

An Exploratory Analysis of Messages on a Prominent LIS Electronic Discussion List from India

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ABSTRACT

The study analyses some of the aspects of e-mail postings such as number of posts, contributors and the topics of discussion on India's leading e-mail discussion list, LIS-Forum between 2006 and 2011. It has been found from the study that during the period of study on an average; about 1600 postings per year, are being circulated on the LIS-Forum, out of which 'announcements' are forming the major posting. It shows, even in an era of several powerful social media and Web 2.0 tools, the e-mail based discussion list which is the earliest kind of social medium, continues to retain its relevance and popularity and it is evident from its usage by professionals in India to form their virtual network.

Keywords: LIS-Forum, e-mail, discussion list

1. INTRODUCTION

Library and information science (LIS) education in India, which began in 1912, has already completed 100 years. India's major contribution to library science, the five laws of library science, postulated by Dr SR Ranganathan, remains relevant and continues to be widely discussed and debated. Dr Ranganathan was also instrumental in setting up several library schools in India, thus laying a strong foundation for LIS education in the country. The impact of ICT especially the internet, on library and information services is well known. As per Telephone Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) report, as on March 2011, there are 19.67 million internet subscribers and 381.40 million people access internet through their mobile phones¹. The newly established National Knowledge Network (NKN) is laying the foundations for high speed internet connectivity across educational, scientific and research institutions in the country. It will facilitate better internet connectivity especially for the teaching, learning and research communities in the country.

E-mail has been known to be a killer application of the internet. Listserv, an e-mail-based software

tool, facilitates in the automatic redistribution of e-mails to all the subscribers of a mailing list. This helps in geographically separated users to share information and to engage in discussions and debates amongst themselves. Thus, Listservs are not only an effective communication tool, but they also enable healthy discussions on issues of interest to a community. For the last many years, listservs are also being used for sharing information amongst a group of users.

Listserv first appeared on Bitnet, an academic network-based on IBM computers. The early versions of Listserv became operational in the mid 1980s, and its early archives show how network users learned to use the software and, perhaps more importantly, how to manage network-based organisations². In India, the LIS-Forum, administered by Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore has come to be recognised as a prominent Listserv in the LIS discipline, which was set up in November 1994 by the erstwhile National Centre for Science Information (NCSI) with support from NISSAT, DSIR, Govt. of India³ with more than 7500 members with the large majority of them being from India. It is observed that the forum is quite active with regular postings by the

members. The postings include announcements of events such as conferences, workshops, seminars, job openings, news of interest to the community members, topics for discussions, request to take part in surveys, request for articles, and so on. Being a moderated list, one rarely finds irrelevant postings. Therefore, it is felt that an analysis of the messages on the LIS-Forum will give some understanding of what is being discussed amongst the LIS professionals from India

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have been undertaken on the content analysis of discussion forum messages. Deryakulu & Olkun⁴ have used content analysis technique and examined the types of job-related problems that the Turkish computer teachers experienced and types of social support provided by reciprocal discussions in an online forum. Azevedo⁵, *et al.*, proposed a qualitative analysis of discussion forums using a text mining technique which used a graph formalism to represent relevant terms found in a text, as well as their relationships. The study found that text mining approach is useful to assist teachers in identifying situations that needs intervention. Mailing lists are chiefly used for information sharing and dissemination. Pujar⁶, *et al.*, had identified eight such mailing lists from India for library and information science professionals in the country. Content analysis of the mailing list, Iphealth, a health sector information dissemination and news alert mailing list revealed the diversity in the documents that were forwarded⁷.

Bibliometric and content analyses of 20,000 postings on KUTUP-L, a discussion list for librarians in Turkey revealed that the distribution of messages followed Price and Pareto Laws but not Lotka's Law⁸. Wildemuth⁹, *et al.*, studied postings on 14 different electronic lists or newsgroups for approximately one month during the year 1994. It was found that the topics most frequently discussed in each group were reasonably consistent with the group's stated purpose. In addition, technology topics were frequently discussed, as well as topics related to library's clientele. Rajshekar & Gulla⁶ have dwelt about the setting up of the LIS-Forum and presented the statistics of the forum three years after it was established.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the year-wise distribution of messages on LIS-Forum;
- To study types of messages being posted on the Forum; and
- To identify prominent contributors.

4. METHODOLOGY

The LIS-Forum started its operation in 1994 using the ListProc software¹⁰. In 2001, it was moved to the Mailman software¹¹, which archives all the messages that are approved for circulation. The archived messages are available and accessible from April 2003 onwards in text and compressed formats¹².

For analysis, messages posted to the mailing list during the six-year period (2006-2011) have been studied. The content of each message was manually examined. The messages were broadly grouped into the following seven categories:

4.1 Queries

The messages in this category dealt with queries, questions or clarifications sought by the members on various issues and topics. Such queries could be related to the application of emerging technologies for providing information services or seeking advice for the implementation of software for library automation, institutional repository, software for detecting plagiarism, etc. Queries were also raised pertaining to government circulars, vendor addresses, pay scales, the need for the LIS associations to take up the issues pertaining to the profession and professionals with the State and Federal Governments.

4.2 Responses

Messages in this category pertains to replies or responses provided by the fellow members to queries posted by the members or views aired by members on posts in general. It has been observed that members who have opted to receive forum messages in the 'digest' mode, while responding to a particular message, do not take care to ensure that only pertinent part of the 'digest' is included in the response and to follow the top-posting style. This makes the responses clumsy and may result such replies/responses being discarded by the fellow members, if at all such messages are approved for circulation. The moderation process ensures that such replies are not circulated, but occasionally, such replies do appear on the Forum.

4.3 Discussion on Issues

The discussion topics and issues raised by members range from application of information and communication technologies for providing information services, various aspects pertaining to digital library, pay scales, pay parity, open access, library automation, library related software, continuing/higher education, working conditions, etc. Budding professionals and students pursuing masters and other degree programmes, raise topics that are directly relevant to them.

4.4 Announcements

Messages pertain to announcements of conferences, workshops, seminars, lectures, panel discussions, admissions, short-term courses, jobs, etc., constitute a good percentage of the overall postings.

4.5 Request for Resources

Request for articles from journals and sometimes papers from conference proceedings. It has been observed that such requests are entertained only from the academic and Government-funded research institutions.

4.6 Information Dissemination

On issues related to open access, search engines, technological developments, release of new versions of open source software, articles/books of interest, bibliographies on specific topics, reports of interest, digital libraries, databases, etc. Many a time messages from other lists are also forwarded. Messages in this category also constitute a good percentage of overall messages posted on the list.

4.7 Others

Messages in this category includes achievements, promotions, wishes, award of degrees, congratulatory messages, condolences, obituaries, etc.

5. ANALYSIS

9734 messages have been posted on the mailing list for the period 2006-2011, with an average of 1622 messages per year. The year-wise breakup of messages for the period 2006-2011 is given in Table 1. These

Table 1. Messages per year

Year	No. of messages (%)	Cumulative total
2006	1834 (18.84 %)	1834
2007	1425 (14.64 %)	3259
2008	1982 (20.36 %)	5241
2009	1569 (16.12 %)	6810
2010	1436 (14.75 %)	8246
2011	1488 (15.29 %)	9734

postings broadly belonged to the categories listed in the preceding section. It has been observed that 2008 had the highest number of postings (20.36 %) while 2007 had the least (14.64 %).

Based on the categorisation of the messages, it has been observed that announcements were the most dominant type of messages posted on the forum. They constituted 41.46 % of the total number messages. This was followed by postings related to information dissemination (23.26 %). Queries, responses, discussions, requests and other types of messages constituted the remaining 35 % of messages in more or less the same proportions. Table 2 shows the break-up of the messages as per the different categories identified for the study.

Table 3, shows members who have posted 100 or more messages during the study period. The analysis of the messages has revealed that the nine members listed in the table have posted 100 or more number messages each, that have contributed about 17 % of the total numbers of messages analysed. To identify the leading contributors to the forum, all the messages were copied onto a text file. From the text file, the e-mail addresses alongwith the names of the members who have posted messages were extracted and ported to a spreadsheet software tool.

Table 3. Top nine contributors list

Names of members	No. of messages posted (%)
Subbiah Arunachalam	367 (3.77 %)
Sukhdev Singh	301 (3.1 %)
Anup Kumar Das	224 (2.3 %)
Vimal Kumar	147 (1.51 %)
Dinesh Siddaiah	143 (1.47 %)
Mukesh Anand	142 (1.46 %)
J.K. Vijayakumar	118 (1.21 %)
N. Laxman Rao	113 (1.16 %)
Padmanabha Vyasamoorthy	100 (1.02 %)

Table 2. Year-wise distribution of messages pertaining to different categories

Year	Queries	Response	Discussion on issues	Announcements	Request for resources	Information dissemination	Others (wishes, condolence)
2006	170	116	188	560	50	632	118
2007	127	90	123	515	37	488	45
2008	148	150	256	737	73	490	128
2009	118	64	129	712	108	316	122
2010	149	67	69	715	108	244	84
2011	155	101	78	797	159	95	103
Total	867	588	843	4036	535	2265	600

6. DISCUSSIONS

Rajashekar & Gulla⁶ had grouped the messages posted on the Forum in its early days into the following categories:

- Information dissemination (current awareness) related to new products, services, publications, information sources and general news (e.g. new journal devoted to CDIS/ISIS, new products from ISI, electronic journals on internet)
- Surveys (e.g., CD-ROM database subscriptions)
- Discussion (e.g. patent information services, CD-ROM usage, organising a software package library, handling Indian scripts on CDS/ISIS)
- Enquiries (e.g. availability of journals, hardware, converting downloaded bibliographic records), and
- Announcements for forthcoming meetings, seminars and workshops (e.g. marketing of information, information industry-user meet).

These groups, except for surveys, are valid even today. Probably in its early days, the Forum was used more frequently for conducting surveys. In the present study, it has been identified by Rajashekar & Gulla⁶, responses, requests for resources and information dissemination have been added. Writing about the LIS-Forum in November 1997, three years after it became operational, they had mentioned that the objectives of the forum were to:

- (1) Act as an electronic forum (or conference) for LIS professionals, managers, educators and users of library and information systems and services
- (2) Discuss issues related (but not exclusive) to library and information practices and use of information technologies for providing library and information services, and
- (3) Act as an electronic medium for quick exchanges of information and experiences related to new initiatives, plans, projects, information sources and services, forthcoming events and international developments.

From 141 subscribers (Indian 126 and Foreign 15) and 296 messages distributed during first twenty months of its existence, the LIS-Forum as can be seen from the present study has grown by leaps and bounds. It is found that the Forum is facilitating in the creation of a virtual network of LIS professionals and students in the country. It is serving as a focal point to learn and share things related to the LIS profession not only from within the country but from across the world as well. The Forum, therefore, has been fulfilling its stated objectives.

The shortcomings of the Forum by Rajashekar & Gulla⁶ were: (a) Forum is largely used as an

information dissemination tool; (b) there is very little discussion on current issues; (c) very little sharing of problems and experiences; and (d) small percentage of the subscribers contributed to the Forum.

The situation has not changed much in the last 18 years of the Forum's existence. Even today, the LIS-Forum is predominantly being used for information dissemination rather than for discussions related to current professional issues, best practices, and sharing experiences. The other shortcomings have been noticed in this study include:

- Though the file attachments are not allowed in the postings, several postings, especially, in the announcement category of messages are received with attachments.
- Postings are supposed to be made in textual format only, but most of them are in HTML or composed using GUI-based tools. This makes the postings unnecessarily bulky and members should be aware of the fact that the network bandwidth is not infinite. Also, not everybody on the list uses GUI-based mail clients.
- Many a times, messages are composed using a word processing software and such messages are copied and directly pasted on to the LIS-Forum mail, that induce lots of non-ASCII characters and make the messages garbled. This is especially true for people who use simple text-based mail clients. To copy content from a word processing utility and paste it onto the Forum mail, such content should first be pasted onto a text editor like notepad. In the next step, text should be copied from the text editor and pasted on to the LIS-Forum mail.
- Announcements about a particular event like conference, for example, will invariably include complete details of the event. This, in spite of the fact that the website for the event has all the details. Such postings should provide minimal information about the event and a link should be provided to the event website. This is true for the forwarded messages too.
- Top-posting style is not being followed at all. Sometimes, the original message itself is missing in the replies or the subject line of the message is altered. This will make it difficult for members who are following a particular discussion.
- Clubbing LIS-Forum mail with other e-mail addresses amounts to spamming and should be strictly avoided. If the same message needs to be sent to different mailing lists, members should do so by sending it individually.
- In some postings, the 'subject' of the post is not provided or irrelevant 'subject' line like 'Please post this message' is provided.

- It has been observed that at times the Forum is being used as the first option to seek information or to get clarification for a doubt. A member intending to post a query on the Forum should first try to exhaust all the possible sources including searching the Forum's archived content to seek an answer for one's query. In short, a Forum should be used as the last resort to pose a query, and
- To avoid duplication of queries, the Forum's archived content should first be searched.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The Forum can be used very effectively to discuss various issues related to the profession and also to disseminate useful information to all the members. Students and budding professionals can greatly benefit by being members of such lists. Members of the Forum on their part should strictly follow the discussion list etiquettes. This will avoid unnecessary network traffic and make the list more effective in realising its objectives. Also, the moderation process becomes simpler and less time consuming. Moderation on many of the lists including the LIS-Forum are done on voluntary basis and members should not take it for granted.

LIS-Forum has been serving as a platform for the LIS professionals and students in India in creating a virtual network of its members. Several members have vouched the usefulness of the Forum. This fact became evident when a posting was made by the moderator of the list about the likelihood of change of guard in the continuation of the list. The recent announcement regarding the closure of the NCSI, which has been administering the LIS-Forum, caused anxiety among its users. However, it is being continued from the Indian Institute of Science and hopefully, will continue to serve the LIS community in India and elsewhere.

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