

## The joy of electronic networking



A critical review of the electronic extension of the IEES conference in Christchurch 2001

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Archive of the Christchurch electronic extension:  
<http://www.ias.unu.edu/proceedings/icibs/iees-nz>

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### ReadMeFirst!

The idea sounds convincing: Only few people can afford to travel to conference sites as remote as Christchurch, New Zealand. They should be made accessible for a broader audience by using modern means of electronic communication, such as the internet. By this, the target audience can be extended considerably in size. The conference can be opened to people who could never afford the traveling costs.

So much for the theory. I had the chance to take part in the electronic extension of the Christchurch IEES conference in November 2001. I couldn't go in person, for various reasons, and hoped that I would be able to at least be part of the flow of thoughts and share some ideas with the real participants and with the online bunch.

My conclusion is ambiguous. Let me tell you why!

### Getting started

The electronic extension of the Christchurch conference had been announced by the organizer, J. Foo, long before the actual meeting, via the ET-ANN mailing list. As often, when there's plenty of time to do something, I tend to do it the very last moment - in this case a week before the actual meeting. Subscribing wasn't very difficult - just going to the website, clicking through a few links, entering an email adress and a password, that was it. I subscribed to "Keynote Lectures", to "Community Processes" and to "Ecological Engineering Education".

The harder part of it was, to get an overview about what was actually being discussed during the conference and what kind of material was actually available. Fig. 1 gives you an idea, how the website of the electronic extension looked – a list of more than 50 papers with links (to the respective paper, I assumed at first...)

ordered alphabetically after the last name of the first author. I soon found out that behind the links were mostly only short abstracts. It was impossible to get more than a dim impression of what was going to be discussed. Sometimes there were photos, some authors had given a list of references. However, I found it impossible to actually discuss anything based on the available material. I asked J. Foo, whether I had done something wrong and missed out on the full papers, but I hadn't.

Fig. 1: Starting page of the Christchurch electronic extension

Leif Gustavsson		<a href="#">On ecological engineering and sustainable development in a Swedish context.</a>
<b>Economics and Marketing</b>		
Matthew D Davis		<a href="#">Water Management in Chile: Where Markets and Development Collide with the Environment and Indigenous Peoples</a>
Philip A. Lawn		<a href="#">The role and limitations of markets in designing and achieving a sustainable society</a>
Vicki Martin*, Jo Cavanagh, Fiona Casswell, Ian Turney & Richard Gordon		<a href="#">Green house gas emissions: the capital and revenue carbon costs of residential developments</a>
<b>Landscape Services</b>		
R. Davies-Colley* & K. Rutherford		<a href="#">Some approaches for measuring and modelling riparian shade</a>
Paul Dickson		<a href="#">Engineering – Good For The Environment? The Lower Heathcote River case study</a>
Melanie Dixon		<a href="#">Managing willows in streams</a>
Prisca Duijn		<a href="#">Nature friendly banks along waterways in the Netherlands</a>
Gulyaev, S., Burkeridge*, J. & M. Geary		<a href="#">Erosion Monitoring and Prediction on an Urban Seashore</a>
A. Ditta* and R. Waldhardt		<a href="#">Landuse management to sustain the floristic diversity in marginal agricultural landscapes (Österreich)</a>
John M. Quinn* & Alastair M. Suran		<a href="#">A riparian management classification for Canterbury streams</a>
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## Hey, it's talking!

The next thing that happened was an automatic reply by the server asking me to confirm my subscription requests. After having done that, I got two mails with "Usage guidelines for ET-TOR" and "...ET-ZENA", the mailing lists of the two discussion groups. Mails to the two lists were however labeled with "IEES-KEYNOTES" and "IEES-CP". So, already at this early stage the user had to cope with three competing labels for each mailing list:

- The actual name of the workshop (e.g. Community Processes)
- The name of the mailing list (e.g. ET-ZENA), which is irrelevant, one might think if it wasn't for the email address (e.g. ET-ZENA@SEGATE.SUNET.SE) one had to use
- The label of the workshop in the subject line (e.g. IEES-CP)

Although I'd call myself a versatile user of the internet, I felt confused time and again by the list labels – a confusion which was enhanced by other factors, such as:

- J. Foo was the official sender of all list mailings, which made it difficult to find individual responders on a quick glance without opening the mail
- Within each mailing list there were various discussion strings, which were labeled with cryptic abbreviations, e.g. "CP-06" indicating presentation number 6 of the list "Community Processes" (but the number wasn't listed anywhere else - or I didn't find it)
- I got mail from yet another list I hadn't even subscribed to (IEES-NEWS)

## Who's out there... ?

Well, emails started coming in anyway. J. Foo asked us to write a short self introduction for the lists and I wrote one for IEES-CP. Some others did as well, but.... hell, I am sure there must have been more than just those 6 or 8 participants out there.

I found out a few days later (30.11., the meeting in Christchurch was already over) that 31 had subscribed to "Keynote Lectures", 70 to "Community Processes" list and even 98 to the "Landscape Services" list. The number was made available (or should I say: hidden?) at the homepage of each list on the internet.

However, there was no information going beyond these numbers. I would have very much liked to see, who else was out there. Even more than in a real conference, I think a virtual conference must take the social needs of people into account. I'd like to know with whom and to whom I am speaking (or mailing, respectively). Mailing to an anonymous list is a bit like calling out loud in the middle of the night, when you don't know whether the environment is friendly or hostile to you.

## Limited activities

Taking all these obstacles into account, I think it's no great wonder that the activities on the lists were very limited. Notably, the participants at Christchurch themselves were absent from the lists. There were of course the regular messages of the 10 volunteers that had visited the various talks and prepared summaries of them, but hardly any of the authors.

I heard from two independent participants after the meeting that they felt overwhelmed by the sheer number of emails they got during the meeting and had decided that attending the conference and interacting with other participants were more important to them than spending a whole lot of time with sorting out emails.

## A personal conclusion

My personal conclusion in short: I believe that having electronic extensions is a great idea, and I pay my respect to all who put their work into running this one (notably to Jackie Foo). It is a pity that their good work was not noticed by a greater audience. However, there are reasons for this: The technology used for the Christchurch electronic extension was not particularly suitable to create a virtual conference environment and can only be termed outdated.

With the pedagogical knowledge and the technology available today, an electronic extension could be done better:

1. **Users should be guided** so that they always know where they are, what they can do there and what options they have. E.g. it should always be clear what is behind a link. If I click on the title of a paper, I expect the paper and not an abstract of 10 lines with hardly any significance for the reader (unless it's stated accordingly). The disappointment is all the greater when loading times exceed a few seconds (as they easily do on the internet).
2. The **social component** was missing completely. I would like to know to whom I am mailing - a listing of the subscribed members of a discussion group should be readily available in any list, preferably in combination with a short portrait.
3. If **emails** are the medium of information transfer, the list naming must be done more carefully.

Names must be speaking for themselves, two or three parallel names for the same mailing list must(!) be avoided. The sender of an email must appear in the "From:" section of the email, or else it is getting really difficult to follow the discussion thread. No matter how much these details are improved, however, one must not forget that written communication may be limited by the sheer amount of emails and letters that pour into the mailboxes - searchable discussion fora may be more suitable for this task.

4. I'd also suggest to **adapt the whole concept** of electronic extensions better to the needs of internet participants. I'd concentrate on only a few discussion fora or lists about papers that are fully available for download, with the authors present in the lists. This would in my view be better than numerous paper links without any substantial information behind it and numerous mailing lists without substantial activities going on.

5. A last **suggestion** for electronic extensions to follow: Why not also have a specific on-site event, e.g. a special workshop, where communication by internet participants is directly integrated into the real-world conference?

#### **Debating on the internet - a tryout in this newsletter**

In connection with this newsletter, we are trying to give our readers an idea how debating on the internet could be realized in the future. If you are curious, go to the debating tool "debateEcoEng" and comment on a topic of your choice, e.g. upon the content of this article...