Awareness and Use of Online Discussion Forums and Mailing Lists among Library Professionals in the Kerala University Library System

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Abstract

The study explores the awareness and use of online discussion forums and mailing lists among library professionals in the library system of University of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram. A structured questionnaire survey was carried out on a population of 105 library professionals in the Kerala University Library. The findings indicate that majority of the library professionals prefer LIS Links and the second preference was to for LIS Forum. The study proves that these type of forums and mailing lists play a very influential role in the development of library community. The study recommends that keeping in view the increasing number of different type of library professionals and their varied requirements, new forums and mailing lists should be started separately related to library automation, digital library, open source software and so on.

Keywords: Online Discussion Forums; Mailing Lists; Bulletin Board; Computer mediated communication

1. Introduction

Meaningful interaction in online community plays a crucial and fundamental role in knowledge acquisition and professional development. Proper communication and collaboration among professionals of any field is vital to the development in that field. Communication and collaboration among professionals create new ideas, remove confusions and provide guidance to each other. Traditional communication systems such as telephone, postal mail and so on have been designed for one-to-one human communication. Information and communication technologies have made it possible for members of any profession to contact other professionals or communicate on a group level that was not possible in the past. It has become possible because of the availability of ICT-based social networking software (Roselle, 2001).

The web has made it possible to participate in near-instant communication on a global scale. In almost every corner of the world, people communicate with one another through e-mail, news sites, blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, and other myriads of facilities. The present day Internet has roots that reach back all the way to the late 1960s which means it only took around 50 years to go from postage-based mail to instant communication with anyone in the world. Throughout these five decades, the Internet has gone through a considerable number of shifts.

In terms of the first historical milestone for online communication, there is really no better place to start than with the old school bulletin board

system, commonly known as BBS. It was the first time in Internet history where user-generated content became a fundamental aspect of a service. Advances in technology and advanced computer skills have made possible for asynchronous online discussion forum and mailing list to develop rapidly which could serve as primary ground for many developments forming the basis for creation of online community (Khode, 2012).

Because of the nearly-completed unification between email lists and web-based forums, the terms online forum and mailing list are used more or less interchangeably. Mailing lists can be considered as an e-mail based bulletin board. It may also be search engine groups. These forums and mailing lists are effective communication tools for professionals as well as non-professionals. Library professionals have the greatest information requirements and therefore the greatest need of online communities for sharing scholarly information. Today is an information world constantly shifting from print to electronic form where online communication tools are absolutely necessary. In the above technological background the present survey has been undertaken in order to understand the 'Awareness and Use of Online Discussion Forums and Library Professionals in Kerala University Library System.'

2. Review of Literature

Shukla & Dawngliana (2018) carried out an analytical study of communications posted in the online professional forum using content analysis technique. The study analysed 13062 communications posted in the NMLIS forum during five year period. Total extents of communications have been calculated and further Core Contents (Professional Contents) and Non-Core Contents (Non-Professional Contents) have been identified based on eight categories of scholarly communications. The "Degree of Effectiveness" and "Levels of Effectiveness" have been proposed to measure the effectiveness of online professional forums. The study found that Core Contents were the major focus of communications

among group members and thus NMLIS promote professional contents effectively.

The workplace learning about library professionals was studied by Irfan, Haneefa, & Shyni (2015). Library professionals can use online discussion groups and forums to acquire latest developments in their fields and for collaborative learning. The subscription to online discussion forums will enhance workplace learning in the digital environment. The library professionals were asked to indicate in which of the online discussion groups they take part. The responses indicated that 75.26 percent of professionals were using LIS-Forum, 18.56 percent LIS links etc. It is revealed that a large majority of the professionals use online media and mailing lists to update their knowledge and sharing of information. These interfaces provide multimedia facilities for information handling.

Pujar, Mahesh and Jayakanth (2014) analysed 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 was found from the study that on an average; about 1600 postings per year, are being circulated on the LIS-Forum, out of which 'announcements' formed the major posting. It study showed that 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 as is evident from its usage by professionals in India to form their virtual network.

The study by Khode (2012) examined the use of various mailing lists by the library professionals of India. An on-line questionnaire was prepared to collect data from the users of mailing lists. The responses were received from 122 users. The study investigated the different mailing lists used by library professionals, mostly used mailing lists, purpose of using mailing lists, and frequency of use of mailing lists. It also explored users' opinion

about helpfulness of support and importance of mailing lists to the library community. The benefits of mailing lists and suggestions for the improvement of the mailing are also given.

Counts & Fisher (2010) examined the utilization of online discussion group forums by the library professionals to know latest developments in their profession, discussions, to know forth coming conferences, seminars, employment opportunities etc. Most of the library professionals are members of one or many of the online news group forums. LIS Links and LIS Forum are considered as the most popular discussion forums. LIS Links possesses all the features that a social media site possesses. Seventy seven percent of respondents are using LIS Online news groups/forums, where as 92 percent use social media. The preferences of LIS professionals in using online newsgroups/ forums are explained with help of figures in the study. Forty percent of the LIS professionals consider LIS Forum as the most commonly used online discussion forum. The next preferred online newsgroup/forum was found to be LIS Links (38%). Other commonly used online news groups / forums are NMLIS (11%), and IATLIS Forum (6%). Five percent of the respondents were found to be using other newly developed online news groups / forums.

3. Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are the following:

- To study the awareness of online discussion forums and mailing list by library professionals in the Kerala University Library System.

- To ascertain the attitude of the library professionals towards discussion forums and mailing lists

- To find out the extent of use of online discussion forums and mailing lists being used by library professionals

- To understand the application of Web 2.0 in Online discussion forums and mailing lists.

4. Methodology

The population selected for the study is the library professionals of the Kerala University Library System. Kerala University Library System includes the central library of the University located at Palayam within Thiruvananthapuram city, Campus Library at Karyavattom and 42 department libraries of University of Kerala. Among the 105 library professionals, Kerala University Central Library has 52, Campus Library Karyavattom has 11 and Department Libraries have 42 professionals. As the population comprised of a limited number of 105 library professionals, census method was adopted for collecting data. The questionnaire framed for data collection consisted of 41 question. Most of them are closed ended. Likert scale was used in the questionnaire for measuring the awareness and use of online discussion forums and mailing lists. Total 105 questionnaires were distributed to selected population out of which 91 were received back.

5. Analysis

5.1 Awareness of Online Discussion Forums

Online communication tools such as forums and mailing lists play a vital role in library professional development. A dichotomous question was asked to know the status of awareness of the respondents. The finding is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Status of awareness

Awareness	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	85	93.41
No	6	6.59
Total	**91**	**100.00**

Table 1 depicts the fact that large majority of library professionals are aware of the online discussion forums and mailing lists.

5.2 Awareness of Different Services

To further investigate the familiarity of the respondents with discussion groups and mailing

lists, a list of major services provided by the online discussion forums and mailing lists was given and requested to choose from it. The main services include online chat service, sending newsletter, resource sharing, publishing works , marketing library products and service, E-mail service, alerting forthcoming events, publishing notification of vacancies, RSS feed service, mobile SMS Alert and SDI service. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Awareness of different services

Services	Frequency	Percentage
Online chat service	68	80.00
Sending News letter	47	55.29
Resource Sharing	60	70.59
Publishing works	44	51.76
Marketing library products and service	42	49.41
E-mail service	72	84.71
Alerting forthcoming events	62	72.94
Publishing notification of vacancies	60	70.59
RSS feed service	34	40.00
Mobile SMS Alert	53	62.35
SDI service	32	37.65

Respondents were found to be aware of more than one service. E-mail was found to be the most predominant service about which about 85 percent of the respondents are aware of. Online chat service (80%), alerting forthcoming events (72.94%), notification of vacancies (70.59%) etc. are other notable services about which awareness is moreamong the respondents.
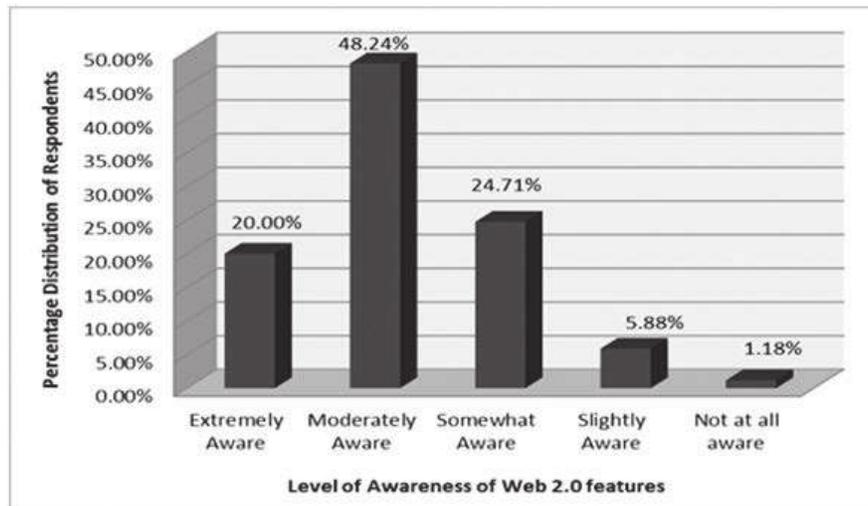
5.3 Awareness of Web 2.0 Application

One of the most fruitful development of web technology is Web 2.0. It includes different interactive and attractive features. Library professionals were asked to rate their level of awareness about Web 2.0 applications as "extremely aware", "moderately aware", "somewhat aware", "slightly aware", "not at all aware". The responses are portrayed in Fig.1.

The share of respondents who are extremely aware of the facilities offered by Web 2.0 is only 20 percent. Nearly half of them (48.24%) have a moderate level of awareness. About a quarter of the respondents are somewhat aware. The awareness level is poor among 5.88 percent and 1.18 percent are not at all aware of the tools and services forming part of Web 2.0.

5.4 Rating of Quality of Messages

The quality of messages and posts in online discussion forums and mailing lists is measured in

Fig. 1 Awareness of Web 2.0 Application

terms of the quality of content, features, currency and a host of other features. Library professionals were asked to rate their opinion about quality of messages as "very good", "good", "average", "poor", and "very poor". Table 3 shows the opinion about quality of messages.

Table 3
Rating of quality of messages

Opinion on quality of message	n*	%
Very good	13	15.29
Good	51	60.00
Average	20	23.53
Poor	1	1.18
Very Poor	0	0.00
Total	**85**	**100.00**

n* = Number of respondents

Library professionals had different opinion about quality of messages. It is found from the results presented in Table 3 that a large group (60%) of the respondents rate the quality of content as "good". Only about 15 percent rate the contents as "very good" and 23.53 percent consider it as "average". It is interesting to note that those who are not at all aware of Web 2.0 have remarked that the quality is "poor".

5.5 Usefulness of the Posts Regarding Job Vacancies

One of the important features of online discussion forums and mailing lists in the field of Library and Information Science is posting related to job vacancies. With the objective of understanding the opinion of the respondents, a dichotomous question about its usefulness was incorporated in the questionnaire. The result obtained is given in Table 4.

Table 4
Usefulness of posts on job vacancies

Usefulness of job posts	n*	Percentage
Yes	83	97.65
No	2	2.35
Total	**85**	**100**

n* = Number of respondents

Out of the 85 respondents who were aware of the online discussion forum and mailing lists, 97.65 percent have viewed it positively.

5.6 Attitude towards Quality of Different Services

Many advanced services are provided by online discussion forums and mailing lists. They include

Table 5
Quality of different services

Services		Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Services only to registered users	n*	23	48	13	1	0	4.09	0.68	-14.757	*0.000
	%	27.06	56.47	15.29	1.18	0				
Verification of content before sharing	n*	25	36	22	2	0	3.99	0.81	-11.261	*0.000
	%	29.41	42.35	25.88	2.35	0				
Censoring unethical contents	n*	21	33	23	8	0	3.79	0.93	-7.839	*0.000
	%	24.71	38.82	27.06	9.41	0				
Deletion of inappropriate content	n*	25	22	29	7	2	3.72	1.05	-6.281	*0.000
	%	29.41	25.88	34.12	8.24	2.35				
Securing confidential personal information	n*	28	30	22	4	0	3.98	0.89	-10.037	*0.000
	%	33.33	35.71	26.19	4.76	0				

services only to registered users, verification of content before sharing, censoring unethical contents, deletion of inappropriate content and securing confidential personal information. Table 5 shows the opinion about quality of services offered by the discussion forums and mailing lists.

Compared to other services, "services only to registered users" got higher mean value (4.09) which is considered as high quality service chosen by most of the respondents, followed by "verification of content before sharing"(3.99%). "Censoring unethical content" (3.79%), "deletion of inappropriate content" (3.72%) occupy the third and fourth positions. The score obtained by One Sample T-Test is 4.09. Since the value obtained by One Sample T-Test is<0.05, the quality of services are significant (t value= 0.68, sig= 0.00<0.05).

5.7 Preference of Online Discussion Forum and Mailing List

Different professionals may prefer divergent online discussion forums and mailing lists. A list of 11 important online discussion forums and mailing lists were provided in the questionnaire to measure the preference of the respondents. Ranking of the discussion forums and mailing lists based on the preference of the respondents is provided in Table 6.

Table 6
Preference of online discussion forums and mailing lists

Online discussion forum and mailing lists	Rank
NMLIS	3
LIS Forum	2
LIS Links	1
DiglibIndia	4
LISERT-India (IATLIS)	6
India-LIS	7
Corporatelibrns	8
ILOSC	9
ASDOLIS	11
KULIS Forum	5
MANLIBNET India	10

From the Table it is clear that the respondent's first preference was to "LIS Links" and second preference to "LIS Forum". The next order of preferences was NMLIS, DiglibIndia, KULIS Forum, LISERT-India (IATLIS), India-LIS, Corporatelibrns, LOISC, MANLIBNET and ASDOLIS respectively.

5.8 Frequency of Usage

In order to verify how often library professionals use online discussion forums and mailing lists, a question was incorporated. The frequency wise distribution of respondents is shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Frequency of usage

Frequency	Week		Month	
	n*	%	n*	%
1	28	44.44	8	36.36
2	20	31.75	11	50.00
3	10	15.87	1	4.55
4	4	6.35	2	9.09
Daily	1	1.59	0	0.00
Total	63	100.00	22	100.00

n* = Number of respondents

Weekly and monthly usage was analysed. In the case of weekly usage of online discussion forums and mailing lists, a little more than 44 percent use once in a week, followed by twice (31.75%) and thrice (15.87%). A small percentage of respondents (1.59%) use online discussion forums and mailing lists every day in a week. Analysis of monthly usage shows that out of the 22 respondents in this category, 50 percent use online discussion forums and mailing lists twice in a month, followed by 36.36 percent who use it once in a month. The analysis shows that LIS professionals in the Kerala University Library are not avid searchers of online discussion forums and mailing lists who do it daily as a matter of routine.

5.9 Purpose of Usage

Online discussion forums and mailing lists can be used for many purposes like job search, technical support, keep in touch with library professionals etc. Table 8 shows the different purposes for which the respondents use mailing lists.

Table 8
Purpose of usage

Purpose	n*	%
To Keep in touch with other library professionals	72	84.71
To keep up-to-date on current trends in LIS research	78	91.76
To find specific information in the field of interest.	56	65.88
For discussing issues of interest to members of the Group	54	63.53
To follow discussions of experts in the specific field	56	65.88
To share nascent ideas/knowledge	61	71.76
To receive notification about vacancies advertised	77	90.59
To find technical support	47	55.29

Table 8 depicts that about 92 percent of the respondents use online discussion forums and mailing lists to"keep up-to-date with current trends in LIS research" followed by "receiving notification on job vacancies" (90.59%). "Keeping in touch with other library professionals" occupies the third position followed by "sharing nascent ideas and knowledge" (71.76%). With only 55.29 percent, 'to find technical support" comes last.

5.10 Use of Web 2.0 Features

The main features of Web 2.0 such as RSS Feeds, tagging, user profiles, message sharing, social networks, blog and social bookmarking were listed and the respondents were asked to mark the application that they are using. Table 9 shows the distribution of respondents in the use of different Web 2.0 features.

Table 9
Use of Web 2.0 features

Web 2.0 applications	Yes		No	
	n*	%	n*	%
RSS Feeds	32	38.10	52	61.90
Tagging	41	48.24	44	51.76
User Profiles	58	68.24	27	31.76
Message Sharing	73	85.88	12	14.12
Social Networks	75	88.24	10	11.76
Blog	56	66.67	28	33.33
Social Bookmarking	21	25.61	61	74.39

n* = Number of respondents

The status of usage of Web 2.0 features varies according to the type of service. Table 9 highlights that social networks (88.24%) and message sharing facility (85.88%) are the most commonly used web 2.0 features. User profiles and blogs are the other notable features used by respondents. Social bookmarking (25.61%) is the least used facility.

5.11 Opinion about Advanced Features

Like other online communities, discussion forums and mailing lists also introduce different new services to users. Some feature such as Real time interaction, Tagging, Use profiles, Message sharing with social networks and SMS Alert were listed and the respondents were asked to rate their preference of new features. One Sample T-

Test was done with the data. Table 10 presents distribution of respondents by their opinion about new features.

From Table 10, it can be interpreted that the respondents have a positive attitude towards new features included in online discussion forums and mailing lists, beacause all the features are significant. Since high mean score of 4.30 is obtained by One Sample T-Test for the new feature "Message sharing with social networks", it is considered as the highly significant new feature of online discussion forums and mailing lists. (t value= 16.569, sig= 0.00<0.05).

Table 10
Opinion about advanced features

Features		Very good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor	Mean	SD	T	Sig.
Real time interaction	n*	26	49	10	0	0	4.19	0.63	17.481	*0.000
	%	30.59	57.65	11.76	0.00	0.00				
Tagging	n*	21	42	22	0	0	3.99	0.72	12.736	*0.000
	%	24.71	49.41	25.88	0.00	0.00				
Use profiles	n*	16	48	21	0	0	3.94	0.66	13.127	*0.000
	%	18.82	56.47	24.71	0.00	0.00				
Message sharing with social networks	n*	30	43	12	0	0	4.21	0.67	16.569	*0.000
	%	35.29	50.59	14.12	0.00	0.00				
SMS Alert	n*	29	34	17	0	4	4.00	0.99	9.221	*0.000
	%	34.52	40.48	20.24	0.00	4.76				

*Not significant (>0.05);   *: Significant (<0.05)   n* = Number of respondents*

6. Conclusion

The main objective of the study was to make a comprehensive study of the awareness and use of online discussion forums and mailing lists among library professionals of Kerala University Library system. It is found that most of the library professionals are aware of the online discussion forums and mailing lists. Majority of them use LIS Links and LIS Forum compared to others. E-mail was found to be the most predominant service about which about 85 percent of the respondents are aware of. The respondents are aware of different interactive Web 2.0 tools and facilities to certain extent but most of them do not make use of them. It is suggested by the library professionals that the awareness programmes and proper guidelines are required for the effective use of discussion forums so as to utilize them for professional and personal development.

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