Urban exploration: Secrecy and information creation and sharing in a hobby context

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A B S T R A C T

Urban exploration is a hobby that involves visiting and capturing visual images of urban infrastructure often no longer used, including sewers, towers, factories, and military instalments. Hobbyists then frequently share their visual content via social media sites. The urban explorer's multi-layered construction of content offers an important opportunity to understand how people create information and share experiences and content in a hobby context. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with 17 urban explorers from Ireland and the United Kingdom and an analysis of urban explorers' digital presence. Results suggest that urban explorers believe their hobby serves both personal and civic purposes. Urban explorers' creative hobby behaviors further lead them to secretive information behaviors.

1. Introduction

Urban exploration involves the exploration and photography of urban infrastructure often no longer used, including sewers, towers, factories, and military instalments, followed by sharing of observations and content created via various venues, including websites and social media, such as Flickr, Facebook, and YouTube. This multi-layered construction of content offers an important opportunity to understand how people create information and share this content and experiences in a hobby context, as well as how the collective output of these activities may support development of a further potentially unique body of information. Urban explorers' creative and selective sharing behaviors are explored, examining, in particular, how these behaviors contribute to content generation.

2. Problem statement

The notion of creating information is often addressed as a function of the participative Web. While it is often assumed that young people generate this content, researchers have found that the opposite is true and that so-called digital natives are actually largely consumers of information instead of creators (e.g., van Dijck, 2009). A key problem becomes understanding who, then, is creating and sharing content, as well as where and how are they doing this. Because creative acts may occur in multiple environments, including on and offline contexts, the consideration of people's information creation across environments is important to understanding the creative process and outputs.

The hobbyist world offers a useful lens for examining information creation, particularly because of tangible outputs or outcomes often associated with participation. For instance, hobbyists, such as genealogists (Fulton, 2016), have been shown to engage actively in information creation. Creating and sharing information may also occur in less mainstream hobbies, including urban exploration, a secretive hobby in which participants explore and photograph disused structures and then share selectively via publicly viewed digital spaces, including social media and websites, and hidden areas of the Web where only a select few can share and view content. In creating and sharing information through their hobby, urban explorers also provide insight into an underground hobby and the process of creating information which may form part of that subculture, echoing Chatman's (1996, 1999) and Becker's (1963) development of insider and outsider social constructs.

Creating information is a particularly significant concept for the field of library and information science, where the point of enquiry has traditionally been information retrieval and access. Within library and information science (LIS), information behavior researchers have particularly examined how and why individuals and groups interact with information in everyday and work situations. Information has generally remained a given commodity, with research only beginning in more recent years to examine the participative arena of information sharing, use, and management through social media. This research project on urban exploration marks an important shift in our discipline from considering information provision to match information to needs, as well as from valuing formal or legitimized information sources, to considering information creation and sharing as additional parts of the overall spectrum of information behavior.

The main research question was to understand more about how

information may be created and shared in the hobby of urban exploration.

The research questions guiding this study were

- Who participates in this hobby?
- How and why may urban explorers create information through hobby activities?
- What are the information sharing practices among urban explorers, e.g., through social media?
- Do urban explorers work alone and/or engage with others to create and share information?
- How does the hidden nature of the hobby influence creativity and sharing practices?

3. Literature review

3.1. Information behavior: information creation and sharing

3.1.1. Information creation

The notion of created information, what is also often called "user-generated content," has potential to help us understand the important area of how we use information and the impact of this action in our lives. Cox and Blake (2011) found that food bloggers were motivated by existing information to create their blogs, and while they saw their blogs as creative, they did not see themselves as engaged in a creative hobby, suggesting potential incidental as well as purposed creation. Hartel's (2010) cooks associated creativity with inspiration and information retrieval for making recipes. The outcomes of creative acts may lead to social benefits; for instance, Leung (2009) has argued that content generation online can enhance psychological empowerment and is connected to civic engagement.

While participatory and highly social engagement with creating, collaborating, and sharing content have often dominated discussion of user-generated content, individuals and groups have long created content in a variety of formats and forums. For example, in the hobby world, genealogists are renowned for their interaction with information to produce something new on and offline, such as individual family histories or local history projects as a group (Fulton, 2016). In addition, similar to how one might combine tools and content online to produce something new (e.g., a new service), genealogists creatively extend and integrate their hobby in other areas of their lives, such as scrapbooking to present their research to others, or name studies to facilitate their own research and to help other genealogists (Fulton, 2005, 2016).

The terms used for these creative acts vary as well and complicate the discussion. User-generated content is the most recent term used to describe the output of socially inspired creation of information and services online. Importantly, those who generate content have been defined as doing so without expectation of remuneration or profit (Vickery & Wunsch-Vincent, 2007). Because of the newness of this term, a precise definition is still evolving. The term *user-generated content* would appear, however, to apply to creation activities conducted in an online context. Creating information, on the other hand, is more inclusive of creative acts, encompassing both on and offline activities.

There may also be a generational association with creation of content. Online activities are often perceived to be dominated by the younger generations – characterized as young people who have grown up in a world where the Internet has always existed and Google has long been their portal to information, which they can track via a range of computer technologies, most importantly their mobile phones (e.g., Harrison & Barthel, 2009). However, as van Dijck (2009) has argued, agency associated with who is using, creating, and sharing information on the Web is more complex, with the majority functioning as consumers, rather than creators of content, and blurred distinctions between terms challenging our concepts of recipients and participants in digital environments. As a subset of online participants, actual creators of information offer an opportunity to understand how new content is developed and how others might learn to do the same, fostering a fully participative Web. This ongoing development of a participative Web environment, in which anyone can author and share content, marks a significant change in how we will continue to view and value creation of content.

3.1.2. Information sharing behaviors

Sharing behaviors have gained greater attention among information behavior researchers. For instance, Fulton (2009a) observed a particular quid pro quo approach to sharing information among genealogists to satisfy information gathering for the production of a family history. Rioux (2005) has explored the act of sharing information in his model of information acquiring-and-sharing and concluded that information sharing is a naturally occurring part of communication formed by different motivations, needs, and affect. Shah (2010) asserted that collaborative information seeking may take place where an information problem is too complex or difficult for an individual to resolve. Importantly, this attention to collaborative information behavior marks a shift in information behavior from a focus on individual to participative practices, and, in particular, practices not necessarily defined by traditional groupings, such as occupation, age, or gender, which marked early studies in our field. This participation may involve a wider gathering of people with diverse backgrounds attracted to a particular point for a variety of reasons.

Understanding how people create information offers insight into how participative collaboration may influence information adoption, exchange, and use by other individuals and groups. For instance, bloggers who report their travel experiences via a public Internet forum offer a potentially useful source of tourism data (Volo, 2010). Trischak and Bauer (2009) and Pinder (2005) considered the participative influence on explorations of cities on geographic tools (e.g., global positioning systems, or GPS) and wayfinding. These studies highlighted the impact on collaboration in wayfinding context; when individuals decide to collaborate on similar information sharing, evaluation, and creation, the potential utility of that interaction and outcome may be increased. In keeping with these ideas, this project explored how participants engaged with their hobby and how they viewed participation.

Sharing of information may be covert with urban exploration, and urban explorers may not share, or may selectively share, where they wish to protect their identities or illegal acts, such as trespass. There may be other reasons for decision making about sharing in the hobby. Caughlin and Vangelisti (2009) argue that people have multiple goals in deciding to share or keep information secret, and that these goals "provide important information about individuals, their social interactions, and their relationships" (p.280). Smirnova (2016) has observed that "Concealing information may be done to maintain an authentic image of the self in the eyes of others, or it may reflect an attempt to live authentically, albeit in a different way," (p. 26). George (1993) found concealment to be a cultural practice, in which concealment offered a strategy for self-protection from those outside a community. Examples of secrecy cross everyday and workplace contexts; for instance, Biagioli (2012) reported that in science, secrecy is a protective response, whereby scientists are secretive about their work to avoid being "scooped" by peers. Fulton (2015) found problem gamblers also use secrecy as a protective measure to keep loved ones from discovering their addiction.

For urban explorers, the underground nature of the hobby enables participants to reveal only what they wish to non-urban explorers and to protect the location of sites as they choose. In addition, this secrecy maintains a certain public depiction of the hobby, limiting what outsiders know about the hobby generally and maintaining a mystique around the hobby.

3.2. Leisure as a context for studying information creation and sharing

Leisure offers a useful everyday context for exploring the creation