

Librarians' Use of NLA Online Forum for Collaborative Activities

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Abstract

This study assessed the use of Nigerian Library Association (NLA) online forum for collaborative activities among Librarians in Nigeria. The main objective of the study was to examine the use of NLA online forum for collaborative activities among librarians in Nigeria. The study population was made up of 1074 registered librarians on NLA online forum. Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting 143 members of the forum as respondents in the study. A self constructed questionnaire was used for data collection which was analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings from the study reveal that the forum is used mainly by librarians working in the cataloguing and e-library departments. Reasons for using the forum are associated with acquiring information about the library profession, getting ideas for research and identifying experts. Major hindrances to use of the forum were found to be lack of familiarity with online technologies, lack of access to computers with internet connectivity and incessant power outage. The findings however reveal that improved visibility, cross fertilisation of ideas, access to data and widening knowledge of a particular topic are stronger motivations for members of the forum to engage in collaborative activities when compared to factors like access to equipment and funding. Uncooperative attitude of members in the online forum was discovered to be the greatest hindrance against collaboration activities, followed by anonymity of some members of the forum. The study concludes by recommending that libraries provide internet facilities in all sections of the library to encourage greater use of the forum by librarians irrespective of their section of work. Administrators of

NLA online forum are also to find means of ensuring that members of the forum identify themselves to check anonymity on the forum among others.

Keywords: Collaboration; Librarians; Nigeria; NLA online forum; Online forums

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INTRODUCTION

Online networking is a modern day reality made possible with the introduction of web 2.0 applications, thereby, offering Librarians and professionals from other fields of endeavour the opportunity to interact, exchange ideas, and collaborate. A number of library associations worldwide such as American Library Association, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), and Nigerian Library Association (NLA) are taking advantage of online forums. Siverthorne (2009) affirm that these forums are useful particularly, when looking for solutions to problems that one has not been able to solve in real life. In other words, when the problem at hand can not be solved by those within one's immediate environment, there may be need to look elsewhere for solution. Anderson (1996) supports this view by stating that the capacity to support collaboration, reflection, and professional development, as well as to overcome barriers of time and place, makes the use of online forums potentially useful. Collaborative activities are essential to online forums, especially those operating under the umbrella of professional associations as Burnett and Buerkle (2004) maintain that collaborative behaviours are signs of a healthy, functional community.

BRIEF HISTORY OF NLA ONLINE FORUM

NLA online forum is an offshoot of Nigerian Library Association (NLA) which started as a division of the West African Library Association (WALA). WALA was established in 1954 as a result of a UNESCO seminar held at Ibadan in 1953 on the development of Public Libraries in Africa. With the political independence from colonial rule of Anglophone West African countries in the late 1950s and early 1960s, WALA national divisions transformed into National Library Associations (NLA, 2011). The objectives of Nigerian Library Association includes: to unite persons interested in Libraries, Librarianship and Information services; to safeguard and promote the professional interests of librarians and to promote and encourage bibliographical study, research and library cooperation. On July 25, 2005, NLA online forum took off under the umbrella of Nigerian Library Association (NLA, 2011) as a means of providing an online environment through which members can share their expertise with other members, discuss matters of professional or academic interest, and inform other members of events that would enhance professional development.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Online forums provide opportunities for participants to interact, exchange ideas and collaborate with people they may or may not know in real life. As Nigerian Library Associations becomes part of this global experience through NLA online forum, the question that comes to mind is whether librarians in Nigeria are actually taking advantage of NLA online forum to engage in collaborative activities. It is within this context that the present study investigates the use of NLA online forum for collaborative activities among librarians in Nigeria

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine the use of NLA online forum for collaborative activities among librarians in Nigeria.

Specific objectives are to:

- identify reasons associated with the use and non-use of NLA online forum
- determine factors influencing collaboration among librarians
- determine the extent to which librarians on NLA online forum engage in collaborative activities
- identify factors militating against effective use of NLA online forum for collaborative activities
- seek suggestions to improve collaborative activities among members of NLA online forum

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Collaboration comes from the Latin words *com* and *labore* which means "to work together".

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (2001) defines it as "the act of working with another person or group of people to create or produce something" p214. Axelsson, Sonnenwald, and Spante (2006) go a step further by describing collaboration as human behaviour among two or more individuals that facilitates the sharing of meaning and completion of tasks with respect to a mutually-shared super ordinate goal. The term "super ordinate" in this case, gives a sense of accomplishment that would otherwise not have been possible without joint effort. Although collaboration is a term largely associated with the accomplishment of joint tasks, Subramanyam (1983) as cited by Katz and Martin (1997) argues that collaboration may exist even when the intention is not the production of a joint project. Subramanyam (1983) concludes that a brilliant suggestion made by a scientist during casual conversation may be more valuable in shaping the course and outcome of a research project than weeks of labour-intensive activity of a collaborating scientist in the laboratory. Katz and Martin (1997) agree that collaboration can take various forms ranging from offering general advice and insights to active participation in a specific piece of research. What this implies in essence is that collaboration may not just be for the purpose of accomplishing a joint task for which the contributors share credit. It may as well extend to information or other forms of assistance acquired from others for the purpose of accomplishing a task for which only one person takes the credit. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, collaborative activities entail engaging others for the accomplishment of individual or joint tasks.

Access to data is a major motivation for collaboration to take place between two or more people (Arzberger and Finholt, 2002). In the course of carrying out research, there may be need to obtain information which is beyond a person's reach, thereby, forcing him/her to join forces with one or more people who can fill the information need. Melin (2000) also notes that access to expertise can encourage collaboration especially when one person sees the other as an expert. The author goes ahead to note that cross-fertilization of ideas, a situation where research interest cuts across different fields of knowledge, can encourage specialists in different areas to work together on a given project. Other reasons include access to funds (Smith, 1958); improved visibility (Beaver, 2001) and pooling knowledge for solving complex problems (Goffman and Warren, 1980; Beaver, 2001)

In the view of Anderson (1996) online forums are particularly useful for collaborative activities as they provide freedom from time constraints (participants can participate when and if they choose); time for

reflection (participants decide when and if they choose to participate); opportunities to research and back up assertions; and support for cost effective global communication. In the opinion of Cervero (1988) when professionals search for similarities from across the profession, online forums can yield fresh ideas and solutions to problems. Rheingold (1993) supports this view by asserting that an online community is like a living encyclopaedia when in need of specific information, expert opinion or resource. Lamb (2001) views information exchange on online forums as vital to project success or failure by suggesting that knowing or identifying experts in a particular area and pairing the user with the expert for one-on-one exchange can enhance the outcome of a project.

Despite the merits of online forums for collaborative activities, Sproll and Kiesler (1986), note that online forums can also have draw backs in aiding collaborative activities. Due to the faceless nature of most computer-mediated communication, members of an online forum may decide to hide their identity or falsify information thereby making it almost impossible to identify them, go into joint projects with them or trust information gotten from them. The issue of social distance is also stressed by Hagstrom (1965), who maintains that collaboration may not develop easily among people of unequal rank. By implication, members of an online forum maybe unwilling to go into joint projects with those they perceive as being of lower professional or social status.

Few empirical studies if any looked into interpersonal collaboration among librarians or assessed it in an online environment. However, some researchers have worked in related areas. Bernier and Bowen (n.d.), assessed the use of online museum forums, findings from the study revealed that 28% of the respondents use the forums for providing knowledge, 19% use them for making enquires, 28% for keeping current in the field while 16% use them for finding material for research. Gray's (2004) study on informal learning in an online community of practice, revealed that online environment represents a valuable work resource even for those who do not actively contribute through posting, but who usually just "lurked" in the background to read what was going on. The study also revealed that the major factors militating against the use of online forum were lack of familiarity with online technologies and subsequently a lack of understanding or interest in how online communication could assist work. Tella and Isah (2010) carried out a study on undergraduates' use of online forum at the

University of Ilorin, Nigeira. The study found out that the most prominent benefits associated with participation in an online forum include: intellectual support in terms of sharing of ideas (100%), promotion of social interaction (98.5%), opportunity of asking colleagues what is not clear (98%). The study also indentified hindrances to participation in the forum as: incessant power outage (98.9%), time factor based on tight schedule (91.3%). Other hindering factors to participation were listed as: unruly behaviour by some of the participants in terms of posting excessive jokes and flaming and access to computers with slow connectivity. In a related study Atulomah and Onuoha (2011) investigated use of online social networks by Librarians in Nigeria and the study revealed that worries about privacy issues where they least reason for non – use of online social networks as affirmed by 3 (8%) of the respondents.

METHODOLOGY

The survey research design was used for this study. The study population consists of 1074 registered librarians on NLA online forum as at 9th June, 2011 (NLA, 2011). Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting 143 members of the forum who have posted at least one message on the forum between January 1, 2011 to August 30, 2011. The sample size of 143 is considered adequate as Asika (1991) notes that a sample size of 100 elements randomly selected from a population of 1000 elements is to all intents and purposes deemed to be representative of the population, and the findings from a study of the sample can be generalized for the population. Members who have posted at least one message on the forum from January 1, 2011 to August 30, 2011 were chosen for the study because they are considered to be more active and more likely to respond to the survey. Electronic copies of the questionnaire titled NLA online forum Questionnaire (NLAOFQ) was sent to the respondents through their email addresses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In carrying out the study, 143 copies of the questionnaire were mailed to the respondents out of which 102 were filled and returned successfully giving a response rate of 71%. Among those who responded to the questionnaire 57 (56%) were male while 45 (44%) were female.

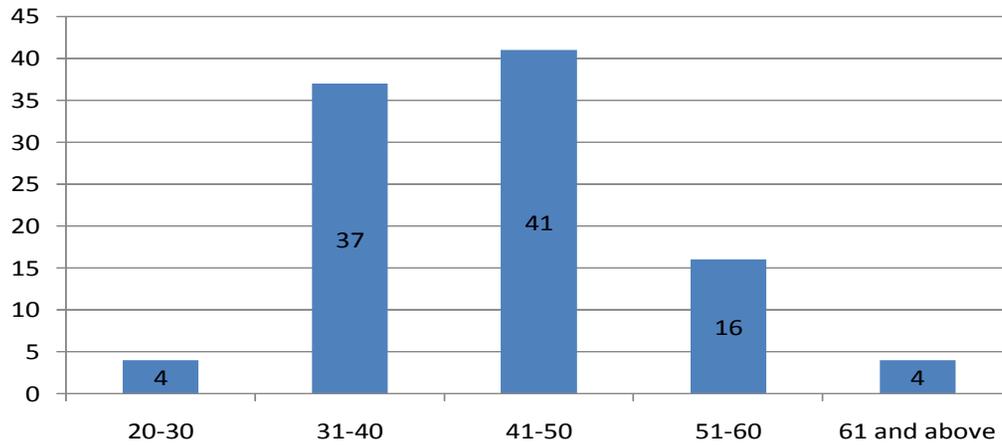


Fig 1
Age of Respondents

Majority of the respondents were those aged 41-50 who numbered 41 (40%), 31-40 years 37 (36%), 51- 60 years 16 (16%). The age groups of 20 -30 and 61 and

above were the least numbering only 4 (4%) each. This suggests that librarians in Nigeria are mainly between the ages of 31 to 60.

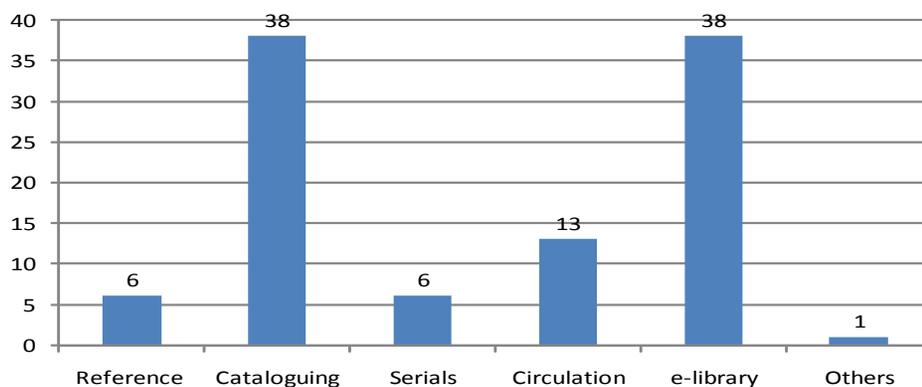


Fig 2
Section of Work

Findings from fig 2 reveals that most of the respondents work in the e-library and cataloguing sections, with both having the highest frequencies of 38 (37.3%). Respondents from the reference and serials sections were least in number 6 (5.8%). The finding may be associated with the fact that work in the cataloguing and e-library sections of most university libraries in Nigeria are more dependent on computers with internet connection for use in copy cataloguing and access to e-resources unlike other sections of the library.



Fig 3
Reasons Associated with Use of NLA Online Forum

Fig 3 presents the frequency count showing reasons associated with the use of NLA online forum. The major reason given for using the forum is getting current information on the library profession as affirmed by 90 (88%) of the respondents. This is in agreement with Rheingold (1993) who states that online communities are like living encyclopaedias when in need of specific information. Other reasons include acquiring new ideas for research 65 (64%), locating experts within the library

profession 61 (60%). The findings suggest that the primary reason for using NLA online forum is to get information about the profession. Although members can get ideas for research or identify experts whom they can consult, those are secondary reasons for using the online forum. Other reasons for using the forum which were included in the study by two of the respondents are making one's self visible within the professional circle and the recognition of new entrants in the profession.

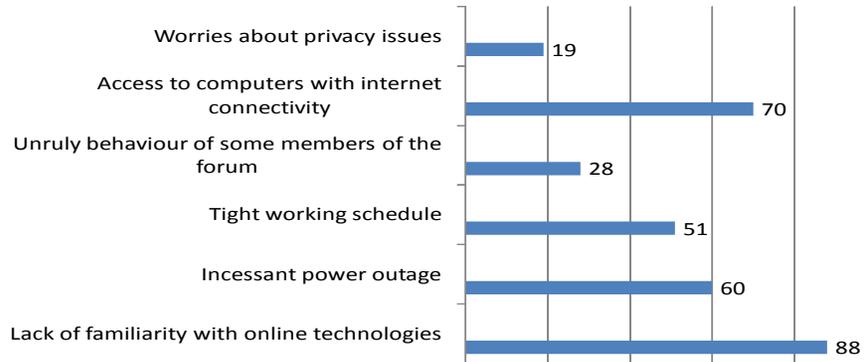


Fig 4
Reasons Associated with Non – Use of NLA Online Forum

While suggesting reasons for non-use of NLA online forum by some librarians in Nigeria, the findings in fig. 4 reveal that majority of the respondents 88 (86.3%) saw lack of familiarity with online technologies as the major reason for non-use of the forum. This finding agrees with the study of Gray's (2004) on informal learning in an online community of practice, which revealed that lack of familiarity with online technologies and subsequently a lack of understanding or interest in how online communication could assist work are major factors militating against the use of online forums. Other reasons associated with non-use of the forum are: lack of access to computers with internet connectivity 70 (68.6%); incessant power outage still experienced in Nigeria 60 (58.8%); and tight working schedule. The findings here are in agreement with the findings of Tella

and Isah (2010) which affirmed that incessant power outage and tight working schedule constitutes some of the major hindrances to effective use of an online forum at the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Although indicated as hindrances, unruly behaviour of some members of the forum as affirmed by 28 (27%) of the respondents and worries about privacy issues indicated by 19 (19%) of the respondents constitute the least reasons for non use of NLA online forum. This is also in agreement with the finding of Atulomah and Onuoha (2011) whose study affirmed that worries about privacy issues are the least reason for non – use of social networks by librarians in Nigeria. One respondent however, noted that vital research issues are rarely posted on the forum for deliberation and contribution by members which could also be a factor for non use of the forum by some librarians.

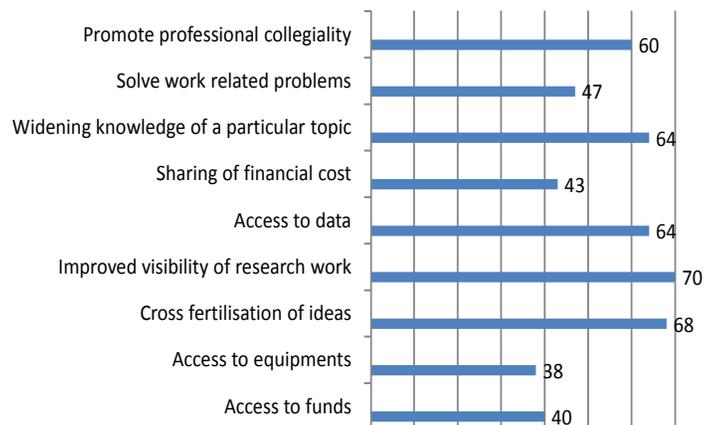


Fig 5
Factors Influencing Collaboration Among Librarians in Nigeria

Among the factors influencing collaboration among librarians in Nigeria as evidenced in fig. 5 is improved visibility of research work which had the highest frequency 70 (68.6%) out of 102 respondents. This is followed closely by cross fertilisation of ideas 68 (66.7%). Access to data and widening knowledge of a particular

topic has the same frequency of 64 (62.7%). The least reasons for collaboration are access to equipments 38 (37.3%) and access to funds 40 (39.2%). These findings are consistent with the findings of Beaver (2001); Melin, (2000); and Smith (1958) who affirmed such factors as influencing collaboration.

Table 1
Extent Of Engagement In Collaborative Activities

| Statement | Rarely F (%) | To a moderate extent F (%) | To a large extent F (%) | No response F (%) |
|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| Get information /ideas from members to assist research work | 37 (36%) | 20 (20%) | 41 (40%) | 4 (4%) |
| Contribute information to assist others on the forum | 4 (4%) | 37 (36%) | 57 (56%) | 4 (4%) |
| Get links to funding using the forum | 35 (34.3%) | 27 (26.5%) | 18 (17.6%) | 22 (21.6%) |
| Carry out joint projects with one or more members of the forum | 40 (39.2%) | 31 (30.4%) | 13 (12.7%) | 18 (17.7%) |
| Resolve work related issues through participation on the forum | 56 (55.0%) | 14 (13.7%) | 23 (22.5%) | 9 (8.8%) |
| Work with people outside your library | 16 (15.7%) | 25 (24.5%) | 45 (44.1%) | 16 (15.7%) |

Findings from table 1 show that majority of the respondents 57 (55.9%) are active in contributing information to assist others in the forum. This finding is also justified by the fact that the respondents for this study were chosen based on their posts on the forum, as all those who had not posted anything on the forum within the last 8 months (January 1, 2011 to August 30, 2011) were eliminated from the study. The table also shows that 45 (44.1%) out of the 102 respondents have to a large

extent worked with people outside their libraries. On the other hand, 56 (54.9%) of the respondents affirmed that they have rarely been able to resolve work related issues through the forum. This however indicates that most of the posts on the forum rarely address work specific issues. Although 45 (44.1%) of the 102 respondents affirmed that they have been able to work with people outside their libraries to a large extent, more than half to the 102 respondents are unable to do so.

Table 2
Factors Militating Against Collaborative Activities on NLA Online Forum

| Statement | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Physical distance among members of the forum | 26 | 25.5% |
| Anonymity of some members of the forum | 48 | 47.1% |
| Uncooperative attitude among members | 60 | 58.8% |
| Fear of rejection by those you want to collaborate with | 47 | 46.1% |

As revealed in table 2, uncooperative attitude of members in the online forum was considered as the greatest hindrance against collaboration activities taking place among members of the online forum. This was followed by anonymity of some members of the forum as some members actually find it difficult to identify themselves even when posting messages on the forum. This is supported by Sproll and Kiesler (1986) who affirm that members of an online forum may decide to hide their

identity or falsify information thereby making it almost impossible to identify them, go into joint projects with them or trust information gotten from them. Physical distance among members of the forum was considered as the least factor against collaborative activities as affirmed by 26 (25.5%) out of the total number of the respondents. This is quite understandable as online forums make use of modern technologies that can breach the gap of distance and time.

The study also sought suggestions to improve collaborative activities within the forum. This resulted in the suggestions/comments listed below:

- 1 Collaboration has to start from our immediate working environment before it can extend to the online forum. He who does not collaborate at home will find it difficult to collaborate outside. Charity, they say, begins at home! Also senior colleagues should mentor and collaborate more with staff under them.
- 2 The importance of the forum should be discussed at NLA conference/AGM
- 3 Members should believe in the profession and move away from being too conservative.
- 4 There is need for wider publicity of the forum
- 5 There is need to encourage dialogue through respective local chapters of NLA
- 6 Members of NLA should be more open to ideas to see the importance of collaboration and at the same time be sincere about their level of knowledge and desire to collaborate with others
- 7 Library administrators should endeavour to provide internet facilities to enable workers connect to the outside world.
- 8 Members of the forum should constantly update themselves on issues connected to the library profession so as to feel confident in sharing their ideas with others.
- 9 Members of the forum should not restrict themselves only to the online forum, but should also get involved in professional networking, attending seminars, workshops and conferences
- 10 The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) should create awareness of collaboration and its usefulness.
- 11 Information about the online forum should be disseminated at NLA meetings and conferences to encourage collaboration
- 12 Members of the forum should be encouraged to respond to survey requests.
- 13 There should be a check-list where every librarian can register his/her address including e-mail address to check anonymity on the forum
- 14 Members should be bold to seek for collaboration without fear of rejection or otherwise
- 15 Members can encourage collaboration by just keeping in touch through personal emails sent to others on the forum

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Professional online forums are no doubt a big leap in the right direction. With the introduction of NLA online forum, Nigerian Library Association has demonstrated its willingness to promote professional development among

Librarians by providing an online environment through which members can share their expertise, discuss matters of professional or academic interest. However, the level of collaborative activities taking place as a result of participating in the forum is still below average.

Considering the findings, the study recommends that the suggestions gathered from the respondents on how to improve collaborative activities among members of NLA online forum be taken seriously as they address vital issues. Internet facilities should be made available in all sections of the library to encourage greater use of the forum by librarians irrespective of their section of work. Administrators of NLA online forum can make the forum more reliable by ensuring that members of the forum identify themselves to check anonymity on the forum. The issue of collaboration should also be addressed at any given opportunity (conferences, seminars or workshops) to encourage more librarians to engage in collaborative activities.

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