

Fandom, Food, and Folksonomies: The Methodological Realities of Studying Fun Life-Contexts

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ABSTRACT

As Library and Information Science research has evolved, new domains of interest have shaped the field, and with them comes a need to question the appropriateness of applying traditional methodologies to these new domains. This panel focuses on the methodological realities of studying fun life-contexts and will address how researching a new domain comes with challenges and opportunities. The group of scholars on this panel all share an appreciation for identifying and exploring the unique information experiences within fun life-contexts, and engage with a variety of subfields, including information behavior, information organization, embodied information, and fan communities. This interactive panel will consist of five short presentations from each of the panelists and a moderated Q&A led by moderator, Jenna Hartel. The panelists each share some examples of their recent work studying fun life-contexts, reflect on their experience researching in a new domain, and develop themes and questions that should be addressed in future work.

KEYWORDS

Methodology, fun, serious leisure, context, fan communities

INTRODUCTION

As Library and Information Science (LIS) research has expanded to study much more than the library, researchers have found themselves studying new populations in new domains across the discipline. While scholars continue to rely on the concepts and methods that were created to study the library and similar formalized information systems, it is important to step back and ask: are our old tools adequate for studying new spaces, or informal systems? That question is central to this panel on the methodological realities of studying fun life-contexts.

The panelists will provide brief presentations on their experiences studying fun life-contexts, followed by a moderated Q&A with the audience. This format will allow scholars to learn more about the methodological realities of studying LIS in an emerging domain, as well as help scholars in these domains to identify questions related to methodology that may require future exploration. The goals of this panel are to start formalizing a conversation around research methods in new research domains, to invite more scholars into this space, and to develop future work that can improve LIS research into fun life-contexts and the variety of new domains scholars are approaching.

BACKGROUND

LIS research can trace its roots back to early studies of the effects of libraries and reading, all the way back to an 1849 report from the British parliament (Case & Given, 2016). The field expanded after WWII with research and funding opportunities focusing on improving the dissemination of information for researchers in basic and applied sciences; this is also when the sub-field of information behavior research began. Models were developed that sought to generalize the behavior of information users, a more reductive approach that sought to illuminate the commonalities between users. Recently, however, LIS research broadly and information behavior research specifically has evolved to examine information behaviors and systems outside of libraries and the scientific community to study how people use information in a variety of aspects of their lives. Beginning with the everyday life information seeking model (Savolainen, 1995), information behavior scholars have explored non-work contexts, both fun and banal, to gain a more holistic understanding of information use and to understand context as a driver for information behaviors and practices. Context has now become an important factor in describing user information behavior and

practice, as Greifeneder (2014) summarizes. While studying everyday life is not new in LIS, there have been no focused discussions of the best methods for studying fun life-contexts.

Hartel (2003) argues for moving information behavior and LIS research more broadly into the informal and even fun aspects of life with her call to embrace serious leisure, hobbies, and the pleasures of life (Kari & Hartel, 2007) as research settings. A growing number of researchers have taken up this call. Most recently there has been attention given to “happy information” (Tinto & Ruthven, 2015) and its positive impact upon friendships, and how play can promote knowledge creation in a program to promote children’s joy of reading (Suorsa, 2017). Lee and Trace (2009) explored how information sustains people’s interests, efforts, and desires within a community of hobbyist collectors. Harviainen (2015) found that people have fun exchanging information about a pleasurable activity, even when they are not engaging in it. And Swalwell, Stuckey, and Ndalianis (2017) discussed how gamers develop videogame collections and share information on best practice to conserve and preserve old games.

Could it be that fun settings generate unique information experiences? Are there distinct information forms and genres associated with fun, such as the joke or exposé? Is laughing an information behavior? Or is it that a *lack* of information can sometimes lighten the spirit and make something enjoyable? These provocative questions have captured the imaginations of the panelists. Answers can only be found through original research, but what are some methodological realities of studying fun life-contexts?

This panel, which brings together scholars from across LIS, will present examples of the similarities and differences studying fun life-contexts compared to more traditional LIS domains. In addition to the presentations, the panel will consist of a moderated Q&A with panelists and the audience to explore how LIS scholars can approach this domain, and what questions should be further explored in future work.

FORMAT

This interactive panel will feature five panelists and a moderator who have performed research in the area of fun, non-work contexts. The panel will begin with a brief introduction from the moderator, Jenna Hartel, welcoming everyone and explaining the purpose of the session as well as introducing the session format. Each panelist will offer a 5-minute presentation on their work with illustrative examples of what data collection and analysis looks like in this domain. After the presentations, the moderator will open the session for questions she has prepared as well as questions from the audience.

MODERATOR AND PANELISTS

The moderator and panelists represent a wide swath of LIS research as well as different stages of academic careers and institutions. By bringing together a variety of methodological and research perspectives this panel will represent how many different sub-fields of LIS are working in the domain of fun life-contexts.

Jenna Hartel, Moderator

Jenna Hartel is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto. Her research is organized around the question: *What is the nature of information in the pleasures of life?* She is investigating this matter through the concatenated study of serious leisure realms, which are crossroads of information and enjoyment (Hartel, 2003). Professor Hartel has employed ethnography and visual methods to explore the use and structure of leisure information on personal and social levels, and her dissertation was a case study of information phenomena in the hobby of gourmet cooking (Hartel, 2007). At the Faculty of Information, she has supervised investigations of information practice in a variety of fun settings: amateur comedy, eating out at restaurants, going to the movies, clothes shopping, video gaming, and online dating. Overall, Professor Hartel’s research and teaching aim to be an imaginative, energetic, and committed form of intervention in the field of library and information science. She believes a different character of LIS is possible, one that moves beyond pragmatic concerns with information resources and technologies to consider positive and upbeat information phenomena across the entire human experience.

Julia Bullard, Panelist

Julia Bullard is an Assistant Professor at the School of Library, Archival and Information Science at the University of British Columbia. She researches information organization, particularly the design of classification and controlled vocabulary systems, with an eye to how designers instantiate community values in decisions of terminology and organization. Julia has found design processes within leisure communities exemplifying the connection between shared values and system design. In her study of game players who designed databases to organize *World of Warcraft* game information and of members of the fanfiction community who maintained a curated folksonomy for the organization and retrieval of fanworks, participants described their work as a variation of the fun thing at the center of their hobbies—that parsing changing data logs can be as rewarding as defeating digital dragons and that finding just the right term for a concept is a valuable and creative way to support a community of creators and readers.

The combination of fun contexts and stereotypically un-fun tasks has meant that Julia's research methods, including participant observation, diary studies, and interviews, are rare opportunities for her participants to share their passions and challenges with an engaged audience, producing deeply reflective and evocative accounts of technological work. In this panel, Julia will discuss the data collection and analysis issues she found in seeking the technical details at the center of passion projects.

Eric Forcier, Panelist

Eric Forcier is a doctoral candidate at Swinburne University of Technology in the department of Media and Communication. His research explores the information-related activities of transmedia fans and fan communities in postdigital everyday life. This research was inspired by an interest in transmedia storyworlds and how the concept of "narrative" is understood by gamers and fans. In 2013, he co-edited the book *Words, Worlds and Narratives: Transmedia and Immersion*, a collaborative project with researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds offering a spectrum of perspectives on the experiences of contemporary creators, fans and media consumers. More recently, at ASIS&T 2017 Eric presented the results of a pilot project comparing fan responses to *Game of Thrones* in his award-winning paper "Re(a)d Wedding: A Case Study Exploring Everyday Information Behaviors of the Transmedia Fan".

Now undertaking data collection for his dissertation, Eric is conducting semi-structured exploratory interviews with self-identified media fans and content analysis of publicly accessible online fan communities. The study adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to identify the specific ways in which transmedia fans interact with information through their engagement with a chosen narrative. In his presentation, Eric will address the decision to adopt two distinct data collection methods and report on his progress, including any challenges or pitfalls encountered in the early stages of data collection and analysis. He will also present examples from the data that represent emerging themes about the information-related activities of fans.

Melissa G. Ocepek, Panelist

Melissa G. Ocepek is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in the School of Information Sciences. Her research addresses how individuals use information in their everyday lives. Her research interests include everyday information behavior, critical theory, and food. Melissa was drawn to fun contexts early in her academic career when working with her two co-authors, Dr. William Aspray and George Royer, Dr. Ocepek on two books and several articles that that addressed the intersection of food, information, and culture. Her interest in food lead her to complete her dissertation entitled, *Everyday Shopping: An Exploration of the Information Behaviors of the Grocery Shoppers*.

To collect data for her dissertation, Melissa interviewed and observed grocery shopping trips with her participants. She discovered that while grocery shopping is something all of her participants regularly participated in, they did not have well-formed thoughts or opinions about most of their grocery shopping habits. The interview protocol required a very deliberate organization to allow her participants to first describe their behaviors and then reflect on them. The interviews were surprising due to the rich details participants were able to provide about their grocery shopping, while being less aware of the underlying rationale. During her presentation, Melissa will provide examples from her data of surprising stories that participants shared as well as how the organization of interview questions led to several "ah ha" moments for her participants near the end of the interviews.

Sarah Polkinghorne, Panelist

Sarah Polkinghorne is a doctoral candidate at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia and a librarian at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. In this panel, Sarah will discuss the use of wearable technology for data collection during fun experiences. For her doctoral study, Sarah uses a GoPro camera to document participant-led walking interviews. This approach facilitates observation and discussion of participants' gestures and other embodied aspects of tacit knowledge and information practices.

Sarah's doctoral study examines how people feed themselves and their families, and the nature of the information practices within people's food-related activities. She uses data collection techniques influenced by sensory ethnography (Pink, 2015), paired with a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Food is a vital element in many hobbies and events, and a common cornerstone of family enjoyment, and as such it carries great potential for fun. At the same time, as a daily need that is encountered subjectively through culture, gender, class, labor, health, and other experiences, food is not inherently, straightforwardly, or universally fun. As such, food-related information and information practices offer rich conceptual and methodological considerations for a discussion of fun in our field.

Ludi Price, Panelist

Ludi Price is based at the Centre for Information Science in City, University of London. She was recently awarded her doctorate after successfully defending her thesis: "Serious leisure in the digital world: exploring the information behavior of fan communities." She is also a librarian at SOAS, University of London. Ludi is deeply involved in the fan community as a fan artist and

writer, and a mentor to younger fans and peers. This, coupled with her practitioner experience, influenced her interest in the information behavior of fan communities, and inspired her to ground her research in methods used within both LIS and fan studies. Her particular interests focus on fan-tagging, fan self-publishing, and the collaborative innovations developed by fans to build their own ‘rogue archives’ (De Kosnik, 2016).

For this panel, Ludi will discuss her use of three research methods in her thesis: a synthesis of the literature on fan information behavior found within both LIS and fan studies; a Serious Leisure Delphi study; and the use of tag analysis to describe fan information behavior, conducted on the folksonomies implemented on three websites used by fans. This use of mixed methods reflected an attempt to marry the rich, qualitative textual accounts favored by fan studies (which is based in cultural studies), and the focus on process and the mapping of human behaviours found in LIS. She will also discuss the issues involved in studying partially-deviant and/or sensitive groups such as media fans, and the need for a wider awareness of interdisciplinary ethics within LIS.

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