



Place, community and information behavior: Spatially oriented information seeking zones and information source preferences



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A B S T R A C T

Even in a digitally advanced society, much of our daily lives is based in place, but information behavior research has largely ignored place as theoretically relevant to information behavior. This study explores the implications of a place-based approach to studying information practices, and examines factors that influence information seeking and sharing in place-based communities among parents of individuals with disabilities. Based on qualitative data gathered from 35 parents of individuals with disabilities, it proposes a spatial model of information source preferences based on the theory of information horizons, and discusses implications of the model for future research related to information seeking and places. It also presents substantive place-related findings about local information needs, including discussion of the local parent network as an information seeking system.

1. Introduction

Developing more complex theoretical understandings of place is necessary if information science is to keep pace with and contribute to rapidly developing research, theory and practice in community, regional, environmental, and population health, urban and rural planning, and other sciences focused on improvement of life in spaces and places. Places are built in response to individual and collective problems, needs, and emotions (Tuan, 2001), much as information behavior occurs in response to human problems and needs. This research examines information access within local community contexts, and explores implications of a place-based approach to understanding information and service provision, information inequality, and inequity.

2. Problem statement

Library and information science (LIS) research has not developed a coherent, complex body of theory related to place, space, and information behavior. Instead, factors that differentiate individuals from one another (like place, race, and ethnicity) are often treated as theoretical (and sometimes methodological) noise—distractions from more favored, more easily operationalized concepts. When attention is paid to place and access, it is usually focused on information and communications technology (ICT) and broadband access, or internal library place-making as an expression of practitioner goals, rather than on understanding the interplay between place and information behavior in

the broader community. This aversion to the complications inherent in the study of place limits the ability of the discipline to advance theoretical and practical discussions around the impacts of structurally reinforced (and spatially distributed) economic and social inequities on information seeking and access. It also limits the ability to dialog with disciplines that regularly use location and place as units of analyses. Finally, much of daily life is organized by place and in physical places. Ignoring place in information behavior research and focusing primarily on online information behavior ignores this reality and limits the impact that information behavior theory and research can have on a large portion of the population of the world.

This research explores intersections of place, information needs, and information access as experienced by 35 parents of individuals with Down syndrome in the United States. The findings are situated within the context of an exploratory grounded theory study on the influence of community and place on information needs, access, and behavior among parents of individuals with disabilities. Rather than focusing on specific information behaviors, the study focuses on using interactions among place, information needs, and information access (as indicated by resolution of information needs) to build a framework for describing and analyzing geographic zones of information access in local communities. That framework addresses

- Eliciting substantive descriptions of participant information needs, access to information sources, and where needs were resolved.
- Building a framework for describing community members' concep-

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tualization of the infrastructure of information access (as related to location of information and services) in the local community; modeling participant expectations for resolution of information needs within the local community; and comparing expectations and actual needs resolution of different groups.

- Describing information needs of participants.

3. Literature review

Beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the first decade of the 21st century, social science research trended away from more place-based, geographical understandings of community toward sociological definitions centered on demographics and personal interest (Agnew, 1989; Gieryn, 2000). Even among geographers, the introduction of the Internet and high speed communication technology dethroned place, and place lost its primacy as an anchor for day to day life (Tuan, 2014). This shift was reflected in information behavior research, as theoretical work on communities leaned toward more sociological approaches to information behavior (Julien, Pecoskie, & Reed, 2011; Veinot & Williams, 2012; Wellman, 2001) and away from place related issues. More recently, a renewed understanding of the importance of places, communities, and the social impact of information (Bishop, 2011; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Samek, 2007) has pushed LIS research toward explorations of community, access, and people in places.

Much of this work still ignores place in favor of more generally applicable context. Context as a concept is less specific than place, and here is defined as being of secondary importance to information behavior. Context describes the background conditions within which information behavior occurs (Dervin, 1997; Talja, Keso, & Pietiläinen, 1999), but is not traditionally “defined as the phenomenon of interest” (Dervin, 1997, p. 14). While the study of context has gained importance (Greifeneder, 2014), its focus as secondary to information behavior and its use as a catch-all for descriptions of place, space, time, situation, organization, and social conditions (Johnson, 2003) limits its usefulness as a unit for analyzing information access (particularly in face-to-face communities). This research focuses specifically on place as the intersection of location, locale (i.e., infrastructure), and experience, and argues for stronger, more explicit, and more holistic conceptual and theoretical articulations of place in LIS research.

3.1. What makes a place? Defining place and community

This study builds on an interdisciplinary social science paradigm of place that incorporates definitions from human geography and sociology (Trentelman, 2009). The phenomenological perspective requires that places be interpreted through human experience, as the product of human interactions, and as the solution to human problems and needs (Tuan, 1975). To use Sonnenwald's (1999) phrasing, places and information are influenced by, and influence, human behavior. Within this perspective, places comprise location, or fixed coordinates on the globe; locale, that is, infrastructure, or “material setting for social relations” (Withers, 2009, p. 640); and sense of place, or experiential essence of a setting, interpreted and imbued with values and meanings (Agnew, 1989; Gieryn, 2000). Each of the component concepts of place are a combined manifestation of the spatial (including location), the structural (or the infrastructural), and the social (or the experiential). Massey (2005) ties place to time, describing this intersection as “throwntogetherness, the unavoidable challenge of negotiating the here and now...; and a negotiation which must take place within and between both human and nonhuman” (p. 140).

Although they are similar concepts, place and community are not interchangeable. At its most basic, the term “community” describes any association of individuals with shared language, shared culture, or normative behaviors (Burnett, Besant, & Chatman, 2001; Chatman, 1999; Day, 2006). Whether place-based or distributed, communities are usually developed to address some sort of collective need

(Cavanagh, 2009) or to capitalize on shared identity. Place, on the other hand, describes the product of interaction between people and their physical environments. The term “place-based community” refers to a combination of community and physical space—a group of actors (individual, groups, or organizations) who to some degree share cultural experience—identity, social norms, language, and values (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), and geographic space (Day, 2006; Herb & Kaplan, 1999).

In addition to conceptual similarities, places and communities tend to demonstrate structural parallels. Places have physical infrastructures comprised of buildings, streets and land features, whereas communities comprise social infrastructures, or information worlds, with actors who play specific social roles and have normative rules for behavior and values (Chatman, 1999; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), all of which contribute to “social differentiation, solidarity, and stability” (Veinot & Williams, 2012, p. 848). Ideally, community members engage in collective self-determination with regards to information, knowledge, and values. According to this perspective, communities also have self-determined social and physical boundaries that are largely a product of internal norms and values. These borders are negotiated through shifting social relationships and group dynamics, and built organically through shared needs, behaviors, ideals, and values (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010; Paasi, 1998, 2012), but can shift in response to outside pressures and social forces.

3.2. LIS research: Explicit and implicit place

A rich body of theory and research implicitly suggests that there is value in understanding place if the field is to understand information access and seeking behavior. In some cases, the idea of place is implicit in discussions on context. For example, information grounds theory (Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004) examines temporally transient information places. Others focus on time, space, and place as metaphors for information seeking. Dervin (1983) states that sense-making is built on the assumption “that all people live in time and space” (p. 7). Savolainen (2006) ties Dervin's time-space metaphor back to physical spaces and places by arguing that Dervin's spatial metaphors “have a basis in physical and cultural experience” (p. 1119). Others are more explicit about the role of place in shaping information behavior. Savolainen's (2009) analysis of information grounds and small worlds elucidates how spatial factors “constrain and afford information seeking and sharing” (p. 41) in small worlds, while they serve as “important qualifiers of information grounds” (p. 41). Studies examining the effects of rural environments on information behavior (Johnson & Griffis, 2014; Kanungo, 2004) and library and facilities placement (Koontz, 2007) are all built on the assumption that place and location matter.

Community informatics literature defines communities as primarily and explicitly place-based (Le Roux, 2010). To resolve place-specific issues, Gurstein (2003) advocates for the creation of ICTs “with the full participation of the end users and the local community” (par. 53). Williams, Bishop, Bruce, and Irish (2012) identify two predominant meanings of community informatics, first as “the use of digital technologies as a tool for community development” (p. 218), and second as a community support that “build[s] information resources and teach[es] skills to community members” (p. 218). This considerably broadens the realm of community informatics applications from problems to potential, aligning with Gurstein's (2003) emphasis on the ability of ICTs “to enable and empower community processes” (p. 11). The present research argues for a similarly agentic view of place-related information behavior theory (Trentelman, 2009) as a byproduct of socially determined needs, as influencing behavior, and as regulating change.

3.3. Places, communities, and health

As will be seen below, a large portion of the everyday life information that was sought by participants in the present study was related in some

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