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Information behaviour research in North America

**Investigación del comportamiento de la información en América
del Norte**

Pesquisa de comportamento da informação na América do Norte

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Abstract

This paper summarizes the history and contributions of information behaviour scholars in North America. Scholars who made foundational contributions to the field, as well as newer scholars, are highlighted. The paper also notes the roles played by North American scholars in important venues for information behaviour research, such as SIG USE in the Association for Information Science and Technology, and the Information Seeking in Context conference.

Keywords: Information Behaviour research; North America.

Resumen

Este artículo resume la historia y las contribuciones de los estudiosos del comportamiento de la información en América del Norte. Se destacan los académicos que hicieron contribuciones fundamentales al campo, así como los académicos más nuevos. El documento también destaca los roles que desempeñan los académicos norteamericanos en lugares importantes para la investigación del comportamiento de la información, como SIG USE en la Asociación para la Ciencia y Tecnología de la Información, y la conferencia de Búsqueda de Información en Contexto.

Palabras clave: Investigación del comportamiento de la información; América del norte.

Resumo

Este artigo resume a história e as contribuições dos estudiosos do comportamento da informação na América do Norte. Estudiosos que fizeram contribuições fundamentais para o campo, bem como estudiosos mais recentes, são destacados. O artigo também observa os papéis desempenhados por estudiosos norte-americanos em importantes locais de pesquisa sobre comportamento informacional, como o SIG USE na Associação de Ciência e Tecnologia da Informação e a conferência Information Seeking in Context.

Palavras-chave: Pesquisa de Comportamento Informacional; América do Norte.

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1. Introduction

This paper provides an overview of information behaviour research in North America. This overview is not systematic but is provided from the perspective of an experienced scholar in the area. Research in information behaviour has a long and impressive history in North America. Many of the most prominent authors in the area have conducted their careers in that region. Take note of scholars such as Marcia Bates, Gary Burnett, Nadia Caidi, Elfreda Chatman, Sanda Erdelez, Karen Fisher, Jenna Hartel, Carol Kuhlthau, Pamela McKenzie, and Ross Todd. The field would be significantly compromised without their contributions – consider foundational concepts such as berrypicking, small worlds, life in the round, information encountering, information grounds, the leisure perspective, and information search process theory, for example.

The focus of information behaviour work by North American scholars has been wide-ranging, and it is not possible to discern a uniquely “North American” perspective on information behaviour or information practices work. The scholarship has been comprehensive, with both theoretical and practical impacts. For example, Carol Kuhlthau theorized a process approach to information behaviour in academic contexts, encouraging a research focus on affect (Kuhlthau, 1991). She also devoted considerable effort to translate her theory to practice, and therefore profoundly influencing practitioners’ approaches to information services. Nadia Caidi has led influential projects on immigrants’ and religious minorities’ information practices which have contributed to policymaking (Caidi et al., 2020). Jenna Hartel has focused on informational aspects of leisure practices and has encouraged innovative arts-based approaches to work in the field (Hartel, 2019). Ross Todd revealed the significant role that information literacy instruction plays in information behaviour (Todd, 2017). Denise Agosto’s focus on young people’s information practices has helped the field to recognize this population’s particular needs (Agosto et al., 2016). Paul Solomon guided the field towards a deeper understanding of the role of sense-making in information behaviour (Solomon, 1997). Marcia Bates helped us to reconsider the nature of information science and introduced the berrypicking concept (Bates, 1989). More recently, Tiffany Veinot’s studies of information experiences in health contexts have been ground-breaking (Veinot & Pierce, 2019).

Much of the work in information behaviour in North America has been conducted from a qualitative perspective. This scholarship has been published in a range of journals (e.g., *Library and Information Science Research*, *Journal of Documentation*, *Information Processing and Management*, and *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*) and has been presented at conferences such as the annual conference of the Association for Information Science and Technology and the biennial Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) conference.

2. The role of the University of Western Ontario

While information behaviour scholarship has been found in most North American information science schools, an overview of research in this geographic area would be incomplete without recognition of the key roles played by scholars at the University of Western Ontario in Canada in the 1980s and 1990s. Patricia Dewdney, Roma Harris, Gloria Leckie, and Catherine Ross produced foundational work in the field and trained a generation of doctoral graduates for further contributions. Those graduates included Lisa Given, Karen Fisher, Crystal Fulton, Heidi Julien, Lynne McKechnie, Pamela McKenzie, and Elaine Toms, all of whom went on to make significant contributions to information behaviour and influenced the field in important ways. In addition to the scholarship that this group generated since the 1990s, they have also served the discipline in leadership roles, providing the opportunity to further the interests of information behaviour scholars within the larger information science context. These roles include leadership of SIG USE in the Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) (<https://www.asist.org/sig/siguse/>) (the association special interest group focused on information behaviour), and as presidents of the Canadian Association for Information Science (<https://cais-acsi.ca/>), the Association for Library and Information Science Education (<https://www.alise.org/>), and ASIS&T (<https://www.asist.org/>).

3. Important literature

Information behaviour literature has deep roots in the North American context. The field's most comprehensive textbook in information behaviour, *Looking for Information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior*, now in its fourth edition (with a fifth edition to be published shortly), was authored by American scholar Donald Case. He invited Lisa Given, a Canadian by

birth and training, to co-author the fourth edition of the text (Case & Given, 2016), and the upcoming fifth edition is being co-authored by these two authors and Lisa Given's former student Rebekah Willson, another Canadian.

A recent retrospective issue of the *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* (Willson, Julien, & Allen, 2022), a venue considered by many in the field to be the most prestigious information science journal globally, highlighted essential information behaviour research published in that journal from 1990 to 2020. Of the twelve papers included, most were first-authored or co-authored by North American authors. These included Denise Agosto, Danielle Allard, Lindsay Brown, Nadia Caidi, Elfreda Chatman, Amelia Gibson, Tim Gorichanaz, Sandra Hughes-Hassell, Jenna Hartel, Kyungwon Koh, Carol Kuhlthau, John Martin III, Lokman Meho, Helen Tibbo, and Tiffany Veinot.

Another recent special issue in the same journal (Willson, Julien, & Burnett, 2022) included nine articles focusing on theory in information behaviour and information practices. These articles included multiple authors from North America, including Vanessa L. Kitzie, Travis L. Wagner, Valerie Lookingbill, Nicolas Vera, Leslie Thomson, Vera Granikov, Reem El Sherif, France Bouthillier, Pierre Pluye, Lo Lee, Melissa G. Ocepek, Brittany Brannon, Amy G. Buhler, Tara Tobin Cataldo, Ixchel M. Faniel, Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Joyce Kasman Valenza, Christopher Cyr, Diana Floegel, and Kaitlin L. Costello. That special issue won the 2022 Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) Special Interest Group Publication of the Year Award in 2022.

Longitudinal analyses of the information behaviour literature have also contributed to greater understanding of the field. At the ISIC conference, one set of papers contributed over two decades has been an analysis of empirical research presented at that conference. Because of the conference's focus on information behaviour and information practices, those analyses reveal a great deal about the focus, theoretical underpinnings, and methodological approaches used by ISIC (and by extension, information behaviour) authors (McKechnie et al., 2004; McKechnie et al., 2006; McKechnie et al., 2008; McKechnie et al., 2016; VanScoy et al., 2022). One of these papers found that from 1996 to 2016, the largest proportion of first authors of empirical papers presented at the ISIC conferences were working in the United States. The proportion of first authors

working in the U.S. and Canada was more than double the proportion from the next most represented country, the United Kingdom (Julien, Polkinghorne, McKechnie, & Chabot, 2018).

Another longitudinal analysis of information behaviour publications reveals much about the field as it has evolved over the past three decades (cf. Julien & O'Brien, 2014). This set of papers has tracked several variables, including authorship, interdisciplinarity, research methods, use of theory, and focus on cognition, affect, and implications of findings for systems design. Findings include the persistence of traditional research methods, such as interviewing, as well as opportunities to incorporate theory more strongly into information behaviour work, and to focus on affect as well as on implications for design of information systems. The authors of both sets of longitudinal analyses are North American.

4. The role of SIG USE

SIG USE, a special interest group in ASIS&T, the largest international association in information science, has provided a home for information behaviour scholars in the discipline. It hosts an annual symposium in conjunction with the ASIS&T conference, and has generated special journal issues (Willson, Julien, & Allen, 2022; Willson, Julien, & Burnett, 2022), including an upcoming special issue of *Library and Information Science Research*, and two books - one focused on theory relevant to information behaviour research (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005) and another focused on affect (Nahl & Bilal, 2007). The editors and authors of these books conduct their work in North America. Thus, much of the impetus, energy, and activity in SIG USE is due to the work of North American information behaviour scholars.

Perhaps the most significant indicator of the influence of North American information behaviour scholars is the list of winners of the ASIS&T SIG USE "Outstanding Contributions to Information Behavior Research" Award, given annually since 2005 to a scholar from anywhere on the globe who is judged to

have made outstanding contributions to this field. Winners whose work has been done in North America include Jenna Hartel (2022), Lisa Given (2001), Heidi Julien (2020), Soo Young Rieh (2019), Denise Agosto (2018), Dania Bilal (2017), Karen Fisher (2016), Sanda Erdelez (2015), Gary Marchionini (2014), Nick Belkin (2013), Donald Case (2011), Barbara Wildemuth (2010), Brenda Dervin (2007), Carol Kuhlthau (2006), and Marcia Bates (2005).

5. Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) Conference

Another indication of the influence of North American information behaviour scholars on the field is their prominence as members of the Steering Committee of ISIC conference. This biennial conference, established in 1996, and hosted in many countries (although as of this writing, yet to be hosted in North America), has been an important scholarly touchstone for the world-wide information behaviour community. The conference has provided a crucial venue for empirical and theoretical research, providing a home for the range of theoretical and methodological approaches which characterize the information behaviour field. North American members of the ISIC Steering Committee have included Leanne Bowler, Harry Bruce, Brenda Dervin, Sanda Erdelez, Karen Fisher, Jenna Hartel, Heidi Julien, Carol Kuhlthau, Lynne McKechnie, Ross Todd, and Rebekah Willson.

6. The future of information behaviour scholarship in North America

This review has focused on the historical contributions of North American information behaviour scholars. However, thought-provoking newer scholars in North America are also making important theoretical contributions to the field,

including Sarah Barriage (Barriage, 2021), Kaitlin Costello, Diana Floegel (Costello & Floegel, 2021), Amelia Gibson (Gibson & Martin, 2019), Tim Gorichanaz (Gorichanaz, 2020), Devon Greyson (Greyson, 2018), Vanessa Kitzie (Kitzie et al., 2021), Sarah Polkinghorne (2018), Leslie Thomson (2018), and Rebekah Willson (Willson, 2022). This new generation of information behaviour researchers is moving away from traditional information behaviour perspectives towards closely related information practices work, situating their scholarship within social contexts, examining the structural forces shaping information behaviour, and expanding their focus to the co-construction of meaning and to the informational practices of marginalized people. These shifts in the approaches and foci of research in the field promise to make valuable contributions to the body of established scholarship. What has not shifted, however, is the focus on qualitative methods to investigating information behaviour/information practices. For the most part, qualitative approaches remain the most fruitful for investigating the people, situations, and challenges that capture the interest of scholars.

7. Summary

Without the scholarly contributions and leadership of information behaviour scholars in North America, the field would be significantly less healthy. The work of North American scholars has been essential to building a robust information behaviour focus within information science. This geographic region has substantially impacted the field over the past four decades, and the newest group of North American scholars in this area promise to build on that foundation, moving the field forward in innovative and exciting ways.

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