MODULE 3

**Information-Seeking and Information Communities:**

**A Study in Diversity**

By

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Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.
— Albert Einstein

A friend emailed me this quote as part of a collection of inspirational messages that frequently circulate among friends. I mentioned to her that I was delighted with it and planned to use the quote to start my lecture on information-seeking behavior. A retired government documents librarian, she wrote back, saying: "OK, I give up. What does this quote have to do with information seeking?"

I lost a bit of confidence as to what I was trying to communicate with the quote. But what I had in mind is the notion that all individuals are part of larger groups – family, ethnic, gender, occupation, etc. – and our modes of thinking, value systems, and behaviors are shaped by the communities we're part of. These community-based identities can also influence the way we go about finding and valuing information. Not everyone will be part of a research community and use scholarly databases with aplomb. Probably most people wouldn't even want to use these databases to resolve their information needs. Instead they'll consult the sources that they prefer. The goal of this lecture, then, is to give you an idea of the many ways that information communities search for and use information and some of the strategies information professionals have developed to work within these different cultural frameworks.

As Michael discussed in module 2, much LIS research has explored how people seek information. Over the past three decades, many theories have been proposed (principle of least effort, berry-picking, sense-making, etc.) that describe

how people experience the process of locating information from both emotional and intellectual perspectives.  The ultimate goal of these studies is to improve the ways in which information professionals assist users in their quest for information.

These theories of information seeking have been criticized, however, because they seem to focus exclusively on the individual without recognizing – or appreciating – the sociocultural context within which people live and function.  As I mentioned earlier, just as an individual's personal communities (family, workplace, religion, ethnicity, etc.) influence his or her preferences and actions, they also guide his or her information-seeking behavior.  To put it in more concrete terms, while Albert Einstein may be skilled in collecting data on quantum physics, my 20-year-old niece is a genius when it comes to finding information via her smart phone.

To address the limitations of traditional information-seeking theory, an alternative strand of LIS research has evolved that considers community-level information behavior (as opposed to the individual) so that information professionals can better respond to the needs of the diverse populations they serve. Often referred to as "information-seeking in context," this research considers an individual's information seeking within the wider context of their professional and personal lives.  Indeed, some theorists go so far as to suggest that we stop using the concept of "information-seeking behavior" altogether, as it overemphasizes the individual and fails to understand the social context of information seeking and use.  In its place, they offer "information behavior," "information practice," even "information in social practice."  For the purposes of this class, we'll continue to use the traditional information-seeking behavior.[1]

## Research Communities

Some of the earliest research on information communities was done during the Cold War to better understand the research needs of government-funded scientists.  Since that time, the study of various research and scholarly communities has dominated the field.  In fact, if you consider the 2010 edition of the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, there are 12 separate entries on the information practices of various academic disciplines:

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[1] Although this lecture is essentially a literature review, I prefer to keep its content and style informal.  Therefore, I have decided not to provide references for the different publications I mention.  You can find full citations for these writings in the list of sources provided at the lecture's conclusion.

- Area and Interdisciplinary Studies Literatures and Their Users
- Arts Literatures and Their Users
- Biological Information and Its Users
- Business Information and Its Users
- Chemistry Literature and Its Users
- Engineering Literatures and Their Users
- Historical Sources and Their Users
- Humanities Literatures and Their Users
- Physical Sciences and Mathematics Literatures and Their Users
- Science and Technology Studies
- Social Science Literatures and Their Users
- Social Science Professional Literatures and Their Users

By comparison, the encyclopedia has only eight articles on other information communities (what the editors call "contextual communities") based on demographics (i.e. youth) and special interest (i.e., genealogists).

What do these studies reveal about research communities? Not surprisingly, that each discipline (not to mention sub-discipline) has its own information culture within which scholars seek, evaluate, and disseminate information. The entry on Arts Literatures and Their Users provides a good example. The author, Lisl Zach, notes that humanities scholars in general have "a tendency to work alone, to browse extensively, and to rely heavily on primary materials in addition to books and journals." She then compares the information seeking that happens in each art-related discipline. Art historians, for instance, prefer using informal communication networks to gather data rather than working with library collections or librarians. As you'd expect, their top priority is visual resources. Music scholars, on the other hand, are more interdisciplinary in their research habits and consult a wider variety of materials, including recordings, musical scores, and librettos, as well as scholarly books and journals. Music experts also use informal channels of communication, often relying on private collections for their research. Compare these humanities researchers to biologists who typically need access to large online datasets to do their research, as well as a comprehensive collection of science journals. Of particular concern to biologists (and their information providers) is the long-term preservation and curation of these digital data collections.

# Professional and Occupational Communities

When I was in library school in the early 1980s, my professors devoted significant time to discussing whether or not library and information science was a true "profession." We students memorized lists of characteristics that define a profession and did a lot of hand wringing over whether or not the general public understood and respected our professional expertise. This approach to understanding LIS is known as "professional trait theory" and is based on the idea that every profession has its own specialized theoretical knowledge distinct from other disciplines. This specialized knowledge and the ability to use it requires advanced education and a formal body of published research literature. Through research, writing, and professional communication, members of a given professional community determine among themselves what constitutes professional practice.

Professional trait theory has proven quite useful in understanding the information behaviors of individuals working within different professional communities and cultures. Cheryl Dee (a SLIS faculty member) and Jocelyn Rankin, for example, wrote about the information behavior of health science professionals in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences* (ELIS). "Health care professionals' information needs typically require responses within a short time frame," they explained. "They need information that is credible, current, and relevant to the specific case at hand. While the knowledge base of the health sciences is the biomedical literature, primarily the journals, additional sources such as collegial expertise, continuing education programs, drug information resources, and various online knowledge services augment the published literature." The article continues with a comparison of the information practices of physicians, nurses, public health providers, and biomedical researchers to illustrate the research nuances within these related fields.

Penny Hazelton's ELIS essay on the legal profession paints an entirely different information landscape. The defining characteristic of legal research is the need for a wide variety of sources that come in many formats. Individuals researching within the legal community regularly use constitutions and charters, statutes and codes, judicial opinions and regulations, not to mention law reviews, bar journals, legal encyclopedias, case digests, published opinions, and much, much more. Another characteristic of legal information seeking is the number of people at different levels conducting research on a given project. Lawyers may perform their own research, but often those in larger firms have lower-ranking

associates, paralegals, and librarians doing research for a case as well. Legal research is also influenced by the financial status of the client.

The literature on information seeking within various professional communities is voluminous, covering every occupation imaginable. Studies have been done on company executives and employees, dentists, astronomers, architects, journalists, meteorologists, ministers, even hotel employees. An interesting example of workplace information seeking is Patricia Katopol's study of the employees in an unnamed Canadian government agency. In her research, Katopol found that this agency's culture did not encourage the use of "ample, high quality information" but instead rewarded "rapid problem solving over deep information searches or thorough examination of the retrieved information." She also determined that the organization's reward system (bigger budgets, more employees, better projects) "resulted in unintended consequences for information searching, reducing it to quick retrieval of familiar resources that worked in the past (as opposed to resources that were more relevant to the current information need) and minimal review and analysis of retrieved information."

Dysfunctional researchers like those found in Katopol's workplace pose thorny problems for information professionals. Do we accept an organization's culture and work within those boundaries? Or do we try to reform the community's information-seeking practice so that its members gather data that we feel is more authoritative and useful? If we try to do this, do we risk crossing over professional boundary lines and dispensing information (say medical) that requires the expertise of a different profession?

In the situation described above, the author suggests intermediation within the purview of LIS professionals. That is, she suggests that the information professional:

- Educate the agency's employees about information resources and the benefits of using them
- Hold a workshop for employees to teach them search skills
- Work with new employees to alert them to information resources and services

In this way, the information professional working within a given community can subtly reform its information culture and thus advance the interests of the group.

# Information Seeking in Everyday Life

Although working with research and professional communities poses interesting challenges for information professionals, clearly the individuals in these communities are privileged insiders when it comes to the information universe. They have access to information resources, they are comfortable using them, and they expect to use them. But what about outsiders, the information "have-nots" who don't have much experience with libraries or information professionals? They need information, too.

One of the first scholars to suggest that LIS information-seeking behavior research was too narrowly focused on society's elites was Elfreda Chatman, a professor in the School of Information Studies at Florida State University who grew up in a poor neighborhood and had firsthand knowledge of what she described as "information outsiders." In a series of groundbreaking studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, Chatman explored the information experiences of people living on the margins. Her theory was that these individuals were not as information poor as they were commonly depicted. Rather, they did not consider mainstream information sources or their providers as pertinent to their lives. They used other methods to obtain needed information.

Chatman focused her research on different communities of women, including women living in an Oakland ghetto, women janitors at UC Berkeley, women prisoners, elderly women living in a retirement community, and feminist booksellers. Describing these various female communities as "small worlds" or "life in the round," Chatman sought to understand how these women's world views determined what information they would seek and how they would go about locating it.[2] For her best-known study, *The Information World of Retired Women*, Chatman interviewed women living in a southern retirement home. She learned that their most pressing information needs had to do with problems related to health, finances, and loneliness. She also discovered that the more serious the problem, the less likely these women were to search for information about it. Moreover, the cultural norms of the retirement community promoted this non-information-seeking behavior. Chatman hoped that if information professionals were sensitized to the information-seeking styles exhibited within these marginal

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[2] Others prefer the term "microcultures."

communities, they could develop resources and services that would be more relevant to them.

Chatman's pioneering work inspired a generation of researchers who have studied every imaginable community. LIS scholars have considered the information seeking of people of different age groups and ethnic backgrounds, people living in different regions, people with various hobbies and leisure pursuits, and people with special needs. A particularly profitable line of research has to do with students of different ages and cultural backgrounds to better understand the factors that influence their performance in school. Patricia Katopol (2012), for instance, interviewed African American graduate students in a predominantly white university about their research experience and the barriers they encounter. Katopol found that this community of students had the typical college student research problems: finding too much information, finding too little information, and not knowing how to evaluate the information they found. But they also experienced additional anxiety when they sought assistance from faculty and librarians who often knew little about the topics they wanted to study. African American graduate students also worried about how their research findings would be received by others and whether or not they were being taken seriously as scholars.

Drawing on this type of research concerning African American students, academic librarians have been able to develop specialized services to reduce students' research anxiety and improve their research and writing skills. For instance, Patrick Hall, who recalls being one of "a handful" of African American students at a private Jesuit college, developed the Research Assistance Program (RAP) at the University of Notre Dame and later at Penn State. Designed to improve African American students' confidence and skill in using the library's information sources, the program pairs minority students with librarian mentors who guide them through the process of formulating a research topic and locating and synthesizing authoritative information. Hall has found that this "one-on-one mentoring" and the personal connection that is established between the student and the librarian is not only consistent with that community's information-seeking behavior, it is also "one of the few strategies I have been associated with over the past twenty years that actually works."

Another area of interest concerning students is how they use specific information sources. Alison Head and Michael Eisenberg, for instance, surveyed

over 8,000 college students to learn how they use the web to find information. In their article, "How College Students Use the Web to Conduct Everyday Life Research," the authors reported that students most often use the web to locate current news. They also go online to find information about impending purchases and health-related topics. Interestingly, students looking for spiritual information were the least likely to look for it on the web.

Head and Eisenberg's use of "everyday life" in their article title has a special significance, for it links their research to an on-going stream (if not a river!) of publications on how people locate, evaluate, and use information in their personal lives. Developed by Finnish professor Reijo Savolainen in the mid-1990s, everyday life information seeking (it's commonly referred to by its acronym ELIS) is a theoretical construct that many LIS scholars use as a framework to study the variety information communities that exist beyond academia and the workplace. The distinction between these types of communities is important. The academic and workplace communities are controlled environments in which there is a specified end product – a published article, a term paper, a market survey for a new business venture, etc. Everyday life information seeking is much more fluid as it is fueled by personal interest and need, not institutional requirements. Everyday life information seeking is also more likely to be influenced by sociocultural factors that can cause people to seek or avoid information for all sorts of personal and cultural reasons. For example, one study of cancer patients found that the more advanced a person's cancer is the less likely he or she will seek information about treatments.

Everyday life information seeking thus considers how people locate and use information sources to support their personal activities, particularly in the areas of heath, consumption, hobbies, and other leisure pursuits. Another important characteristic of ELIS is that it focuses on communities of people, rather than the information behavior of individuals. So everyday life information studies deal with the small worlds or microcultures that Elfreda Chatman was talking about. And you can imagine the plethora of everyday life communities that LIS scholars have researched. Many studies revolve around age group: preschoolers, tweens, adolescents, and the elderly. Other researchers have considered the information seeking of various ethnic and cultural groups as well as social class. Still others have considered the information needs of special populations, such as the disabled, homeless, battered women, young adults with Aspergers, and individuals battling serious diseases. And then there are the studies of special interest groups: cooks,

environmental activists, genealogists, homebuyers, female investors, backpackers, pet owners.   The possibilities are endless!

ELIS has been especially important for public libraries, as it helps information professionals to be more responsive to the multiple communities they serve.  For example, a number of LIS scholars and practitioners have considered the information needs of the GLBTQ community, particularly gay youth.  As Linda Alexander and Sarah Miselis write in their survey of the literature on this topic,  "These studies all concluded that the library was the most important information source for GLBTQ people and that this group was seeking information about understanding their gay identities, coming out, learning gay social 'rules,' and where to connect with others like them" (p.  45).  In addition to encouraging public librarians to develop fiction and nonfiction collections for their GLBTQ patrons, the article's authors suggested that librarians take the following steps to create a more welcoming environment:

- Make sure your library's collection development and book challenge policies are clear and staff understands procedures for dealing with challenges
- Strengthen your library's equal opportunity statement so that it includes the terms "gender and sexual orientation"
- Be prepared with positive reviews that support your materials and research the outcomes of previous challenges for specific books
- Protect workplace speech
- Conduct staff training, especially for reference staff, to alleviate misperceptions and prejudice
- Stay in touch with your teens with a Teen Advisory Board
- Network with local GSA, PFLAG (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and other GLBTQ groups for support
- Make materials accessible and visible; include them in booktalks, displays, pathfinders, etc.

This is a good example of how information professionals are researching the information needs of specific communities and then, based on their findings, taking steps to reach out to them.

Another interesting focus of ELIS has to do with how libraries and other information organizations can serve their communities in times of crisis.  After Hurricane Katrina, Donna M. Braquet (2010), whose grandmother was one of the

disaster's victims, studied how individuals living in the hardest hit areas sought solace in their public libraries.  Not only did local residents go to the library to obtain information, they also used the library as a place of refuge and to find escapist reading to relieve the post-disaster misery and anxiety.   Braquet thus used Hurricane Katrina as a means to explore the roles libraries can play in promoting their community's well-being.

A final avenue of study that I'd like to mention deals not with resources or services, but with how different communities relate to and interact with information professionals.  In the late 1980s, Roma Harris and Gillian Michell conducted a series of studies to answer the question, "Do patrons and professional librarians differ in how they evaluate the competence of reference librarians?"  To gather data, Harris and Michell had public library patrons and librarians view videotaped reference transactions and then asked them to rate the librarians' effectiveness in answering reference questions.  Their first discovery was not all that surprising:  Librarians were much harsher in their judgments of professional competence than their patrons.  But the researchers also found that male and female patrons had different perceptions of librarian competence as well.  That is, women and men responded differently to the ways in which librarians went about helping their patrons find information.  Men preferred to be involved in the research process, while women were happier when the requested information was simply presented.

Dominique Daniel recently conducted a similar study, adding ethnicity to the mix.  She asked 449 college students, faculty and staff to view images of librarians of different ages, gender, and race.  Respondents overall found women librarians "more approachable" than men, and preferred librarians from their own age group.  Interestingly, African American respondents felt more comfortable with African American librarians, while Asians preferred white librarians.  White respondents didn't seem to care about the ethnicity of the librarian, although the author suggested that they had been trained to "avoid the appearance of racial bias."

## Cultural Competence

As you can see, information professionals are dealing with a complex set of sociocultural variables as they try to meet the information needs of their diverse users.  Complicating things even more is the fact that people are members of not one community but multiple communities.  How do you assist an older female art

historian who's of Asian descent?  What if she's also a lesbian living in a retirement home?!   Of course, it all goes back to the concept I used to start off this lecture:  information-seeking in context.  What's the nature of the information she seeks and which community context does her information need relate to or derive from?  But in developing community-specific approaches to dealing with different users do information professionals risk reducing their patrons to broad stereotypes?  As a reference librarian am I going to start answering the reference questions of men and women differently based on the type of information that each gender is supposed to prefer?  When does this become another form of discrimination?

The profession has considered the implications of these troubling questions and come up with a framework through which they can recognize and respect cultural differences without imposing heavy-handed solutions:  Cultural Competence.   What is cultural competence?  Rae Helton explains in her article, "Increasing Diversity Awareness with Cultural Competency," that "cultural competence encourages information professionals to recognize these differences, appreciate the patron's perspective, and not be driven by his or her assumptions about the content or format of the information being provided."  Helton also provides a set of attributes that define a culturally competent professional:[3]

- A culturally competent professional is one who is actively in the process of becoming aware of his or her own assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, preconceived notions, personal limitations, and so forth.
- Second, a culturally competent professional is one who actively attempts to understand the worldview of culturally diverse populations. In other words, what are the values, assumptions, practices, communication styles, group norms, biases and so on, of culturally diverse students, families, communities and colleagues you interact with?
- Third, a culturally competent professional is one who is in the process of actively developing and practicing appropriate, relevant, and sensitive strategies and skills in working with culturally diverse students, families, communities, and colleagues.

Cultural competence, then, means that information professionals should strive to understand information seeking from their user's perspective and not

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[3] This list is taken directly from Derald Wing Sue and David Sue's 2013 book, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse*: *Theory and Practice.*

impose their own assumptions and values on them.  But how does this work in practice?

An outreach program developed by the librarians at Mars-Hill Graduate School (a graduate-level divinity and counselling program in the state of Washington) provides a good model.  Located in a predominantly African American community in Puget Sound, one of the college's librarians (who is white) saw the need to provide health information to the local residents.  Based on the research literature and her own observation, she knew that most African Americans did not seek information about health problems in libraries or from librarians.  They were more likely to obtain information from the media and other trusted authorities.  So instead of creating a collection of health-related resources and expecting community members to come to the college library to access them, the librarian brought the health information she compiled to where the community gathered – their church.   She partnered with the African Americans Reach and Teach Health Ministry, a church-based group that was already providing information to the local community, and this group distributed the librarian's health information to community members.  As the librarian observed:  "Librarians may be the best people at discerning information needs and finding appropriate information to fulfill that need, but others may be better at interfacing with the individual or the community."   She thus understood that the library had a choice: "attempt to change the information-seeking traditions of an entire community" or work with organizations within the community that are already providing information services.  She decided to do the latter, and succeeded.

## Conclusion

The goal of this lecture has been to introduce you to how community culture can shape the information-seeking behaviors of its members.  It also suggests some of the strategies information professionals have developed to meet these groups' varying information needs and preferences.  Your task now is to choose an information community as the focus of your semester's work to learn more about information-seeking behavior firsthand.  As you can see, the choices are endless, limited only by your imagination.  But when selecting a community to study, I'd caution you to not choose one that is too esoteric or narrowly focused.  You'll have difficulty finding the resources you'll need to complete the class assignments.

Also, when you choose your community, be mindful of the larger group within which your community fits so that you can broaden your research if needed. For example, if you're studying the information seeking of weavers, you'll probably need to look at the information-seeking behavior of artists more generally. Or if you're interested in Harry Potter communities, then you'll need to understand the information-seeking of youth as well. Finally, choose a community that you are part of or have access to. Several of the blog assignments will ask you to interview community members about their information-seeking experiences so you'll need to have easy access to several individuals.

Throughout this lecture, I've given you examples of the research done on various information communities. I've also tried to show you how information professionals have used this research to create new programs and services for specific communities. To stimulate your thinking about your own information community research, I've included a chart in this module's resources that lists various information communities and examples of the theoretical and applied articles that have published about them. The theoretical articles are those written by LIS scholars who have used qualitative and quantitative research methods to collect data about a given community. The applied articles are those written by information professionals that describe different programs and services they've developed for their institutions based on the theoretical research. The professional literature of LIS consists of these two types of publications. I'll be discussing them in more depth in next week's lecture.

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