Information behavior of journalists: Analysis of critical incidents of information finding and use

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Abstract This study is aimed at investigating information behavior of journalists in Kuwait. It attempted to seek answers to questions such as how search for information is initiated, what information sources are preferred and how successful is information finding? Journalists were asked to report critical incidences of information finding related to their recent journalistic assignment through a questionnaire. Analysis of 42 critical incidents indicated that journalistic assignments were in four major areas: political, cultural business, and sports. In most cases, background information was most frequently sought type of information. Internet was the most frequently used information source even though some journalists perceived that information available on the various websites may not be very objective. A follow up study is planned to be carried out to discuss the findings with a selected group of journalists using focus group discussions.
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Introduction

The Critical Incident Technique (CIT) refers to a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in different areas of activities. A critical incident makes significant contribution to an activity or phenomenon. Critical incidents can be gathered in various ways by asking respondents to tell a story about an experience they have had. CIT offers a rigorous tool for achieving a deep understanding of the information seeking behavior of a particular group of users. Unlike the traditional surveys, CIT provides an opportunity to probe beneath the surface of a situation and to provide a rich context for understanding the information behavior of professionals and managers. Analysis of critical incidents of finding and using information helps investigate motivation behind decisions to seek information; selection of sources of information and steps in identification, assessment, and use of information. Context-specific data collected through CIT can help develop an in-depth understanding of information behavior for suggesting steps for improving information services in a meaningful manner.

Various researchers have suggested that critical incident technique explores a brief but memorable information seeking episode (Urquhart, 2001). A couple of studies have used this technique to investigate information behavior of professional groups. For example, Fidel and Green (2004) employed a variant of the critical incident technique where engineers recalled a recent instance of information seeking which was used to investigate individual cases of

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information seeking. Daft, Lengel, and Trievino (1987) employed the critical Success Factor technique to identify over 200 incidents of actual work performed by managers and to compile a list of media typically used by managers.

We could not locate any study where critical incident techniques were used to investigate information seeking of journalists. We were convinced that the peculiarities of journalistic work make critical incident techniques attractive for information behavior research. We decided to use critical incident technique for investigating information behavior of journalist in Kuwait. We expect that analysis of critical incidents of journalists will provide important clues to come up with specific recommendations for improvement focusing on accessibility and usability issues. In the second phase of our project, we will have follow-up discussions with a group of journalists to be selected from those who provided critical incidents. Analysis of critical incidents of information finding was considered better than traditional questionnaire surveys as it was expected to report information searching in a natural way.

Peculiarities of information needs of journalists

Information seeking by journalists is motivated by originality checking that requires use of multiple sources and spaces. Journalistic work generally involves uncertain context sometimes requiring reinitiating earlier information; finding activities including the relocation and review of previously consulted sources.

Campbell (1997) pointed out that journalists are unique in the ways in which they search for information. Unlike other professionals, journalists seem to use the easiest way of finding information. It is due to the nature of the news process. The method by which the journalists construct news precludes the reporter from spending an elaborate amount of time evaluating the best possible sources of information. It has been reported that journalists use tacit or taken-for-granted rules to evaluate issues to gather information and to construct the news. The ways in which journalists search for information and the sources that they consult are critical to the understanding of the communication process which facilitates the mediation of complex issues to the readership or audience.

Attfield and Dowell (2003) highlighted that nature of work of journalists requires them to use wide and varied sources of information. Some sources are unique to journalism, e.g., conversations, phone-ins, and daily news diaries. Emphasis is on human sources as journalists are encouraged to gather information by talking to people, e.g., victims, officials, experts, etc. This is partly due to the fact that time is limited in news-construction and human sources give comments or explain complex issues in simple terminology. The pragmatic factors in journalist work require journalists use each other's contacts for information. It is also important to them that they validate assertions and check facts of issues. All this has to be accomplished within a set time and a set amount of space. Information finding strategies therefore have to be straight forward and executed quickly targeting a range of sources.

Poteet (2000) pointed out that the information environment of journalists is changing rapidly as the influence of information technology changes the way people communicate and share data. The range of technologies has expanded enormously. Journalists are using electronic archives of the newspaper to commercial online databases and websites with downloadable text, data, images and audio. More and more newspaper journalists are gaining desktop access to online information sources that were not available to them just a few years ago.

Chinn (2001) and Nicholas, Williams, Cole, and Martin (2000) highlighted that advent of technologies had changed the needs and habits of print TV journalists. The proliferation of information on the Internet increase journalists' capabilities at both seeking and gathering information for work.

Millen and Dray (2000) reported that vibrant online communities of journalists used the online communication medium to compliment professional face to face meetings and other forms of communication.

Peculiarities of journalist work prompted us to conduct a study of information seeking of scientists focusing on the actual information finding activities by using critical incident techniques.

Previous studies

We could not locate any study of information seeking among journalists that used critical incident technique. However, we noticed that peculiarities of information needs of journalists were addressed in several studies that used different methods for collecting relevant data. These studies are briefly summarized in this section.

Poteet (2000) conducted a questionnaire survey of newspaper journalists at the Charlotte Observer and the News & Observer of Raleigh to gather data regarding use of online information sources. This study found that journalists frequently use online information sources. A majority believes that online sources are very important to information gathering in their work. More than 80 percent use email and the websites daily, although less than half search internal sources weekly.

Attfield and Dowell (2003) studied information seeking and use by newspaper journalists using interviews. They found their information seeking behavior was motivated by originality checking, personal understanding, and developing and determining potential context. The study concluded that information gathering is motivated by context and facilitated by available resources. They highlighted that journalists' work is uncertain. They have to re-initiate preparatory information seeking activities including the relocation and review of previously read documents.

Anwar, Al-Ansari, and Abdullah (2004) investigated the information seeking behavior of working journalists in Kuwait. The 92 respondents to a questionnaire were mostly male. Results showed that they placed emphasis on fact-checking and background information. They obtained information by using a wide variety of informal and formal sources. Human sources, Internet, and press releases were considered high in terms of importance and satisfaction. Use of in-house electronic library of stories was very limited. Respondents considered their information searching skills