

Francis Jayakanth: Moderators of discussion groups have to be impartial in dealing with the members and their postings

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Open Interview

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Francis Jayakanth, Ph.D. is one of the distinguished library and information professionals known for his contributions to the open access movement. A Scientific Assistant at J. R. D. Tata Memorial Library, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru, Jayakanth has been credited for setting up of India's first institutional repository, thus making the century-old IISc's research far more globally visible than before. He has trained several students through erstwhile National Centre for Science Information (NCSI), Bengaluru and library professionals in many workshops for setting up their institutional repositories.



He is known as 'renaissance man' in the librarians' circle for being a strong advocate and technical expert in all aspects of open access development. Jayakanth is also known for being the Moderator of LIS-Forum, a 25-year-old India's first online discussion forum for the library and information professionals. His 23-year long stint with the Forum is full of splendid experiences, challenges and stories.

Open Interview features Jayakanth's interview with Santosh C. Hulagabali and this is the first exclusive interview on LIS-Forum conducted ever before. The aim of the interview was to explore what it takes to be a Moderator of such a respectable discussion Forum for more than two decades. It was also to share Jayakanth's rich experience of handling the Forum and thus recognise his role, contributions and selfless service to the library-professional community. His honest reminiscences of his association with the Forum will really inspire Moderators and members/readers of different online discussion groups.

LIS-Forum is all set to celebrate Silver Jubilee this year*. Open Interview congratulates the entire team of LIS-Forum and specifically you on being the longest serving Moderator of the Forum. We also congratulate you and your colleagues on IISc scaling the first position in the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF), 2019.

Thank you very much.

Serving a prestigious discussion forum for more than two decades is indeed a long period. How do you feel about it?

It's a great feeling because I am able to carry forward a service for the benefit of fellow professionals, which I believe, is useful to them. The fact that the number of subscribers has steadily grown over the years to reach close to 6000, gives an immense satisfaction and it also serves as a stamp of approval of usefulness of the service by the fellow professionals.

Could you please share with us how the idea of starting LIS-Forum was conceived and launched? Who all pioneered it and what's its status at present in terms of its members, coverage and reach?

The idea of starting LIS-Forum goes to late Dr. T.B. Rajashekar. Ms. Meenaxi Gulla, who worked as a project assistant was the only other person who was involved in the project in setting up perhaps the country's first email-based discussion forum for Library and Information Science (LIS) professionals.

During the initial years of LIS-Forum, Dr. Rajashekar used to moderate the Forum. It was around 1996-97 that the responsibility of moderating LIS-Forum was given to me. To date, there are close to 6000 subscribers to the Forum and new subscriptions happen almost everyday. Vast majority of the members are native subscribers.

How far LIS-Forum has been successful in attracting the non-resident Indian (NRI) LIS professionals to take part in the Forum?

There are several NRI LIS professionals on the Forum. There are also internationally renowned figures like Marshall Breeding (Library Technology Guides), Thomas Krichel to name a few, on the Forum. However, it is difficult to identify the nationality or the affiliation of the members as most of the people subscribe to the Forum using their personal email-IDs. To subscribe to the Forum, only the email field is mandatory. It is, therefore, difficult to segregate the subscribers region-wise or on any other criterion based on the email IDs.

There is a common perception among the librarians that LIS-Forum is an elite group of elite LIS professionals. What do you say about it?

That is a wrong perception. The fact, there are close to 6000 subscribers undermines that perception. Had it been an elitist group, the number of subscribers to the Forum would have been a fraction of what it is today.

The LIS-Forum (which was initiated in April, 1994) as a project was sponsored by NISSAT/DSIR. May we know why this project needed sponsorship?

With sponsorship comes the funding, which enables in procuring hardware, hire people, etc. Having dedicated infrastructure and people to work on a time-bound project will ensure that the project timelines are met. Also, people with specific skill-sets needed for the project can be hired for the required duration.

LIS-Forum used ListProc software 10 way back in 1994 and in 2001 it was shifted to Mailman software. Can you please share on such technological changeover and the technological background of today's LIS-Forum?

LIS-Forum software runs on GNU Mailman software application from the GNU project, for managing electronic mailing lists. GNU Mailman is a web-based application, and it currently runs only on GNU/Linux and any other POSIX-compliant operating system, such as BSD-based, Solaris, macOS X, etc. Also, a mail server (MTA) is required for its operations.

There are two ownership roles associated with each mailing list – List administrator and list moderator. The list administrators are the people who have ultimate control over all parameters of a mailing list. They are able to change any list configuration variable available through these administration web pages.

The list moderators have more limited permissions; they are not able to change any list configuration variable but they are allowed to tend to pending administration requests, including approving or rejecting held subscription requests, and disposing of held postings.

It was too technical then. Perhaps, opening a new discussion forum, nowadays, is not that technical. How do you see these two phases and what differences and limitations do you find?

I did not have an opportunity to get hands-on experience with ListProc software. Though I got involved in the moderation of the Forum in 1996-97, my involvement in the administration of the Forum began in 2001 when the forum software was migrated to the GNU Mailman software application. Being a web-based application, administration and moderation of Mailman is quite straight forward.

I will not be able to comment on the differences and limitations of the two phases of the Forum as I did not have the opportunity to work during the ListProc days.

What were the initial challenges when the group was launched and how those were addressed?

I was not involved during the initial stages of the Forum operations; therefore, I will not be able to comment on the challenges faced during the initial stages of the Forum.

There was an announcement of the closure of the NCSI which was administering the LIS-Forum. The users were dumbfounded to know this. Although IISc continued it but how was the reaction/response from the members that time?

Though NCSI was closed in 2012, all the activities that NCSI was involved in were taken over by the J.R.D. Tata Memorial Library, IISc, and are still being continued. The only major activity of NCSI that was discontinued was the 18-month training programme on Information and Knowledge Management (IKM)[1].

LIS-Forum completes 25 years of its existence. Now, there are many LIS discussion forums but still LIS-Forum holds a great value. What is its USP?

Since its inception, the Forum has been functioning democratically, and the objectives of the Forum are strictly adhered to. Also, the downtime of the Forum has been very minimal. Rarely has any spam message been circulated on the Forum. That is because as the Moderator, I have a quick look at every single message before approving it for circulation.

Requests for articles on the group are increasing. There were discussions earlier on such requests on LIS-Forum. What do you say about such requests and how many of them really reach out to those requests?

I feel the forum is serving as a reliable platform for inter-library loan (ILL) service. Going by the number of requests being made on the Forum, it is well within the limits of the CONTU Guidelines. Also, as the Moderator, I do not intend to exercise any control on such requests. The libraries responding to ILL requests should take the onus of copyright compliance.

It is difficult to gauge the success rate of article requests because most of the time the library willing to share an article does so directly to the requesting library. Very rarely do the recipients acknowledge the receipt of articles on the Forum.

In 1997, Dr. Rajashekar and Ms. Gulla [2] identified a few shortcomings [3] of LIS-Forum. They observed that the Forum was largely used for disseminating information and there was very little discussion and sharing of problems and experiences. I think these apply to all other list serves even today. Have these changed now or are there any new shortcomings that are equally a matter of concern now?

No, there has not been any change in the way the Forum is being used by the members. It continues to be used mostly for disseminating information, request for articles, and for surveys. Discussions do take place, but occasionally.

They had also observed that a small percentage of the subscribers contribute to the Forum. If we see this now, what do you say on this?

Yes, the same trend is continuing w.r.t. the Forum postings. However, there are a few next generation professionals who are very active in promoting open-source library management system, digital library software, reference management tools, etc. They conduct online workshops on these tools using [Skype](#) or [WhatsApp](#). They use the forum effectively to connect with the prospective participants.

Sometimes some meaningful queries or inputs that have great potentiality of proper discussion however go unanswered. What is your take on this?

I cannot recollect such a situation in the recent past. Generally, discussions do take place if the query or the reply merit it.

Nowadays, we share any professional inputs, information, queries, achievements, etc. on different academic/professional networking platforms like [ResearchGate](#), [Academia.edu](#), [LinkedIn](#), etc. So the discussion and sharing of information are scattered. Has this trend really affected the actual discussion on the discussion forums?

May be true but professional discussion forums like the LIS-Forum serves as an excellent platform for both students and the professionals. It is because, a single platform can be used by all the members to share knowledge, exchange ideas, seek advice and help each other, and of course, to disseminate information. No other platform offers all the advantages that an email-based discussion forum offers. Moreover, all the conversions get archived for posterity, and depending on the configuration of the Forum software, the archives can be browsed and searched by non-members too. [LIS-Forum archive](#), available from April 2003 onward, is accessible to the non-member, too.

Studies and surveys conducted on LIS-Forum indicate that the LIS-Forum is the most popular and active Forums in the country amongst the LIS professionals.

How do you balance your work as a Scientific Assistant at IISc Library and Moderator of LIS-Forum?

There are close to 6000 members on the Forum. On an average, the forum receives about 5 or 6 postings, everyday. Of these, 3 or 4 messages will be mere forwards from other lists without any editing. I am forced to discard such messages. While forwarding messages to the Forum from other sources, members should ensure that only the relevant portions of the forwarded messages are sent.

I will have a quick glance at the remaining 2 or 3 messages, and approve them for circulation. Each approved message will get delivered to each of the subscribed member. On a given day, if 3 messages are approved, 18,000 emails (6000*3) are to be sent from the [IISc](#) mail relay host.

As LIS-Forum generates enormous amount of network traffic, IISc network administrators have asked us not to operate the Forum during the regular office hours. I, therefore, approve the Forum messages only after 9 PM on most of the working days. During the weekends and holidays, I can approve the messages at my convenience.

I spend about 30 minutes every day in the overall operations of the Forum. As I have been doing the moderation work beyond regular office hours, it does not affect my office work.

Sometimes Moderator's job becomes very challenging. I know how honestly and straightly you deny postings/messages that do not adhere to Forum's objectives. Some feel offended. How tough this job is?

Most of the messages that I reject/discard are the ones that have attachments in the postings and also the ones that carry multiple recipients either in the 'To:' field or in the 'Cc:' field.

Forum postings should be made in textual format and they should be without email attachments. The attachments in the postings not only increase the posting size, which, in turn will have a bearing on the network traffic, they are also the source for spreading computer viruses. File attachments should be stored on alternative locations, like the Google Drive, and the postings should carry a link to the file rather than the file itself.

Also, including multiple IDs either in the 'To:' or in the 'Cc:' field not only enhances size of the messages, it is also an irritant to rest of the members who receive such messages. With regular offenders, I just discard such messages. For the first-timers, I write back to them giving the reason for rejecting/discarding their postings.

Postings to LIS-Forum can be done only from the registered email IDs. These days-people having multiple email IDs are very common. Quite often, members make postings from an email ID that is not registered with the Forum. As to be expected, such postings get rejected and an auto-generated message is sent to that effect to the person who has made such a postings. Without understanding the reason behind the rejection, people complain bitterly about the service and its moderation.

Share with us any one incident where you felt being a Moderator is so challenging and demanding?

About a year ago, the GNU Mailman software was behaving erratically. As usual, the postings were being received and I would approve all the relevant messages. However, there would be considerable delay (more than 72 hours) in the approved messages to reach the mailboxes of the members.

Being the administrator and also the Moderator of the Forum, I always make it a point to inform the members, should there be any issues in the day-to-day operations of the Forum. I did inform the present scenario, too, but as to be expected, there would have

been considerable delay even in my message reaching the members' mailboxes. Apparently, those who were making postings during the said period would call/email me to know what was happening to their postings.

It was getting very hectic in troubleshooting the issue. Even our network team was not able to identify the cause for such a behavior of the Forum. Finally, I decided to upgrade the software and also port it on to a new hardware platform. When I did that, things were back on track, and it was a great relief for me!

Can you recall any one or two discussions that you personally enjoyed and felt enriched personally?

Yes, I would like to refer to the discussion on the topic, Union Catalogue of ETDs that took place in November, 2018. Dr. Ashok Asundi had posed the query, and I had responded to the query, which, to the best of my knowledge was correct and implementable. However, I realized later that it was not an efficient option. Dr. Saiful Amin of semanticconsulting.com suggested a much better option, which I was not aware of. Though the discussion was quite short, it was a learning experience for me.

I would also like to mention about a posting made in May, 2003 by Dr. M.G. Sreekumar, Chief Information Officer, IIM Kozhikode. The posting was about the announcement of Fulbright Fellowships' for 2004-2005. I was one of the awardees of the 2004-05 Fellowship. But for the posting of Dr. Sreekumar, I may have missed the opportunity to apply for the Fellowship! The Fellowship helped me to do the groundwork for my thesis work too.

I am sure there are several other interesting stories out there for which the LIS-Forum has played an important role of serving as a communication channel.

You must be the member of some International LIS groups. What difference do you find in view of the type of messages shared and discussions take place?

I used to be on couple of international LIS groups like the Web4Lib and IFLA-L but due to frequent changes in my official email ID during last 4-5 years, my subscription to the said lists got deactivated. Only recently I got back on to Web4lib and IFLA-L lists.

We always think twice before sharing anything on LIS- Forum. It's because our messages get noticed and read by many distinguished LIS professionals. Similarly, as a Moderator, do you think twice or thrice while reviewing or approving or posting messages?

Yes, I do. I glance through every message before approving it for circulation. Many a times I write back to the members giving the reason for rejection/discarding. At times, I ask them to re-post the message after incorporating the required corrections/changes.

When I am in a dilemma about a particular message with respect to its approval/rejection, I do seek advice from senior professionals. Their inputs have always helped me to take a right decision on such messages.

As a reader, I always look forward to read postings of Dr. S. Arunachalam. So, as a Moderator and reader whose postings you curiously wait for posting and reading respectively?

I, too, am a keen follower of Dr. S. Arunachalam. I also look forward to read messages /replies from Mr. Sathyanarayana (Informatics), Dr. I.R.N. Goudar, Ms. Vasumathi Sriganesh (QMed), Dr. M. Koteswara Rao (Former Librarian, University of Hyderabad) and a few others. Of late, I look forward to your postings too, because of the openinterview.org platform.

I take this opportunity to congratulate you and your team on initiating the Open Interview blog.

Thank you so much Sir.

How has your active association with LIS-Forum for a long period helped you grow professionally and personally?

Quite often, I use the Forum to place ILL requests for articles from our researchers, especially very old articles that are not available in digital form. Invariably, these requests are fulfilled by the fellow members. Our researchers are quite pleased that library is able to cater to their information needs.

Personally, I have made many professional friends through the Forum. Also, as already mentioned, it is through the Forum posting that I came know about the Fulbright Fellowship, which in turn paved the way for my Ph.D. thesis. It has also helped me realize that discharging responsibilities with dedication, selfless attitude, and without extrinsic reasons will bear rich dividends in the long run.

This question is to encourage the budding librarians and LIS students. As per your experience, what kinds of messages hold real value in terms of engagement and response and succeed in drawing the attention of the experts?

Very often, members use the Forum as the first option for their information needs – it could be an article request, vendor details, etc. A simple Google search would have served such requirements, but instead they put the onus on the Forum members. On several occasions, senior professionals have intervened and tried to educate the fellow members the etiquette to be followed while seeking help from the fellow members. They also point to different resources that could first be consulted to know sources from where

the required information could be obtained. Such postings from the senior professionals greatly help the students and fellow professionals, provided they make efforts to learn from such messages.

How one can build contacts/ network through LIS- Forum or any online discussion forum for their career growth?

As with any other online medium, discussion forum/s serve as an excellent platform to create an impact for oneself by initiating useful discussions on the topics of relevance to the fellow professionals. Also, it is quite common on most of the professional forums to see job advertisements and upcoming events. So, being a keen user of a forum can help individuals to grow professionally.

There are many specialized LIS discussion groups dealing with a particular/specialized group of librarians. How effective they are in comparison with the general discussion groups?

I have not been on any of the specialized LIS discussion groups. My reading is that specialized LIS discussion groups, like the corporate librarians' group, will be quite focused with respect to its membership enrollment, and therefore, the discussions that take place on such forums will also be focused to the specific needs of the group. Such groups will be very useful to people who are beginning their careers in the corporate sector.

Apart from LIS-Forum, which forum (at national/international level/s) you recommend the librarians to be a part of?

I am not on any other lists operated from India, therefore I am not in a position to make any recommendations. At international level, I recommend: [Web4Lib Electronic Discussion](#), [IFLA-L](#).

As a Moderator, what do you advise the moderators of other Indian LIS list serves?

Moderators will have to be impartial in dealing with the members and their postings. To the extent possible ensure that the postings that are approved for circulation conform to the objectives of the forum. When a posting is rejected, members should be informed the reason behind such actions.

As the Moderator of LIS-Forum, what is your precious learning so far?

Starting a new service is easy, but sustaining it for more than two decades and beyond is quite challenging. Also, one needs dedication and passion to ensure that a useful service is continued with minimal downtime.

Any future plans of LIS-Forum?

Before I answer this, on behalf of all the members of LIS-Forum, I take this opportunity to thank the IISc authorities for providing all the necessary infrastructure and support needed for the smooth functioning of the Forum.

Yes, there are a couple of plans/issues that needs to be addressed to ensure that the Forum is continued uninterrupted for several more decades: a) LIS-Forum server will have to be moved to a different domain as the existence and continuation of ernet.in domain cannot be taken for granted. b) LIS-Forum server is running its own mail server. Once the ernet.in domain services are withdrawn, LIS-Forum services will be affected.

Another plan I wish to share through Open Interview is that, we are planning to organize an event to mark the Silver Jubilee of the LIS-Forum in November, 2019. Hope we all will have a great time discussing varied stories and experiences of being part of the Forum.

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· *All the answers/ opinions expressed in this document are of the interviewee.*

Notes/Citations

* Open Interview tributes this interview to LIS-Forum for completing 25 years of service to the LIS community.

[1] The IKM training programme offered by the NCSI was one of the best and sought after training programmes in the country. All the alumni of IKM training programme are very well placed in the various sectors like academics, corporate, government, and non-government organization. The demand for NCSI-trained professionals continues to exist even to this day.

NCSI-Net Foundation is a registered trust established by the staff and alumni of the erstwhile NCSI. Its forerunner, NCSI-Net Association, was formed in 2000. It was the brainchild of Dr. T. B. Rajashekar. The NCSI-Net Foundation organises two events in memory and honour of Dr. T.B. Rajashekar viz. Dr. T.B. Rajashekar Memorial Lecture (which is usually held in the month of June to commemorate his death anniversary) and Dr. T. B. Rajashekar Memorial Seminar (which is usually held in the month of November to commemorate his birth anniversary). More details about the lectures and seminars are available here.

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

[3] Pujar, S., Mahesh, G., & Jayakanth, F. (2014). An Exploratory Analysis of Messages on a Prominent LIS Electronic Discussion List from India. *DESIDOC Journal of Library & Information Technology*, 34(1). <https://doi.org/10.14429/djlit.34.1.5942>.

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