

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LIS-FORUM: A SURVEY

Anish G.

Asst. Librarian

Heera College of Engineering & Technology

Thiruvananthapuram.

anishg83@gmail.com

Vimal Kumar V.

Technical Assistant

Mahatma Gandhi University Library

Kottayam

vimal0212@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This survey examines the popularity of LIS-Forum email discussion forum among Library and Information Science professionals in India. This study sort out the limitations of this email based discussion forum on the basis of perceptions of LIS-Forum users. LIS-Forum community also recommended new features and suggestions to improve the service in the context of web 2.0 phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: Professional communication, Discussion forum, LIS-Forum, email, web 2.0

INTRODUCTION

Communication between professionals in same domain is very important. In the past, there existed very few opportunities only for communication between professionals. There were seminars, training programmes and periodical publications to gather and express their views and share messages. Traditional methods of professional communication were not interactive and were very time consuming. Email based discussion forums made a revolution in professional communication. LIS-Forum is considered as the most popular and authentic email discussion forum for Library and Information Science professionals in India. Through LIS-Forum many issues related to Library and Information Science were raised for discussion at the national level. Many issues were brought to the attention of concerned authorities and found solution for them. Clay Shirkey observes that “as the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action” (Shirkey, 2010).

In the initial stages, WWW was not a creative space for users, because editing web content was difficult. Now user can easily add the content to web by just write text. Tim Berners Lee forecasted that WWW gone in the direction of becoming more of a creative medium (BBC, 2005). Emergence of Web 2.0 and social media are now outwit legacy Internet communication tools like email and instant messaging. Communication platforms based on Web 2.0 are offering interactive message exchange and collaborative content creation. Academic institutions and business firms are migrating to online social spaces to reshape their communication strategy.

This survey tries to know the community participation LIS-Forum in micro level. The study presents a detailed profile of LIS-Forum community and their participation in professional communication. It also collected user's perceptions on LIS-Forum; limitations and suggestions to improve the service in the context of web 2.0 phenomenon.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To know the detailed characteristics of LIS-Forum community (e.g. gender, age, workplace, etc.)

To know the users engagement in LIS-Forum

Message contribution of users

Users perceptions on LIS-Forum now and into the future

ABOUT LIS-FORUM

LIS-Forum is an e-mail based discussion forum for Library and Information professionals in India. It is operated and maintained by NCSI, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. It was established in the year 1995 with support from NISSAT, DSIR, Government of India ("About LIS-Forum", 1995)

1.1 How it works?

LIS-Forum is an email based discussion forum. Those who wish can join the service by filling the details in LIS-Forum website. An email will be send to user mailbox for confirmation. Moderator of the forum has the right to approve/reject your subscription. The applicant will be notified of the moderator's decision by email. According to LIS-Forum moderator, 7779 members were on the list (LIS-Forum Admin, 2013). LIS-Forum has no provision to ensure number of active members. So we can't ascertain exact number of active LIS-Forum users. Other email based discussion forums running on same platform has enabled the provision to ensure active members. They are sending periodical confirmation mails to subscribers. Users are excluding from list if they do not respond to confirmation mail.

One can submit the message in LIS-Forum by sending an email to lis-forum@ncsi.iisc.ernet.in. Other members can send reply to your message by email. Messages are arriving in subscribers email account and old messages will get archived in LIS-Forum website. Anybody can check the

archived messages online without subscription.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A structured questionnaire was prepared with the help of “Form”, a utility available with “Google Docs” to create online questionnaire. The questionnaire was posted in LIS-Forum email discussion forum (Anish, 2013). Survey was closed after 15 days. The number of people participated in the survey were 101 and the entire responses have been selected for the study. Statistical analysis Percentage is used here to sort out the variables.

For the convenience of collection and analysis of responses entire questions were divided into two categories; user profile and use behaviour. Questions to create user profile (e.g. age, gender, workplace, nativity etc.) were in the first category. In the second category, questions to monitor the user participation (e.g. number of messages posted, frequency of checking messages etc.) in LIS-Forum activities were included.

2.1 User Profile

Population for the study consisted of librarians, faculty members, research scholars and students in the field of Library and Information Science. Following are the characteristics of LIS community participated in the survey.

2.1.1 Gender ratio

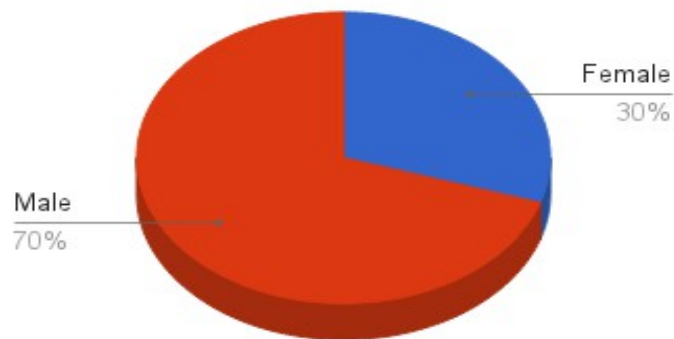


Fig. 1. *Gender ratio*

Majority of survey participants belonged to male group, female participation was limited to 30%.

2.1.2 Age range

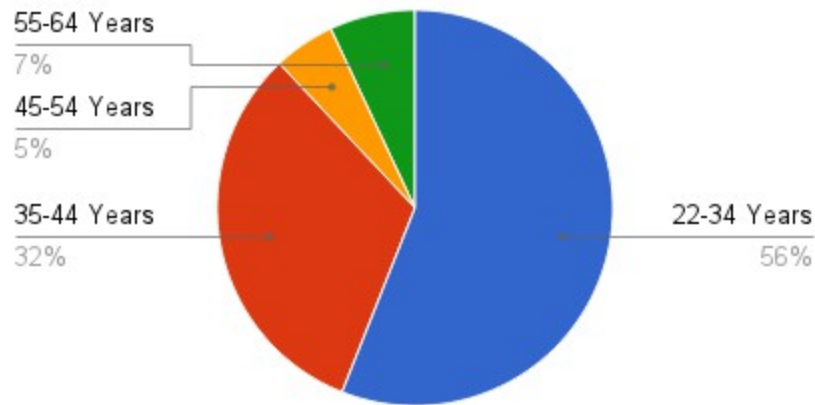


Fig. 2. Age range of LIS-Forum community

Question for the age range borrowed from profile questionnaire of American Marketing Association. Majority of participants belonged to young adulthood (22-34 and 35-44 years). Representation from middle adulthood (40-65 years) was 12%.

2.1.3 Nativity

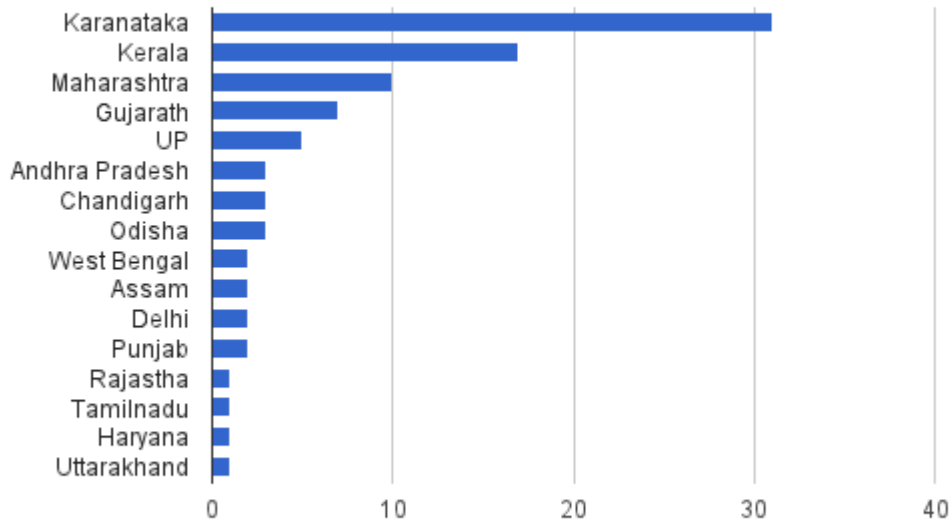


Fig. 3 Nativity of LIS-Forum users

Majority of LIS-Forum users were from South Indian states (Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamilnadu). Karnataka and Kerala share first and second place consecutively.

2.1.4 Profession

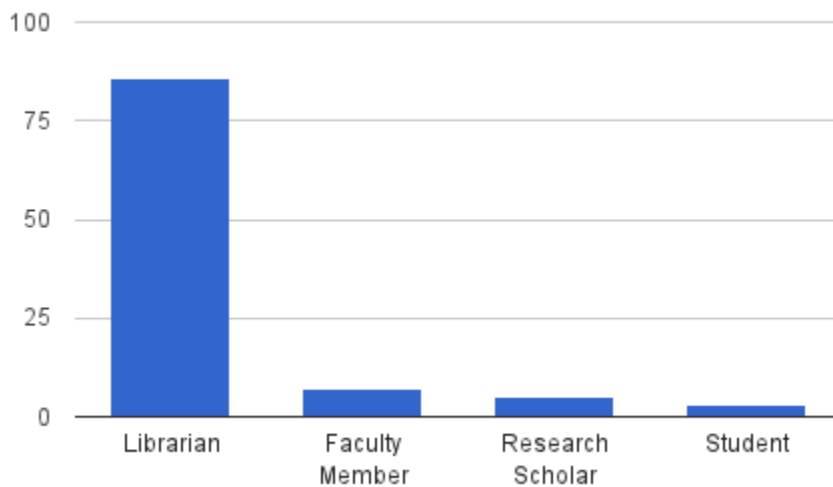


Fig. 4 LIS-Forum community by occupation

Working librarians participation in LIS-Forum is very high. Research scholars and students engagement in LIS-Forum is meager. No retired librarians participated in the survey. Faculty members in LIS schools can introduce various email discussion groups in LIS and to give awareness to students about the advantages of participation in discussion forums. From LIS-Forum students can collect lots of useful information about higher studies, job opportunities and LIS events.

2.1.5 Library type

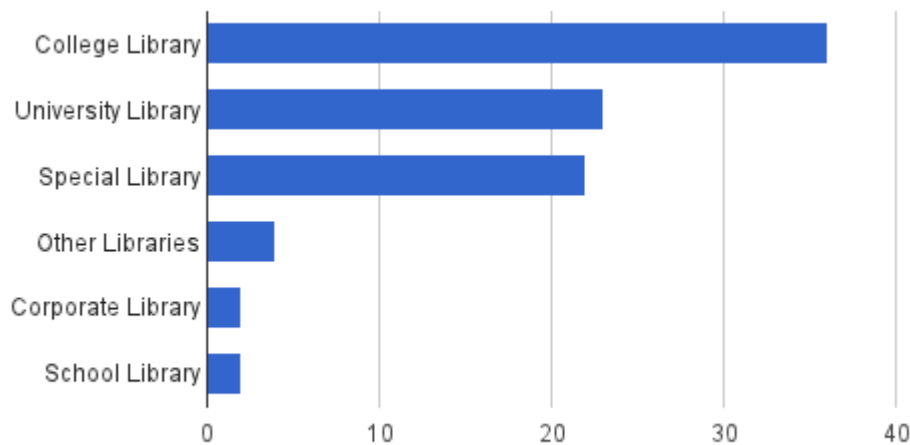


Fig. 5 Workplace of LIS-Forum users

Representation of college librarians in LIS-Forum was high. One fourth of the total participants were from university and special libraries. School and corporate librarians participation was very less. Nobody from public libraries participated in this survey.

2.1.6 Membership in other discussion forums

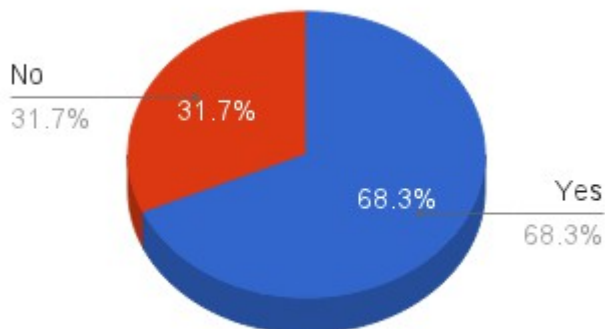


Fig. 6 LIS communities participation in other discussion forums

Majority of LIS-Forum users are members of other email based discussion forums for LIS community. Other popular discussion forums are LIS-Links [www.lislinks.com], MLOSC-

Maharashtra Librarians Online Study Circle, NMLIS - New Millennium LIS Professionals and IATLIS - Indian Association for Teachers in Library and Information Science discussion forum.

3.1 PARTICIPATION

3.1.1 How acquainted with LIS-Forum

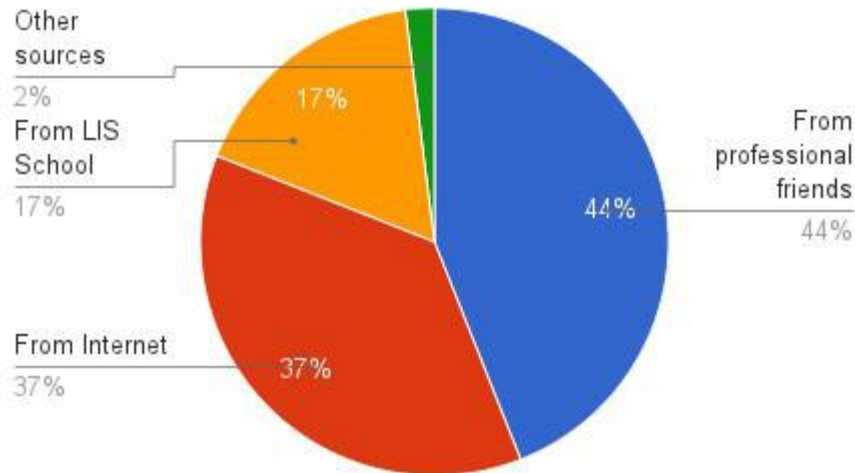


Fig. 7 How learned about LIS-Forum first time

Most of the users first heard about LIS-Forum from professional friends. Second segment of participants learned about LIS-Forum from Internet resources. Remaining users are lucky enough to get awareness about LIS-Forum from LIS schools in the early ages in their career.

3.1.2 Frequency of checking messages

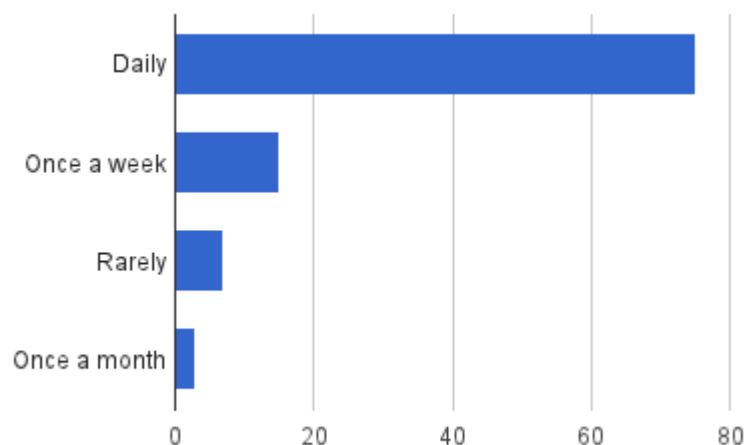


Fig. 8 Frequency of checking LIS-Forum messages by LIS community

LIS-Forum messages can be received two ways; digest mode and instant mode. In instant mode, messages arrive in the inbox when approved by the moderator. In digest mode, messages are received as a bundle in a single email. The majority of LIS-Forum members check messages daily. About 15% of members check messages once a week, 3% of members check once in a month, and 7% of members do not regularly check messages.

3.1.3 LIS-Forum message archive

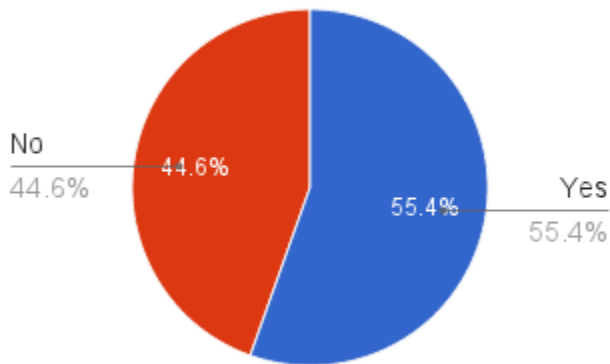


Fig. 9 Visiting of LIS-Forum archive for checking old messages

LIS-Forum archives messages permanently. Message archiving is a very helpful service for users to read past messages. About half of the LIS community checks old messages for various purposes.

3.1.4 Message submission in LIS-Forum

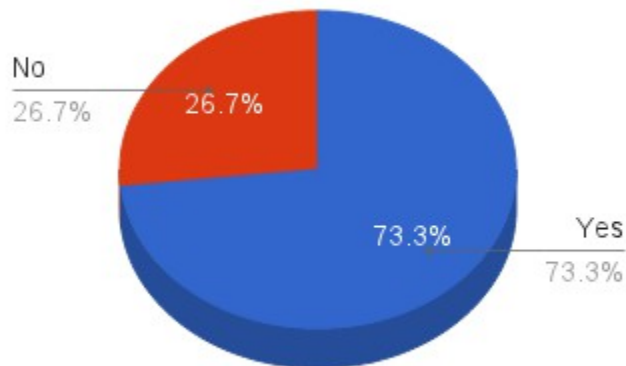


Fig. 10 Have posted messages in LIS-Forum?

About 73.3% of members have posted messages. Remaining users were only viewers of messages. More participation from members is necessary for the health of LIS-Forum.

3.1.5 Number of messages posted in LIS-Forum

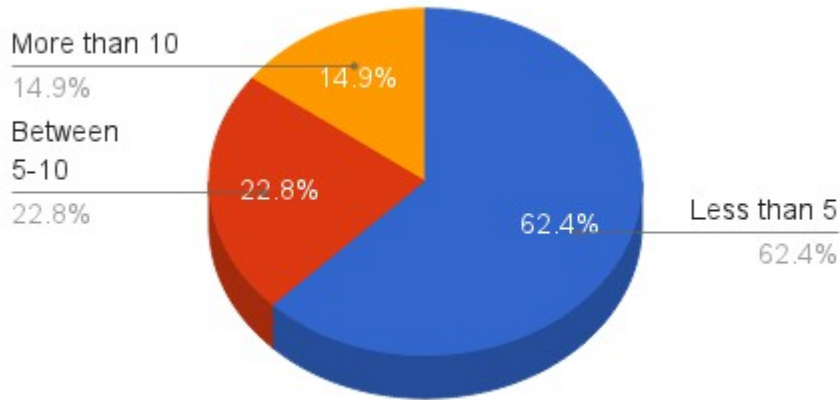


Fig. 11 Number of messages posted in LIS-Forum last one year

Survey statistics shows that message contributions from members were not good. A small segment of members (14%) have posted more than 10 messages in last one year. Library and Information domain is an interdisciplinary one and lot of changes are happening everyday. On the basis of number of message submitted an active professional interaction was not visible. T.B. Rajashekar had expressed the same observation about the health of LIS-Forum activity (Rajashekar & Gulla, 1997).

3.1.6 Quality of messages in LIS-Forum

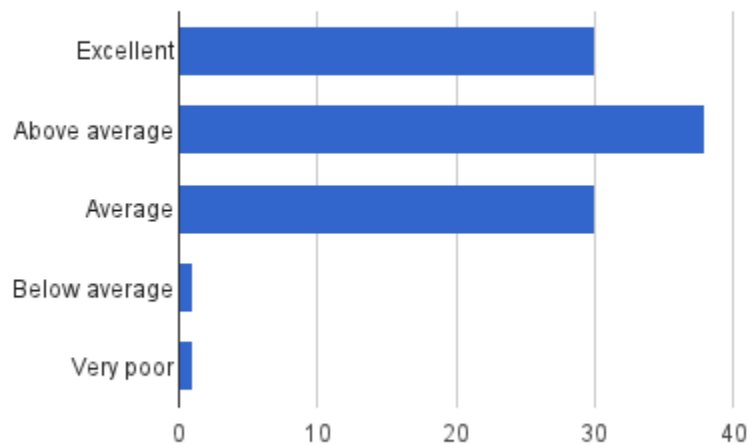


Fig. 12 Message quality in LIS-Forum

This question was asked to evaluate the quality of messages received by subscribers themselves. The term quality was used in terms of compelling, fulfilling, and significance of the content. Among LIS-Forum subscribers, 38% of them say that message quality is above average and 30% says that message quality is excellent.

3.1.7 Helpfulness of messages in LIS-Forum

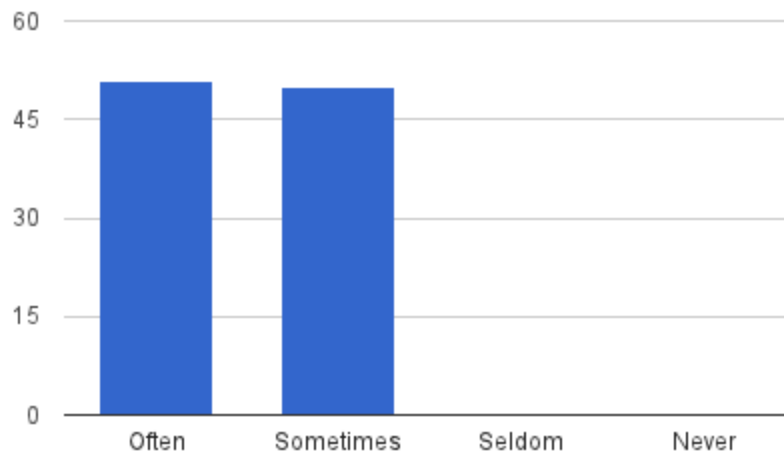


Fig. 13 How helpful the messages in LIS-Forum

LIS-Forum messages are representing various aspects of Library and Information Science sector. Messages in LIS-Forum were helpful for various segments in the community in different ways. For example, messages about job offers were more helpful for LIS graduates. Messages dealing with service matters were exclusively useful for working professionals. Almost 50% of the participants say that messages were often helpful and 49.5% of LIS community says that messages were helpful sometimes. Nobody deny that messages were not helpful.

3.1.8 Timeliness of content in LIS-Forum messages

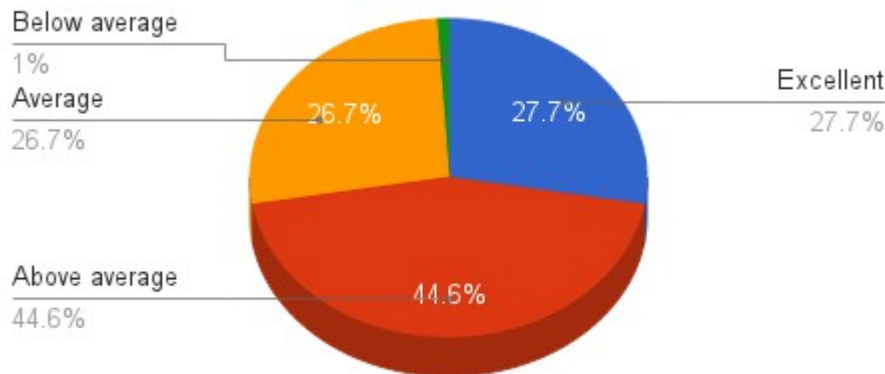


Fig.14 Timeliness of content in LIS-Forum messages

The main aim of asking this question was to know whether the messages appeared in LIS-Forum are covering latest developments in the domain. One of the main aims of electronic discussion forum is to provide platform for disseminating developments in specific area of interest with maximum pace. According to 44.6% of LIS-Forum users, timeliness of messages is above average. Only 27% of subscribers say that message content is timely.

3.1.9 Things don't like with LIS-Forum

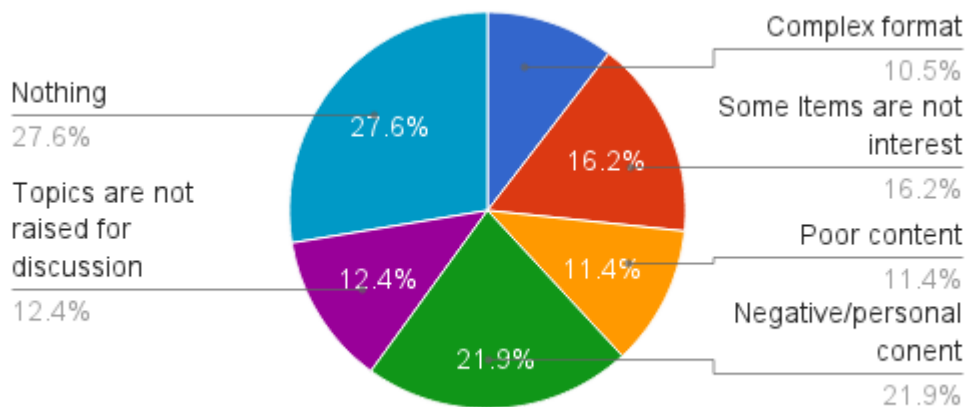


Fig. 15 Community dislike with LIS-Forum

LIS-Forum subscribers do not like certain anomalies in messages. Negative/personal content appeared in messages is the major disturbance according to LIS-Forum subscribers (21.9%). But, 27% of users did not find anything wrong with the message content.

3.1.10 New features suggested

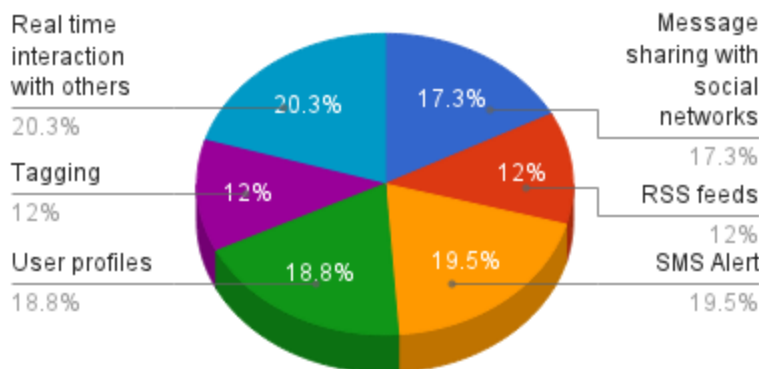


Fig. 16 New improvements suggested for LIS-Forum

With the advent of web 2.0, text based traditional email discussion forums are disappearing from the scene. Subscribers can feel a delay between message submission, approval by moderator and delivery. So, email based discussion forums can't claim the instant delivery of messages and users can't get the feeling of continuing conversations. Professional groups have migrated to social networking sites to enjoy more outlets of interaction. Online social networking sites have more provision to broadcast messages, chat, and maintain discussion threads. Conversational language is more effective in communication in social space. Users can add photo or video to increase the engagement (King, 2013).

Social networking sites, blogs, tagging and social bookmarking are the main features of Web 2.0. Dynamic content is major attraction of Web 2.0 and user can put content direct on the web and have good control over the content (O'Reilly, 2005). LIS community in India is like to see more interactive features with LIS-Forum service. About 20% of users liked the availability of real time chat facility to direct interaction with other professionals. SMS alert is very helpful to get instant updates in mobile phones, 19.5% of users have expressed their support. Tagging is very convenient for users to classify messages and easy to search desired items. Tagging feature received 12% votes from LIS-Forum users. User profiles are very helpful to display professional identity in discussion forum. Members details are hidden in LIS-Forum and only administrator can see the details of subscribers ("About LIS-Forum", 1995). Message sharing facility is helpful to share the LIS-Forum messages to other social networking sites to reach more professionals. For example, a message in LIS-Forum can make available in facebook.com and twitter using message sharing facility. If so, more professionals outside LIS-Forum can see the messages and respond.

CONCLUSION

Men wrote most posts in LIS-Forum than women. Young people (56%) had majority in LIS-Forum activities. Representation of members from South Indian states (57.2%) was higher than other sectors of India. Among states, leading number of participants were from Karnataka. Number of librarians in the community is higher than faculty members, research scholars and

students. College librarians outwit in numbers among librarians group. Most of the LIS-Forum members are subscribers of other email discussion forums in LIS domain.

Most of the subscribers were checking messages daily. More than half of the members were visit message archive of LIS-Forum to check old messages if necessary. A large number of users have posted messages in LIS-Forum before. Very few members regularly contribute messages. Anyway, all LIS-Forum subscribers said that messages were helpful. Negative/personal content in messages was most annoying thing as felt by subscribers. Another important complaint is that topics are not raised for healthy discussion.

Community members demand web 2.0 features like RSS feeds, tagging, user profiles, and message sharing. Social networks with high user participation are replacing traditional email based discussion forums. In conclusion, we can't ignore the presence of social media in personal and professional life. It is high time to revamp of LIS-Forum service and it is essential to cope up with the demands of users.

REFERENCES

About LIS-Forum. (1995). *LIS-Forum -- Discussion Forum for Library and Information Professionals in India..* Retrieved May 29, 2013, from <http://ncsi.iisc.ernet.in/mailman/listinfo/lis-forum>

Anish, G. (2013, May 9). Survey for LIS-Forum users. *LIS-Forum*. Retrieved May 29, 2013, from ncsi.iisc.ernet.in/pipermail/lis-forum/2013-May/015038.html

BBC. (2005, August 9). Berners-Lee on the read/write web. *BBC News*. Retrieved June 19, 2013, from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4132752.stm>

King, D. L. (2013, January 8). Five Tips to Reshape your Social Media Plan in 2013. *David Lee King*. Retrieved June 19, 2013, from www.davidleeking.com/2013/01/08/five-tips-to-reshape-your-social-media-plan-in-2013

LIS-Forum Admin (personal communication, May 27, 2013)

O'Reilly, T. (2005, September 30). What Is Web 2.0. *O'Reilly Media*. Retrieved June 20, 2013, from <http://oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>

Rajashekar, T.B. & Gulla, M. (1997). LIS FORUM:E-mail Discussion Forum for Library and Information Services . *Information Today and Tomorrow*, 16(3), 9-13.

Shirky, C. (2010, December 20). The Political Power of Social Media. *Foreign Affairs*. Retrieved June 20, 2013, from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67038/clay-shirky/the-political-power-of-social-media>