskforce gathered the Newsletter's use statistics from 2005-2008 and conducted a survey of the MLA membership to ascertain how the Newsletter is used by the members of MLA (and others who may read it), as well as reader opinions about its content and delivery.

The 239 survey responses provided some insights into the Newsletter's use, and non-use. While more than 80% of personal MLA members responding read the Newsletter, almost twenty percent of personal MLA members responding (and almost 27% of all survey takers) claimed they don't read the Newsletter. Based on comments, this is largely due to lack of time and lack of awareness about how or when to access new issues. It seems that the Newsletter suffers from a lack of PR. The primary mode of notification of new issues is MLA-L, which is not the official voice of MLA.

Based on survey responses, readers are fairly evenly split between whether they read the PDF or HTML versions of the Newsletter. Although web statistics show that the HTML versions are used more than twice as often as the PDF ones, this is likely because people who print the PDF version don't refer back to it online. This may suggest that we don't need to maintain both HTML and PDF versions if the HTML version was as printable/readable as PDF. Surprisingly, several people still lament the demise of the print version of the Newsletter. The Taskforce advocates that the Newsletter should be archived permanently no matter what form it takes, as 87% percent of respondents refer to past Newsletter issues.

The content areas of most importance to readers include news of the Association and its members, including past and future conference reports, which comprise a large percentage of the Newsletter's content. Response was mixed over whether some Newsletter content sections could be moved permanently to the MLA Web site, where they could be updated in real time and not suffer from the delay in publication that occurs with the Newsletter. The sections that garnered the most votes for relocation to the Web site were: Calendar, Announcements, and Committee Reports. The least-read section (according to survey respondents) is Beyond MLA, which is the only section to receive significant votes for elimination. Almost twenty percent of respondents claimed not to read roundtable or chapter reports. A significant number of respondents indicated that they would be interested in new or expanded sections of the Newsletter for "More library-related news," "MLA member news," and "short member submissions." Slightly fewer than half of respondents would be interested in a section for notices about recent Web site updates.

There is no clear vision from the membership about whether the Newsletter should exist as a distinct entity or whether it should become part and parcel of the Association's Web site, with content scattered to appropriate sections on the Web site and no longer residing under a Newsletter rubric (which was suggested in several reader comments). Readability (having all of the information in one place) and archiving (which is being addressed by a separate MLA task force) seem to be the main reasons for not disbanding the Newsletter as a separate publication. But this also brings us to the question of the Newsletter's purpose, a harder question to answer than the one of how it is

being used. The Newsletter serves an important role as the official publication of the Association's news. More formal than MLA-L (which is not the official voice of MLA's business) and less formal than *Notes* (which, while an official publication, does not serve as its primary purpose as a communication tool for Association business), the Newsletter is a venue for current information to be shared with the Association's membership (and others who care to read it) about the activities of the organization. Each Newsletter issue serves a slightly different purpose—the pre-annual-meeting issue is different than the post-annual-meeting issue. However, there is room to move this publication and our communication into the 21st century so that the information can reach members in a more timely and meaningful manner. More robust notification methods, Newsletter RSS feeds, and moving some content to the Association's Web site will make the Newsletter a more useful, and hopefully, more widely read publication.

II. Recommendations

NB: The Taskforce is aware that some of these recommendations may affect the MLA Handbook, but has not investigated the specific instances in question.

Newsletter Management and Creation

1. The Newsletter Editor should solicit and edit content.
2. The MLA Web Team, A-R, or an outside vendor should handle the creation of the HTML (and PDF); or, there should be an assistant newsletter editor to do this. Rationale for this recommendation come from the Taskforce's discussions about: reducing the high workload for the Newsletter Editor, separating the editorial content from production functions as with MLA's other publications, making it easier to appoint a newsletter editor who might not have the technical skills, and the usefulness of putting the production under auspices of the Web Team.
3. Concentrate on creating a readable, printable, high-quality HTML version—making the HTML version an official version of the Newsletter.
4. Streamline the creation process as much as possible, including using a single source/format to create both the PDF and HTML versions (if both are maintained)

Newsletter Content

1. Consider establishing regular columns for content (e.g., job-hunting advice, collection management tips, technology how-to's) with content written by members or a standing contributing editor; there is not currently a home for these items on the MLA Web site.
2. Create an annual index to Newsletter content (especially if it is broadened as suggested in point #1 above).
3. The Newsletter should not be used for dissemination of time-sensitive information and the Calendar and Announcements sections should move to MLA's Web site.
4. Informal committee reports and round table reports (post annual meeting) that are now in Newsletter should also be on Web site linked from Committee and Round Table pages as appropriate. Currently Committees' annual reports to the Board are provided on the Web site, but these are two different sets of reports; the Newsletter can include links to these reports when they are available, but does not need to duplicate this content.
5. Annual meeting reports currently presented in the Newsletter should also be posted to a new "Annual Meeting" section of the MLA website. This section would collocate conference

information, handouts and presentations slides, and other information created at the Annual Meetings each year.(ARSC even has a section on their website for conference recordings: <http://www.arsc-audio.org/cds.html>); the Newsletter can include links to these reports when they are available, but does not need to duplicate this content.

6. The Newsletter is not a "members-only" publication and is currently freely available on the web; therefore there are no concerns with keeping a "members-only" section of the Newsletter .

Newsletter Distribution and PR

1. While not strictly under the purview of this study, MLA-L is not the official voice of MLA and a measureable number of members do not subscribe to MLA-L. Therefore, it should not be used as the primary method for informing members when new issues of the Newsletter are available. The email list from A-R is closer to the complete membership list and should also be used for notifications of new issues. Presumably there are members who do not use email or the Internet, but those numbers are likely declining.
 - a. The notification email should include small sections of content with a “read more” link
 - b. Offer print “opt-in” for individuals or libraries who want a print version sent to them
2. Archive the Newsletter, either as print copies of the HTML (or PDF if that is maintained) with other MLA papers and files, and/or the HTML should be archived as part of the Web site archiving process.
3. Create an RSS feed for the entire Newsletter so that readers can choose to be alerted that way when new issues are released.

III. Survey Results Analysis

Question 1: What is your affiliation with MLA?

Total responses	239
Personal MLA Member	82.4% (197)
Institutional MLA Member	1.7% (4)
Student MLA Member	4.6% (11)
Retired MLA Member	2.9% (7)
MLA chapter member (but not national member)	0.4% (1)
Other professional library or music organization affiliation (ALA, AMS, ARSC, SAM, SEM, etc)	7.9% (19)

Question 2: How did you hear about the survey?

The survey was distributed by MLA-L, by direct-emailing members based on A-R’s membership records, and by distribution to SEM, ARSC, and the AMS listservs. Every respondent heard about the survey via one or more of these means.

Question 3: Do you read the newsletter?

Total responses	238
yes	73.1% (174)
no	26.9% (64)

Breakdown of responses by membership category

Institutional member	4	75% (3) no; 25% (1) yes
MLA chapter member	1	100% no
Other professional org	19	79% (15) no; 21% (4) yes
Personal MLA member	197	19% (38) no; 81% (159) yes
Retired MLA member	7	29% (2) no; 71% (5) yes
Student MLA member	11	36% (4) no; 64% (7) yes

Comments and trends

Of the 69 individuals who left comments concerning this question (primarily those who answered that they don't read the newsletter), their responses fell into three groups overall.

1. No time
2. Don't know where to find it/don't receive it/don't get notices about its availability
3. Don't want to read it online

Some of the specific responses seem to indicate a bigger problem with MLA and Newsletter communications—several people reported never having heard of the Newsletter or having no idea when and where to find new issues. Because this survey was disseminated to members via MLA-L and the official list of members from AR, this perhaps indicates that some percentage of the membership does not subscribe to MLA-L. It also begs the question concerning what is the official mode of communication for the association. Several people also expressed a change in their habits once the Newsletter became online only.

- “I don't recall ever receiving it - I get "Notes", but why not the newsletter?”
- “There have been no e-mail reminders when new issues are posted to the MLA website.”
- “Didn't know it existed”
- “Have to sign in to read it. If it did not require password that I can never remember, I might print it off and read it. Will not read it online.”
- “I stopped reading it when it went on-line only. When I had something to hold, I read it. Sadly, I spend so much time in front of computers that the last thing I want to do in my spare time”
- “I stopped reading it when it went online. Also, there isn't much except conference news...if there were more in the newsletter online, I'd be inclined to check it out. Also, if I received in print, I'd read it.”

Question 4: Which version of the newsletter do you read?

Total responses	142
PDF online	49.3% (70)
PDF printed out	26.1% (37)

HTML online 47.2% (67)
 HTML Printed out 2.8% (4)

Web hit statistics

Year	Newsletter #	May		June		July		August		Totals
		HTML	PDF	HTML	PDF	HTML	PDF	HTML	PDF	
2005	143	74	28	85	43	61	31	52	16	390
2006	144	341	35	269	37	231	32	179	31	1155
2006	145	93	25	100	12	73	16	50	n/a	369
2006	146	47	9	51	n/a	50	n/a	29	n/a	186
2006	147	106	23	n/a	7	51	14	56	13	270
2007	148	137	36	125	27	92	21	69	18	525
2007	149	98	37	89	12	86	18	71	25	436
2007	150	76	37	48	12	59	28	52	26	338
2007	151	60	13	77	28	76	21	65	27	367
2008	152	134	74	134	90	108	73	74	45	732
2008	153			133	95	75	76	68	69	516
	Totals	1166	317	1111	363	962	330	765	270	

All HTML Views: 4004
 All PDF Views: 1280

NB: Newsletter #144 was the one following the 75th Anniversary meeting.

Question 5: If you use more than one version of the newsletter, how do you use them differently? (e.g., print one copy (PDF or HTML) to read and recycle when finished and use HTML version to look up information later if necessary)

Total responses	31
Read and print pdf	2
Read html, print pdf	4
Read pdf, read html	6
Read and print pdf, html as reference	11
Read and print html, pdf cite	2
Read html	1
Unknown	5

Question 6: How often do you refer back to information in a specific newsletter (on average)?

Total responses	142
Frequently	1.4% (2)
Occasionally	27.5% (39)
Very infrequently	57.7% (82)
Never	13.4% (19)

Question 7: What things do you like the most about the MLA newsletter? (List as many as you want)

Of the 239 individuals responding to the survey, only 93 answered question #7. Three of the answers were deemed not responsive to the question, and were excluded. The 90 remaining free-text submissions were analyzed and broken into individual concepts, resulting in 221 data elements. These were grouped into 39 categories.

The responses fell into roughly two general categories: 1) content that was liked (82%) and 2) things about the nature of the *Newsletter* that were liked (18%). The top eight responses:

1. Conference Reports	38
2. News -- members	21
3. news -- members -- transitions	18
4. News -- conference (upcoming)	17
5. News -- Association	14
6. News -- Chapters	14
7. President's Report	13
8. Photos	12

Four of the top eight can be grouped under the umbrella “news of the association” (nos. 1, 4, 5, 7). Overall, 46% of responses (101) indicated that they liked news of the Association in the *Newsletter*, with 27% of all responses linking their preference specifically to news of the annual conference (reports of meetings, information on upcoming meetings).

News of the Association

News (unspecified)	8	
Conference Reports	38	
News -- conference	4	
News -- conference (upcoming)	17	
News -- Association	14	
News -- awards	1	
President's Report	13	
Announcements	5	
Annual Reports	1	
Total	101	46% (101/221)

Given that the content of the *Newsletter* is closely oriented to the annual meeting, these statistics are perhaps inevitable. More surprising is the number of the people who read the *Newsletter*, at least in part, for member news: 23% of all responses. General “news about members” is the no. 2 highest response, with the “Transitions” column being no. 3. These findings are also reflected in survey question 8, which finds the “Transitions” column to be the most read item in the *Newsletter*.

News of Members

news -- members	21
news -- members (new)	6
news -- members -- transitions	18
members' publications	6

Total

51 23% (51/221)

This is surprising in that the amount of member news published in the *Newsletter* is small, relative to the overall content. Also, “Transitions” is derived almost entirely from the MLA Web site (“Positions Recently Filled”). Its popularity among respondents indicates they like having it “delivered” via the *Newsletter*, and one could speculate that perhaps readers do not view it on the Web site.

Chapter news was the no. 6 “most popular” item among those surveyed, receiving a little over 6% of the responses (14).

Most of the 39 categories of responses about the nature of the *Newsletter* were preferences voiced by one or two individuals, and thus difficult to generalize about. The exception is “Photos” which appeared 12 times among the responses (ranked no. 8 among all response categories). Otherwise, the responses were positive about the appearance, etc.

Comments

Respondents liked the *Newsletter* for the news of the Association, its members and its chapters. The number of responses indicating they liked member news and photos may suggest a change in emphasis for the *Newsletter*, towards a more popular style that emphasizes members more than it currently does.

Question 8: *The following are current sections in the newsletter. Please use the following grid to indicate whether or not you read each section. Also, please indicate if you think the content should be integrated into the main MLA web site or eliminated entirely.*

	Read	Don't read	Move to web site	Eliminate	Response Count
President's Report	84.6% (115)	10.3% (14)	17.6% (24)	0.0% (0)	136
Calendar	69.9% (95)	11.0% (15)	43.4% (59)	0.0% (0)	136
Transitions	91.9% (124)	3.0% (4)	21.5% (29)	0.7% (1)	135
Members' Publications	81.2% (108)	7.5% (10)	21.8% (29)	2.3% (3)	133
Committee Reports	77.0% (104)	11.9% (16)	32.6% (44)	0.0% (0)	135
Roundtable Reports	70.1% (94)	19.4% (26)	28.4% (38)	0.7% (1)	134
Chapter Reports	69.5% (91)	19.1% (25)	26.7% (35)	0.8% (1)	131
Annual Meeting Articles (e.g. LAC preview; Plenary report)	86.1% (118)	7.3% (10)	16.8% (23)	0.7% (1)	137
New Members	85.1% (114)	6.0% (8)	20.1% (27)	0.7% (1)	134
Beyond MLA (reports from other	57.6% (76)	34.8% (46)	15.2% (20)	3.8% (5)	132

organizations)					
Announcements (e.g. Calls for papers; Grants & Awards)	75.2% (100)	14.3% (19)	30.1% (40)	1.5% (2)	133
MLA News (e.g. Election results, awards presented)	86.8% (118)	8.1% (11)	26.5% (36)	0.0% (0)	136

Question 9: Would you be interested in the following new sections of the newsletter?

More library-related news (e.g. performing arts libraries)

62.5% (75)

MLA member news

75.8% (91)

Short member submissions (e.g. poster-like information; excerpts from committee reports)

66.7% (80)

Recent web site updates

45.0% (54)

Question 10: Are there any other changes to the newsletter that you would advocate?

Of the 239 responses, 34 answered question 10. 7 said no changes were needed. One said to eliminate the print copy. The remaining 26 responses can be grouped into the following areas:

A. Additional topics

1. Include the facilities update in the newsletter.
2. Include something about library assistants/paraprofessionals now and then.
3. Institute an annual president's advice column for those new to the profession.
4. Articles should solicit feedback to increase communication. Break down the traditional publisher-to-public mode of communication.

B. Move to MLA-L

1. Announcements (e.g., Calls for Papers; Grants & Awards).
2. There were 3 recommendations for a link from MLA-L to the newsletter. E.g., Present all the headlines in a list via email, with some text following, then "click here to read more."
3. More frequent ads on MLA-L about the newsletter.
4. Email notifications about the NL.

C. Move to website. This seemed to be the most discussed topic, with many suggestions but no clear answers.

1. Reports from annual meetings, committees, chapters, roundtables.
2. Present news and highlights of stories in blog form, with links as appropriate to full stories and perhaps areas for comments. Gather the most important items into the newsletter.

3. Replace the newsletter (in the sense that it is a formal publication, made up of discrete issues, published permanently at fixed intervals) with the website (containing all of the same content, but continuously updated).
4. Move some areas to the website and include links to them in the newsletter.
5. Moving the NL to the website would make it easier to find the information later, but it is useful presented in one package. And I might not seek out updates on the web site.
6. If the website becomes more dynamic, a lot more could be moved there, maybe everything, with some elements being in a members-only section, and others in more public pages.
7. Move everything but "New Members"-- for confidentiality reasons [but this is already available online since the Newsletter is online]-- to the MLA web site.
8. If information is integrated into the web site, it needs to be archived. Older issues (20+ years) are used when trying to trace the history of something that was in the past.
9. I use the web site for reference only--conferences, publications, descriptions of committees, etc.—rather than reading things.
10. “As “Member's publications” editor, I've always thought that maybe the new publications would be best on a Web page where they were immediately available. It can take months from original publication to newsletter publication and I would think the authors would want the information out there more quickly (as long as people still read it!). I can go either way with this.”

D. Format

1. Print/Mail – 3 requests
2. RSS feeds – 2 requests: for content being moved to the website and for an announcement about the next newsletter being available.
3. More graphic elements.
4. Improve navigation and search of newsletter.

IV. Taskforce Membership

Kirstin Dougan (chair), Jon Haupt, Steve Mantz, Renee McBride, Anne Shelley, Linda Solow Blotner