

CAIS 2017 Final Version Extended Abstract

Title: Information sharing as embodied practice

Short abstract:

This paper works toward extending two areas in information scholarship: religious practice and embodiment. Reporting on completed ethnographic research about information practices among Muslim converts in the Greater Toronto Area, this paper reveals how information is shared through non-written sources in the context of religious transitions that take place within a contentious political landscape.

Keywords:

information practice
embodiment
Muslim
religious conversion
information sharing

Extended Abstract

Introduction

As Marcia Bates and others have observed, information is woven into our everyday lives (Bates 1974; Bates 1999; Cox 2012; Savolainen 2008). Research on information access, seeking and representation in leisure settings, migration, healthcare, and the home has expanded information science beyond contexts such as schools and libraries, which continue to be focal points in our field (Allard 2015; Cox & Blake 2011; Dali 2013; Gorichanaz 2015; Hartel 2010; Lloyd 2014a; Loudon, Buchanan, & Ruthven 2016; McKenzie 2010; Quirke 2015; Tinto & Ruthven 2016; Huvila 2013; Lloyd 2009; Molopyane & Fourie 2015; Pilerot 2016; Takhteyev 2012). For many Canadians, another important part of everyday life is religious practice (Statistics Canada 2013). Yet with the exception of a small number of studies on information seeking and use among Christian clergy (Michels 2014; Roland 2012; Roland & Wicks 2009), studies of the role of information in religious practice remain marginal.

A forthcoming special issue of *Library Trends* notes that while earlier work (e.g., Prigoda & McKenzie 2007; Hartel 2007) alluded to issues of embodied as opposed to “encoded forms of knowledge” (“Call for Papers: Information and the Body”), information scholars need to pay more attention to how people “receive information through the senses and the way the body is used as a sign that can be interpreted by others” (ibid.). These issues go beyond abstract academic discussions; the relationship between information and the body has space design and service implications for information professionals.

With these two sensitizing concepts in mind – information in religious practice, and embodied forms of knowledge – this paper will report on completed research on information practices among Muslim converts in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The project focused on the ways in

which Muslim converts seek, evaluate, and share information that relates to their conversion experiences, and how these practices mediate the construction of their religious identities. Two main questions framed the research:

- What strategies and actions do Muslim converts employ to seek, evaluate, and share information related to their conversion experiences?
- How do these information practices help converts to develop and present Muslim identities?

In particular, this paper will highlight how research participants share information through non-written sources (such as bodies, talk, and creative products) in the context of their religious transitions that take place within a contentious political landscape.

Methods

Research for this project was guided by ethnography – a qualitative methodology that aims to develop rich descriptions of participants’ personal experiences based on the researcher’s extended social immersion in particular sites and communities, and documentation of observed actions and practices (Bernard 2011; Clifford 1983). Over 14 months, the author conducted participant observation at local sites such as religious conventions, discussion groups, and religious education classes, and recorded detailed fieldnotes. Additionally, the author met with 13 Muslim converts and two converts’ spouses for semi-structured, narrative interviews (Bates 2004; Jovchelovitch & Bauer 2000). Initial interviews (between 45 minutes and three hours each, depending on participants’ responses) helped to establish trust between the researcher and participants, and established a context of participants’ conversion experiences by focusing on critical moments, resources, and people in their lives. Follow-up interviews occurred at least two weeks after the initial interviews, and focused on participants’ experiences of seeking and learning from information sources. During follow-up interviews, participants were given the option to create a timeline drawing – an arts-based elicitation technique designed to prompt participants’ reflections on the past, present, and goals or expectations for the future (Bagnoli 2009; Jackson 2012; Sheridan, Chamberlain, & Dupuis 2011). Two participants opted out of this activity, and one participant did not continue with the project after the initial interview. Not only did the timeline drawing technique generate insights into participants’ conversion experiences and related information practices, but it also offered participants a chance to create a product that evoked further conversation. The timeline drawings also acted as a chance for the researcher and participant to discuss “something they see together” (Cerwonka & Malkki 2007, 149), and work towards balancing the power dynamic inherent in a conventional interview.

Following data collection, data were analyzed using constructivist grounded theory to identify patterns of information practices, while remaining mindful that data were co-constituted by the researcher and participants through social interactions (Charmaz 2006) and “negotiated interpretation” (Lloyd 2009). Data were reviewed and coded line-by-line to produce an “analytic frame” (Charmaz 2006) of initial codes. Then, topics that participants described in interviews and addressed in fieldnotes were compared with initial codes. After identifying similarities and differences between topics and codes and removing duplicate codes, data were categorized into

initial groups of related themes. Next, analytic memos were produced to reflect on the researcher's observations about generated themes and how themes were connected to each other. Finally, themes were developed and refined based on the researcher's interpretations about recurring, common experiences or contrasting sentiments, and their relationship to the research questions and sensitizing concepts.

Once themes were developed, compelling excerpts from interview transcripts and fieldnotes were selected and arranged under three main themes: Navigation, Authority, and Expression & Exchange. Findings chapters were developed around "excerpt-commentary units" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw 2011), which combined data, the researcher's interpretations, and connections to relevant literature. Findings prioritized participants' voices and perspectives.

Findings

This paper will focus on research findings outlined under the theme of Expression & Exchange. These findings reveal how participants present religious commitments through their bodies, vocabularies, and creative pursuits. Findings presented in this paper will be centered around interview excerpts that reflect on participants' experiences of sharing information about their beliefs and religious selves through the clothing they wear, gendered aesthetic concerns, verbal repertoire in everyday conversations, embodied values, and the physical creation of artistic products. While they represent only a portion of generated fieldwork data, these excerpts highlight participants' experiences of "self-presentation" (Goffman, 1959) and "self-fashioning" (Greenblatt, 2005). Additionally, they show that participants' perceived visibility or invisibility as Muslims impact how they access worship spaces, expertise, and secular public spaces. Although many participants share information through their bodies and the words they use, their decisions to share, avoid, and conceal information are also heavily influenced by the political climate in their local communities and abroad. (For instance, participants negotiate their denominational affinities, their stances in debates about public veiling, and their choices about publicly identifying with a religion that is consistently linked to terrorist activities in mainstream media and policy discourses.) Finally, findings point to how participants' creative pursuits (e.g. printmaking, crafting, and calligraphy), experiences of teaching and presenting sermons, and invitations for others to embrace Islam allow them to become information producers, publishers and experts – rather than mere consumers or recipients of information provision and service.

Conclusion

This research contributes to information scholarship – especially the emerging movement to explore issues of spirituality, materiality, and corporeality (e.g. Gorichanaz 2016; Kari & Hartel 2007; Latham 2014; Lloyd 2014b) – by highlighting the bodily and creative aspects of information practice. While participants also referred to the importance of academic publications, magazines, sacred texts, websites, and online discussion forums for learning their religion, they reflected on the significance of practicing postures, wearing particular clothing items and styles, and being physically present in worship spaces and at classes and conventions for learning about Islam and articulating their identities. In addition, this research illustrates how

information practice is not a one-sided matter of consuming resources; it includes the ways in which people create and produce materials to understand who they are and to communicate with others. Furthermore, this research extends an interdisciplinary perspective on identity construction among individuals who are undergoing a critical transition in their lives. Finally, this research has practical implications for libraries, which are becoming increasingly concerned with facilitating information experiences over solving problems or addressing information needs by connecting people with only written resources (Stevenson, Clarke, & Elmsley 2016).

References

- Allard, D. (2015). *Living “Here” and “There”: Exploring the Transnational Information Practices of Newcomers from the Philippines to Winnipeg* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Toronto, Toronto.
- Bagnoli, A. (2009). Beyond the standard interview: The use of graphic elicitation and arts-based methods. *Qualitative Research*, 9(5), 547–570.
- Bates, J. A. (2004). Use of narrative interviewing in everyday information behavior research. *Library & Information Science Research*, 26(1), 15–28.
- Bates, M. J. (1974). Speculations on the sociocultural context of public information provision in the seventies and beyond. In *Library and information service needs of the nation: Proceedings of a Conference on the Needs of Occupational, Ethnic, and Other Groups in the United States* (pp. 51–76). Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office.
- Bates, M. J. (1999). The invisible substrate of information science. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 50(12), 1043–1050.
- Bernard, H. R. (2011). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (5th ed.). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
- Call for Papers: Information and the Body. (2016). *Library Trends*. Conferences and Calls for Papers. Retrieved from http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/library_trends/calls.html
- Cerwonka, A., & Malkki, L. H. (2007). *Improvising theory: Process and temporality in ethnographic fieldwork*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
- Clifford, J. (1983). On ethnographic authority. *Representations*, 4(2), 118–146.

- Cox, A. (2012). An exploration of the practice approach and its place in information science. *Journal of Information Science*, 38(2), 176–188.
- Cox, A. M., & Blake, M. K. (2011). Information and food blogging as serious leisure. In *New Information Perspectives* (Vol. 63 (2–3), pp. 204–220). Retrieved from <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/00012531111135664>
- Dali, K. (2013). Books in their suitcases: Leisure reading in the lives of Russian-speaking immigrants in Canada. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 45(4), 261–293.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Gorichanaz, T. (2015). Information on the run: Experiencing information during an ultramarathon. *Information Research*, 20(4).
- Gorichanaz, T. (2016). Experiencing the Bible. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 15(1/2), 19–31.
- Greenblatt, S. (2005). *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hartel, J. (2007). *Information activities, resources, and spaces in the hobby of gourmet cooking* (Doctoral dissertation). University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA.
- Hartel, J. (2010). Managing documents at home for serious leisure: A case study of the hobby of gourmet cooking. *Journal of Documentation*, 66(6), 847–874.
- Huvila, I. (2013). Library users come to a library to find books. *Journal of Documentation*, 69(5), 715–735.
- Jackson, K. F. (2012). Participatory diagramming in social work research: Utilizing visual timelines to interpret the complexities of the lived multiracial experience. *Qualitative Social Work*, 12(4), 414–432.
- Jovchelovitch, S., & Bauer, M. W. (2000). Narrative interviewing. In M. W. Bauer & G. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound* (pp. 57–74). London: Sage.
- Kari, J., & Hartel, J. (2007). Information and higher things in life: Addressing the pleasurable and the profound in information science. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 58(8), 1131–1147.
- Latham, K. F. (2014). Experiencing documents. *Journal of Documentation*, 70(4), 544–561.

- Lloyd, A. (2009). Informing practice: information experiences of ambulance officers in training and on-road practice. *Journal of Documentation*, 65(3), 396.
- Lloyd, A. (2014a). Building information resilience: How do resettling refugees connect with health information in regional landscapes – implications for health literacy. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 45(1), 48–66.
- Lloyd, A. (2014b). Informed bodies: Does the corporeal experience matter to information literacy practice? In H. Hughes, K. Davis, C. Bruce, I. Stoodley, & H. Partridge (Eds.), *Information experience: Approaches to theory and practice* (Vol. 9). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
- Loudon, K., Buchanan, S., & Ruthven, I. (2016). The everyday life information seeking behaviours of first-time mothers. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(1), 24–46.
- McKenzie, P. J. (2010). Informing relationships: Small talk, informing and relationship building in midwife-woman interaction. *Information Research*, 15(1). Retrieved from <http://www.informationr.net/ir/15-1/paper423.html>
- Michels, D. H. (2014). *Seeking the will of God: The information seeking experiences of the leaders of Nova Scotia churches in transition* (Doctoral dissertation). Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.
- Molopyane, J., & Fourie, I. (2015). A framework for workplace information literacy in academic contexts: Central University of Technology, Free State (South Africa) as case study. *Library Hi Tech*, 33(4), 562–583.
- Pilerot, O. (2016). A practice-based exploration of the enactment of information literacy among PhD students in an interdisciplinary research field. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(3), 414.
- Prigoda, E., & McKenzie, P. J. (2007). Purls of wisdom: A collectivist study of human information behaviour in a public library knitting group. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(1), 90–114.
- Quirke, L. (2015). Searching for joy: The importance of leisure in newcomer settlement. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 16(2), 237–248.
- Roland, D. (2012). The information behavior of clergy members engaged in the sermon preparation task: Wicks revisited. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information*, 11(1-2), 1–15.
- Roland, D., & Wicks, D. A. (2009). A conversational model for qualitative research: A case study of clergy and religious knowledge. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 40(4), 252–265.

- Savolainen, R. (2008). *Everyday information practices: A social phenomenological perspective*. Lanham, MD; Toronto, ON: Scarecrow Press.
- Sheridan, J., Chamberlain, K., & Dupuis, A. (2011). Timelining: Visualizing experience. *Qualitative Research, 11*(5), 552–569.
- Statistics Canada. (2013). *National Household Survey (NHS) Profile* (2011 National Household Survey Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE). Ottawa. Retrieved from <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-prod/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Data=Count&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>
- Stevenson, S., Clarke, A., & Elmsley, S. (2016, November). *Approach avoidance: sources of change and resistance in the public library as a site of professional work*. Research In Progress, Faculty of Information, University of Toronto.
- Takhteyev, Y. (2012). *Coding places: Software practice in a South American city*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Tinto, F., & Ruthven, I. (2016). Sharing “happy” information. *Journal of the Association for Information Science & Technology, 67*(10), 2329–2343.