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Forked times: documenting “ordinary time” in everyday life

Abstract or Résumé:

“Ordinary” time is commonly defined as time that is neither holidays nor emergencies, which suggests that “ordinary time” events are routine rather than singular. An analysis of how people document events in “ordinary” time, however, shows that the stream of “ordinary” time has multiple forks; that ordinary does not necessarily mean predictable, and that both vacations and emergencies could, in certain circumstances, take on the character of routine rather than singular events.

1. Introduction

Both “everyday life” and “ordinary time” are commonly defined by what they are not: within Library and Information Science, “everyday life” has been used to mean life outside the workplace (though see Savolainen 1995 and Ocepek 2018). “Ordinary time” is often defined in contrast to holidays and festivals (e.g., Zhong and Li 2012, Crozat and Fournier 2005) and emergencies or crises (Lev-On and Uziel 2018, Luthringer 1991). “Ordinary time” in the Christian liturgical year is at once unremarkable and remarkable: it falls between the major festivals but is distinguished from secular times and values (Caveny 2002). Some argue that the era of climate crisis renders the concept of “ordinary” time meaningless (Rankin 2019). In this paper I consider the ways that individuals create and use calendars, planners, lists, and other tools to classify, document, and manage times as “ordinary” or otherwise.

2. Literature review

Indexical categories of time such as “ordinary” and its opposites depend on socially and culturally shared meanings for significance (Adam 1995). In the workplace, “ordinary time” is “sandwiched between crises and exemplary times” (Marx 2008, p. 113). Holidays such as Christmas are associated with leisure for some workers and a temporary intensification of work for others, e.g., retail workers (Bozkurt 2015). Within households, the work of remembering birthdays and organizing holidays (Hancock and Rehn 2011) is often delegated to women (di Lionardo 1987) and comes with role-related expectations. Research on information activities during emergencies or crises emphasizes the time criticality and potential ambiguity of emergent situations. Marcella and Lockerbie (2016) found that the managers of offshore oil and gas installations engaged in two forms of information behavior during ordinary and crisis time: maintaining safe operations, and reacting to a rapidly changing emergency situation during crises. Much of the scholarship considers aspects of the collaborative information practices of members of multidisciplinary communities of practice (Taber and Taber 2013), e.g., trust and respect (Sonnenwald et al 2014), awareness, and coordination of activities (Heath and Luff 1992, Sarcevic 2007, Saoutal, Matta, and Cahier 2014). Westbrook (2009) conceptualizes “crisis” in a less immediate way, focusing on everyday information needs within three progressive stages of

leaving an abusive partner: considering a change from an abusive situation, adjusting to change (involvement with shelter/police); and preparing for life after the change. Legal information needs were pervasive throughout the process.

“Ordinary” time, then, is neither of these. In this paper I seek to understand the character of “ordinary time” and its information and documentation practices in the context of everyday life. My theoretical approach is concerned with the socially situated practices of documentation and our analysis seeks to make visible the role of temporalities in everyday document work and to show how these are embedded in and reproduce broader norms, standards, and infrastructures (Bowker and Star 1999, Trace 2007). For example, calendars, schedules, and other standardized information and documentation systems for classifying, allocating, and managing time create a common framework for expressing and coordinating temporality.

However, temporal categories such as durations and periods do not form a single coherent system. A strategy for identifying and analyzing the temporal categories of everyday life is provided by Kubovy (2015), who argued for conceptualizing everyday life as comprising multiple concurrent and asynchronous “strands” (e.g., home, work, school) that individuals experience as continuous. The events that comprise strands have temporal characteristics. They may be either temporally determinate, able to be placed in a time slot, or diffuse, preoccupations whose timing is difficult to pinpoint. Temporally determinate events may be a) unique (e.g., an accident, disaster, or singular occurrence); b) routine, following a script (where events are repeated but individual repetitions are not linked, e.g., breakfast) or a plan (with a set of steps); or c) a project, linked in the individual’s mind to past or future events, activities, or incidents, and characterized by initial and terminal incidents. I use Kubovy’s concept of routine strands to characterize the varieties of “ordinary” time and its documentation in our participants’ everyday lives.

3. Methods

My research team and I [acknowledgments to be included following peer review] collected data from 47 participants in two Canadian provinces and interviewed them about what they “keep track of” in their lives overall and how they do it, and we photographed spaces, objects, and physical and electronic documents participants discussed. Data collection and analysis conformed to Canadian guidelines on ethical research on human subjects (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al. 2015). The data set consists of over 56 hours of interviews (2200 transcribed pages), and 1175 photographs.

I used NVivo 12 to analyze the data thematically within a constructionist framework, which assumes that “meaning and experience are socially produced and reproduced” and seeks “to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions that underlie and enable individual accounts” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 85). I hand-searched the transcripts for words indicating “ordinary” time (e.g., ordinar*, typical*, regular, routine), and for words indicating extraordinary time (e.g., holiday, emergency*, crisis, busy, quiet, slow, urgent). Analysis was recursive, using strategies of constant comparison (Corbin and Strauss 2007). I then identified the temporal dimensions of these mentions considered the information and documentation practices associated with each.

To maintain confidentiality, I identify participants by a generic initial. Quotes are edited for brevity and clarity (e.g., removing false starts and irrelevant text). Bracketed ellipses indicate removed text.

4. Findings

I identified three characteristics of routine “ordinary” time that shaped participants’ information and documentation practices. First, the routines of ordinary time were not necessarily regular or even predictable. For example, those working shifts either cycled between times (E.g., a period of day shifts and a period of afternoon shifts) or were assigned variable shifts as needed. This required regular recording of work times to coordinate with other family and household members. P1 explained the different ways she and her husband used the family calendar in their kitchen: “My husband works... I guess normal, sort of, normal office hours. He works... 8:30 to 4:30, so, I mean, he doesn't need to write down his work hours there.” However, she recorded her shift times, because “it's different every day of the week. So, you know, **my** hours have to be in there so I know where **I** am, and where I'm supposed to be and what time, and so he knows as well.” Documenting the irregularity was necessary for many participants to plan non-work events and to coordinate with other household and family members.

Second, many participants experienced multiple “ordinary” times with different sets of routines and different information and documentation requirements. First, there were seasonal ebbs and flows of “busy” and “slow” times at work and at home with different documentation requirements. For example, during the school year, parents of minor children kept track of the contents of children’s backpacks and the whereabouts of permission slips for field trips. The summer vacation period was a different kind of “ordinary” time for parents whose work lives continued, and many scrambled to document and coordinate their work schedules to ensure seamless childcare. Third, several participants lived or had family members who lived in more than one household: e.g., family in one city and work or school in another, or shared custody of children. There were different routines for each household, and travel between homes and routines varied in frequency and predictability. Participants recorded their mobility on calendars and lists; some stayed in a household and others moved as the participant did. In addition, participants in one household sometimes needed to document what happened in the other, such as a parent recording a child’s dentist appointment on their calendar even when it took place on a non-custody day. In other cases, participants kept entirely separate sets of documents.

Finally, for participants managing their own or a family member’s chronic illness, emergencies were not unique events or singular occurrences, but were anticipated, if not predictable routines. A participant with cyclical depression had “ordinary” good days and bad days, and their relationship with their calendar was very different: during bad days the list of events served as an unpleasant reminder of what they had failed to accomplish. A participant caring for a medically fragile child had installed an ambulance call button to facilitate the visits to the emergency room that happened almost weekly. What were singular emergencies for most had become routine, if unpredictable for this family.

5. Discussion

This analysis shows that, for our participants, there was no singular “ordinary” time; the stream of ordinary time rather had multiple forks. Routine did not equal predictability, and both summer vacation and health emergencies could take on the character of routine rather than singular events. There is therefore not a unitary boundary between “ordinary” time and its opposite, and “ordinary time” has many opposites.

Studying the routine activities of participants provides a window into the information and documentation practices of “ordinary time” and begins to characterize the informational characteristics of everyday life as an informational context.

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