



State of the Art Review

Studying a boundary-defying group: An analytical review of the literature surrounding the information habits of writers

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ABSTRACT

This study presents an analytical literature review of the research surrounding the information behavior of writers, understood here as people whose written output is creative in nature and produced outside of the academia or the traditional news media realm. This group is understudied in library and information science, despite its obvious cultural and enduring link to libraries and archives. A qualitative content analysis reveals that part of the problem lies in establishing the boundaries of the literary field in order to operationalize writers as a group for study. The work of Pierre Bourdieu, cited in the literature itself, provides insight into how the concepts of legitimation, consecration, and professionalism influence methods and findings. However, while approaches differ, researchers tend to discuss similar information-related topics. Using literature pertaining to "sister populations", such as other artists or other types of writers, can help support the design of further research. Professional literature and mainstream media are also suggested as avenues for the study of the relationship between writers, information sources, and information professionals.

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1. Introduction

It is fast becoming a cliché to state that writing is a pervasive activity in the digital era. From texting and tweeting to poaching, social and performative writing acts have come to transform both the quotidian uses of writing and the functions of the opposable thumb. Within this culture of ubiquity, certain people do still write to create substantial and artful documents meant for such purposes as knowledge dissemination, be it research, news, or instruction. Others – or at times the same – write to create textual objects meant for entertainment, whether through the trigger of laughter, the contemplation of beauty, or the heart-wrenching throes of catharsis.

But if stating that the pervasiveness of writing in the modern world is a cliché, so too should it be to say that writers, whatever their purposive or creative pursuits, have information-seeking and information-sharing practices that support their creative habits and bolster the promotion of their work. Yet while it is obvious that libraries, archives, and writers have a long-standing relationship, the literature on the information behavior of writers is rather sparse, despite sporadic interest.

This study therefore proposes an analytical literature review of the research pertaining to the information-seeking and information-sharing habits of writers—a group that, as shall be explained below, can be difficult to define. Indeed, the weak "degree of codification of

entry into the game" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 226) that makes the literary field highly permeable yields a very eclectic research landscape. Nevertheless, there are clear trends in the Library and Information Science (LIS) related topics covered. Furthermore, it is possible to assemble a body of research on other creative or "sister" populations, with an eye to certain amateur populations and professional writers, that can be of use when studying writers. Full reference lists of both sets are made available as appendices. Further avenues regarding contextual texts are also explored.

2. Problem statement

Twenty years ago, an LIS Masters student wrote that, "As a special user group, fiction writers are not often discussed in library literature" (Russell, 1995, p. 1); in 2014, a recent LIS Masters graduate and her supervisor wrote that, "There is scant research into the reading practices, library usage patterns, and text acquisition habits of poetry readers, writers, and specialists in Canada" (Toane & Rothbauer, 2014, p. 98). These observations ring true for other genres of literature and for other cultural boundaries as well.

This was made clear when the authors of the present article explored textual elements such as the book's paratext (Pecoskie & Desrochers, 2013) and more specifically, acknowledgments (Desrochers & Pecoskie, 2014) as portals to the information behavior of writers. As part of the ongoing efforts to contribute to the literature, one of the authors is currently conducting an empirical study with writers from the province of Québec (Canada).

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For information specialists and information science researchers, this presents a clear disconnect. Writers, perhaps more than any other group of artists or creative population (understood here as the creators of any cultural good, even if it is not artistic in nature) are the key providers of the cultural products that form library collections; yet their relationship with information providers, if there is one, is difficult to assess or occulted from channels that reveal other sources of influence (Pecoskie & Desrochers, 2013). In fact, the idea that writers use the library for information-seeking is a supposition; and one that is not, in fact, supported by a strong body of research.

The rapport between writers and information services is obvious in the dissemination phase: book launches, book signings, public readings, meet-the-author sessions, and writer-in-residence programs all celebrate and support the tail-end of the writer's work—the book as a cultural product. However, the rapport between writers and information seeking, information sharing, and information sources at the production stage—before and while the book is being written—is mainly supported by literature that is more testimonial than empirical. While this literature, which shall be discussed herein, is fascinating, often beautiful, and eloquent, it is not scientific, but rather partisan and often published in mainstream media and professional avenues in order to show support for libraries.

However, one would think that the creative process of writers should offer a plethora of opportunities for information specialists to intervene. This is particularly true given that the field of literary production is a world where few people achieve economic stability and recognition, but where many strive to find the pathway to success. Information-seeking, for the writer, might therefore be content- or career-driven.

The sparsity of the literature is therefore puzzling, for it seems that by understanding the information behavior of this group, information specialists could become even stronger allies in the production of the cultural goods that line their shelves, be they physical or virtual, and form the core of their user services (Desrochers & Pecoskie, 2014), thereby creating an even stronger bond with a group that seems to be a natural fit, but an elusive user population. The question is then whether the gap in research is due to a lack of interest, which cannot be measured, or to issues in conducting research about this particular user group.

This study therefore has two goals:

- To analyze and understand the issues linked to the study of the information behavior of literary writers and of the relationship between writers and information professionals or information services.
- To synthesize and build on the existent literature to offer a broader corpus based on the concept of “sister populations”, as well as suggestions for the design of future research pertaining to writers, both for researchers and for professionals willing to engage with this group at the creative stage.

Furthermore, by adopting an open-dataset perspective, this study broadens the parameters of the literature review and proposes a reflection on the qualitative approach to this type of research.

3. Literature review

The importance of literature reviews is undisputed. They range from short sections enconced in larger pieces in order to situate projects and findings to larger, stand-alone texts that offer discrete forays into a discipline, topic, or thesis. Booth, Papaioannou, and Sutton (2012) outline twelve types of systematic literature reviews, explaining the value of the systematic approach for the explicit presentation of methods and reproducibility (p. 28). Yet even within the systematic review school, some authors have commented on the necessity to make some accommodations for context. In order to determine their sample of papers on the use of quantitative methods on qualitative data, Fakis, Hilliam, Stoneley, and Townend (2014) employed pre-determined inclusion

and exclusion selection criteria. Marušić, Bošnjak, and Jerončić (2011) examined scholarly authorship and provided a “synthesis of research on authorship across all research fields” (p. 1); studies included in their review were selected using database searches, and titles and abstracts were examined and discussed by the research team to ensure the study met the inclusion criteria. Bar-Ilan (2008) acknowledged the vastness of the infometrics area of study and modified search parameters to make the review manageable in size and timeline, noting that a review of this scope will be “inevitably subjective” (p. 3).

For some years, the *Annual Review of Information Science & Technology* (ARIST) (<http://www.asis.org/Publications/ARIST/>) was a foundational location for works “surveying the landscape of information science and technology and providing an analytical, authoritative, and accessible overview of significant trends and developments” (n.d.). Some information-behavior focused reviews have been published in this series (see Fisher & Julien, 2009; Caidi, Allard, & Quirke, 2010). Case (2012) offers an impressive compilation of information behavior literature. His work, authoritative by any standards and now in its third edition, takes a selective survey approach, rather than claiming to be comprehensive.

Hemmig (2008) reviewed the literature on the information behavior of practicing visual artists. Again, this was not a systematic review, nor did the author offer his procedure for discovering the corpus of literature; his work therefore cannot be replicated. While he proposed a model based on this literature, he nuanced it with such caveats as the fact that this literature presents “almost no direct study of practicing artists without academic affiliations” (p. 344). The issue of the permeable boundaries of the population studied by Hemmig (2008) hence echoes the one discussed in this literature review.

It is plain to see that while their perspectives vary, literature reviews often involve qualitative, even subjective aspects to their methods. It is by assessing these differently modeled reviews that a method deemed appropriate for the genre and for the population studied here was devised.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1. Cultural production and Bourdieu

In *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Bourdieu (1996) expanded on the paradigms of symbolic capital and habitus to show the inner workings of the literary field and to present it in a light that still endures today: as a part of the field of cultural production, itself subsumed to the greater field of power, which in turn is an intrinsic part of the “social space” (p. 124). Furthermore, 2 of the 4 researchers (Craig and Paling) who either authored or co-authored 8 of the 10 texts that serve as the core, inquiry-based corpus of this review, use *The Rules of Art* as part of their own conceptual framework, often in conjunction with other Bourdieu-authored works.

One of the Bourdieusian concepts of particular relevance here is that of *illusio*. Bourdieu (1996) describes the *illusio* as “an investment in the game which pulls agents out of their indifference and inclines and predisposes them to put into operation the distinctions which are pertinent from the viewpoint of the logic of the field” (pp. 227–228); he adds that “the *illusio* is the condition for the functioning of a game of which it is also, at least partially, the product” (p. 228). In essence, *illusio* is the belief that adhering to the conventions and expectations of a field is not only worth one's while, it is constitutive of one's role in—or one's right to belong to—this field. It obviously exists in the scientific field as well (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 228).

Craig (2006) uses the concept of *illusio* as a key element of her dissertation, namely to bridge the gap between the artistic community and academia. She states that “academic institutions help to create an awareness of the *illusio* outside of the field” (p. 193), in part “because of their legitimating force in the larger field of power” (p. 194; see also p. 212). Whether academics and poetry instructors are from the

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