

AOL Feedback Loop Auto-Processing Documentation

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Overview

LISTSERV version 15.5 can automatically process AOL Feedback Loop reports (these special reports are sent automatically by AOL to organizations that are on AOL's whitelist). Once configured, LISTSERV automatically parses the reports and implements the actions required by AOL's whitelist agreement. This helps preserve whitelist status and reduce the number of spam complaints from AOL users.

This document assumes you already have a feedback loop in place as part of your AOL whitelist agreement and are able to redirect the feedback loop reports to a new address.

Configuring automatic feedback loop processing

There are two steps in configuring automatic feedback loop processing. The first is to add the following setting to your LISTSERV configuration:

SPAM_FEEDBACK_PROBE=AOL.COM

If necessary, you can stop after this step if you need to direct your attention to more pressing projects. *Spam reports referring to messages sent before you entered this setting in your configuration cannot be processed automatically by LISTSERV*, so you should make this change as soon as possible, even if you will be unable to test the feature for a while.

In the future, other ISPs may be supported, but for now only AOL is supported, so please do not enter any other ISPs in the configuration. It will not work unless they use the exact same format as AOL.

The second step is to create a LISTSERV list dedicated to feedback loop processing. It can be configured as you wish as long as the special AOL address from which the spam reports are coming is authorized to post to the list. L-Soft also recommends a change log, a very high "Daily-Threshold=" as well as weekly or at least monthly archives for troubleshooting. You should also subscribe to the list, at least initially, to confirm that spam reports are being processed as they should.

You should test the list carefully to make sure that archiving is working properly and that the list will not send any replies back to AOL. When you are satisfied that the list is working as it should, add **"Misc-Options= PROCESS_SPAM_FEEDBACK"** to the list configuration to activate automatic report processing.

Testing

L-Soft strongly advises a testing period during which individual AOL spam reports are manually forwarded to the list. It is important to forward the messages in such a way that they are received by the list with the same special MIME structure that identifies AOL's spam reports. The sender is immaterial as long as it is authorized to post to the list.

If the message is recognized as an AOL spam report *and* it refers to a message originated *after* you set SPAM_FEEDBACK_PROBE=AOL.COM, LISTSERV will:

1. Immediately delete the AOL user from all LISTSERV lists, on the first spam report. This does not include Dynamic Query Lists, which are managed outside LISTSERV.
2. Not send any notification to the AOL user.
3. Log a SPAM_COMPLAINT record to the list's change log, if one has been defined. You can use this information to remove the AOL user from Dynamic Query Lists, if you have any such lists that may contain AOL users.
4. Serve the AOL user off with the DROP option, which prevents the user from accidentally re-subscribing to the list.

This ensure that no further mail will be sent to the AOL user and minimizes the risk for further complaints (although experience has shown that AOL users often find old messages in their mailbox days or weeks later, which can lead to a handful of additional spam reports).

You can verify the operation of the feature on the LISTSERV log. Once you are comfortable with your setup, you can redirect all AOL spam reports to the list so that they are processed without manual forwarding.

Challenges

You can expect a few challenges once you have activated automatic processing. Here is some advice on how to deal with the most common issues.

- **Be patient.** Initially, most incoming spam reports will refer to messages created before the SPAM_FEEDBACK_PROBE=AOL.COM option was entered in the LISTSERV configuration. It may take a day or two for automatic processing to start kicking in. You will continue to see unprocessed messages for at least one month after enabling the feature. There is nothing you can do about it, other than wait for these old messages to have "expired" from the pipeline.
- **Many false positives.** L-Soft's experience has been that many AOL spam reports are sent erroneously. We have seen list owners with AOL accounts report their own lists as spam! It is exceedingly easy for an AOL user to generate a spam report without even realizing it; for instance, exiting the mail interface in a hurry will silently generate a spam report for any *unread* messages *automatically* sent to the junk mail folder by AOL's filters. There is nothing you can do about this, unless of course you work at AOL.

- **Complaints from AOL users.** The heavy-handed “one strike and you’re out” rule is not popular with AOL users who have erroneously generated a spam report. If anything, the lack of notification is even less popular. AOL users may get upset and blame your organization. But, in reality, you do not have a choice in the matter. The terms of AOL’s whitelist agreement *require* “one strike and you’re out” and *forbid* notification. You have a choice between being heavy-handed and not being on the whitelist, which in practice would promptly cause *all* your mail to AOL to be blocked and *all* AOL users to be deleted. Be prepared to write a FAQ on this topic.
- **Complaints from list owners.** Your mileage will vary, but so far most list owners have welcomed this “intervention from higher powers” that takes the “AOL issue” out of their hands. It is convenient for most list owners to refer to an organization-wide policy that in turn refers to the legal terms of AOL’s whitelist agreement, which most reasonable people will understand must be followed. But some list owners will complain that they are unable to re-add AOL users that have been served off. Be prepared to make a policy on serving AOL users back. It is up to you as the AOL whitelist agreement is silent on that issue.
- **Spam reports from reinstated AOL users.** You will find that many reinstated AOL users continue to issue spam reports because they simply do not understand what causes these spam reports to be sent. Until they know what they must do differently, they will keep generating spam reports that hurt your deliverability – and blaming LISTSERV and you for the false positives. This is why it is important to keep archives of all your spam reports. Once the AOL user is convinced that you did receive a new spam report, the problem will be transferred to AOL’s help desk, which in most cases is able to help the customer disable these reports.
- **Lax or tough?** One of the decisions you will have to make is whether to reinstate all AOL users simply for the asking, or only if they petition you in writing and agree not to send any further reports, or never. It is important to understand that every spam report is a petition by an AOL customer to terminate your organization’s access to AOL. Of course, it takes a lot of reports for this to happen, but there is absolutely no difference between voluntary and involuntary spam reports. The risk, if you keep reinstating anyone who asks, is that you keep receiving spam reports from users who are unable to learn how to turn them off, and that your deliverability will suffer. By trying to help a handful of AOL users who share their account or are just not very good with computers, you may end up hurting thousands of AOL users who have meticulously followed instructions to turn off spam reports for your organization.

Future direction

L-Soft expects to add support for additional ISPs as the format of spam reports is standardized.

L-Soft would like to receive customer input about the reinstatement issue.

At this point, L-Soft will not provide configuration options to loosen the “one shot and you’re out” rule, because it is a legal requirement of the AOL whitelist agreement. Usage of the automatic feedback loop

processing feature is entirely optional; nobody is locked in to the new automatic processing feature, but it can only be used in compliance with AOL's terms. L-Soft may revisit this position if AOL changes its whitelist terms. L-Soft believes that the way to move forward on this issue is to encourage AOL users to complain to AOL about the rule, rather than try and configure LISTSERV to ignore it. Like any business, AOL is likely to listen to its customers. AOL has historically been willing to listen to issues such as this one, at least once it saw that there was widespread concern and not just a handful of vocal complaints. Give AOL a chance to set this straight.

Known issues and restrictions

The following known issues and restrictions exist:

- **Preamble inserted in original message.** The little preamble LISTSERV inserts on spam reports it has successfully processed is often also inserted inside the original message. This is an artifact of the current implementation that may be removed in the future.