

Micro roles and the Information-Seeking Behaviour of Seniors

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It is well known that in Canada and many other countries population statistics reveal an aging population, with many more people moving into the senior age category as “baby boomers” reach retirement over the next decade. For many years this trend has been noted in the library literature (e.g., Nauratil, 1985; Moore & Young, 1985). Currently, Statistics Canada (1998) reports that there are 3.7 million people 65 and older living in Canada. This amounts to 12.3% of the population. In Nova Scotia, the province in which this study took place, seniors account for 13.19% of the total. Nova Scotia projects that by 2016 this number will have risen to 18.4% (Statistics Division, Nova Scotia, 1998). With these figures in view, governments, service, and private organizations are becoming more conscious of their need to be aware of the needs of people in this age group, including their information needs.

In this exploratory study, I examined the information-seeking behaviour of seniors as it relates to the different roles in which they engage. Seniors were considered in such roles as members of organizations (e.g., clubs, churches), patients, investors, travelers, and hobbyists. In addition to providing data about the information channels used by participants, it was thought that the study would suggest broader issues related to the information environment of older adults.

THE LITERATURE

Within library and information science, the study of the information-seeking behaviour of various individuals and groups in society has become a major field of study (Dervin & Nilan, 1986). Individuals are studied in a work or social setting. Scholars and professionals especially have been the focus of several studies over the years (e.g., Hernon, 1984; Leckie et al., 1996). Seniors have been included in a few studies of information-seeking as parts of larger groups (e.g., users of public libraries) and sometimes as a specific group (Chatman, 1992; Allen & Wilkinson, 1990).

Much of the attention given in the library literature to older adults concerns specific types of services provided for this age group. These services include large-print books (Palmer, 1988), information and referral (Speer-Brisjford, 1989), humanities programming (Liroff & Van Fleet, 1992), lifelong learning and public libraries (Van Fleet, 1995a),

reference services (Van Fleet, 1995b) and online services (Hahn, 1999; Newmedia, 1998). Other studies look at the special needs of seniors (Deines-Jones & Van Fleet, 1995), and still others report studies or offer recommendations of a more general nature (Van Fleet, 1989; Kleiman, 1995; US National Commission, 1995). In the popular press, the information needs of seniors receives occasional attention, as, for example, in articles about a communications consultant who specializes in aging costumers (*Globe and Mail*, 1998), or a report which suggests that the health of seniors may be endangered poor reading skills (*National Post*, 1998).

A study such as the one reported in this paper is an example of the growing attention given to older adults. This study will help us understand the information-related activities of seniors and contribute to our ability to deliver the services and programmes this important segment of society will require.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In this study I was interested in expanding my awareness of the information needs of seniors and in discovering what information sources and channels people in this age group used for everyday activities. Role theory was used as a basis for the study. In my doctoral research I combined role theory with social network theory in an effort to understand the information-seeking of a particular professional group concluding that awareness of networks and roles helps scholars understand the way in which the professionals I was studying seek information (Wicks, 1997). In this project, however, role was addressed more exclusively than in the earlier research. "Role" is a term which has its origin in the stage. The concept behind role theory is that conduct grows out from certain "roles" or positions a person occupies, as much as from the "players" who act those parts. The implication for the seniors who formed the basis for this study was that different everyday roles performed would lead to some variety in information sources and channels used for those roles.

It should be added that role is best understood in a social setting, and Hirsch & Jolly (1984) have suggested that combining role and network is a profitable way to investigate various behaviours. In the current project, older adults who live in seniors' residences were studied. With the findings of this project in view, it may be possible to examine seniors in other settings and discover whether different social settings produce differences in information-seeking behaviour. Even within the scope of this project it is helpful to ask whether different types of seniors' residences and urban *versus* rural settings appear to influence information seeking.

RESEARCH METHODS

In any discussion of information seeking and older adults, the term "seniors" requires definition. In a survey of public library users in southwestern Ontario, Allen & Wilkinson, (1990) found that 40 per cent of respondents identified 65 as the age at which one becomes a senior. Answers, however, varied with a variety of ages from under 50 to

over 80 preferred. A recent article in a community newspaper in Nova Scotia agreed with 65 as the most common age distinction, but pointed out that the ages of 50 and 55 were also used in some settings (Landon, 1998). Griebel (1998), in an article on libraries and “the age wave”, called for libraries to differentiate segments of the seniors portion of the population, dividing seniors into four subgroups, as follows: World War II (51-57 year-olds), Depression (58-67 year-olds), World War I and Roaring Twenties (68-82 year-olds), and Pre-World War I (the over-80s). The point is well-taken that seniors do not conveniently fit into one monolithic group. For the purposes of this study, “senior” was defined as anyone who resides in a residence for seniors. Of the fifteen participants only one was under 65.

Two seniors’ residences in Nova Scotia were selected, one urban and one rural. Volunteers in each location were interviewed. The interviews ranged from thirty minutes to one hour in duration and, as much as possible, followed a “time-line” approach in that participants were asked to retrace the steps they took in a recent activity that involved the acquisition of information. The interview schedule is found in Appendix A. Participants were encouraged to discuss the way they gathered information for a variety of activities and roles which included their involvement in clubs or church, their planning of travel, their role as a patient seeking medical information, their role as an investor, and their pursuit of hobbies. They were questioned about their reading habits, use of computers, and the frustrations they experienced as information seekers. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed both manually and in *Ethnograph 5.0* software.

FINDINGS

(1) Demographics

Fifteen interviews were conducted, eight in one residence and seven in the other. Residence #1 provided a “low” level of care for the people who live there. The main meal of the day was available for those who wished it, but residents could also make their own meals in the apartment-like accommodations in which they lived. One participant lived with his wife in a neighbouring house on the grounds of the facility. Common recreational facilities and reading and visiting areas were available. Few staff were observed. Residents had considerable freedom to come and go as they wished, and some owned their own vehicle. This residence was located in a rural setting, a few kilometres outside a small town.

Residence #2 offered a “high” level of care, with nursing care available twenty-four hours a day and all meals taken in a common dining room. Often, residents shared a hospital-type room with another person or persons. Staff was much more visible and involved with the residents. Entry was controlled in both residences, but in Residence #2 both entry and exit were controlled. Residence #2 was located in an urban setting.

There were eight women and seven men who participated in the study. Ages of participants ranged from 57 to 95. The mean age of participants was 83 and the median 86. Four had a grade school education, four had some high school, four had completed high

Figure 1: Demographics

	RESIDENCE #1	RESIDENCE #2	COMBINED
SEX: Female	4	4	8
Male	3	4	7
AGE: Mean	83.4	83.3	83.35
Median	86	91	86
EDUCATION: Grade School	-	4	4
Some high School	1	3	4
Completed High School	1	-	1
High School + courses	2	1	3
Teacher's College or university	3	-	-
TIME IN RESIDENCE: 0-2 yr.	1	2	3
3-5 yr.	4	1	5
6-9 yr.	-	3	3
> 10 yr.	-	1	1
MARITAL STATUS: Married	2	2	4
Separated	-	1	1
Widowed	5	4	9
Never married	-	1	1

school (with three of these having taken some additional courses), and three had completed teacher's college or university. Most had lived in their present setting for three to nine years. Four of the participants were married at the time of the interview, one was separated, one had never married, and nine were widowed. A summary of this data is found in Table 1.

(2) Family and Social Life

Ten of the interviewees could be said to have frequent contact with family

members. These contacts took the form of telephone and personal visits, with at least seven people having their relatives living nearby in Atlantic Canada. One man spoke of occasional contact with his late wife's nieces, and two others had only rare contact with any family members.

Participants had engaged in a variety of careers prior to retirement. Five had been homemakers, three were labourers, two were teachers, two were office workers, one had been a sales representative, one had operated a small business, and one occupation was unrecorded. Two interviewees who lived in Residence #1 owned computers which were used for word processing and, in one case, for e-mail.

Outside activities mentioned by the participants included shopping (mentioned by six people) and involvement with a hospital auxiliary (one), a seniors club (one), an art association (one), and a lodge (two). Church activities were mentioned by eleven people as being important to them. For interviewees in Residence #1 this usually meant going out to a community church for services and events, while for those in Residence #2 it meant attending a service in the facility where they lived. In some cases, a church which the participant had once attended kept in touch by sending church bulletins or other notices to the individual.

All the residents interviewed were involved in some type of hobby. The most common pastime was reading, followed by playing card games, bowling, doing puzzles, and walking. Among the other hobby activities mentioned were gardening, building model ships, playing pool, painting, watching sports on television, bingo, shuffleboard, playing the organ, knitting, and doing exercises. On the one hand, one woman mentioned that her arthritis prevented involvement in hobbies and another said life in her building (Residence #1) was "boring". On the other hand, eight people identified three or more hobby activities in which they participated. In some cases participants were asked where they obtained the information they needed for their hobby. One man who built replicas of sixteenth century ships said that while building a model of Drake's *Revenge* he researched details in books. He stated, "I did a lot of research, both in the library and in books that I bought, to try and figure out her original rigging." Earlier in life, this gentleman had ordered books and ship plans from England to inform him for his hobby. He continued to rely on these sources and on his experience. Most people did not require specific information to participate in their hobby, though a few - like the ship builder, or gardeners (who enjoyed reading gardening magazines), or painters (who had studied art in their youth), or the organ player (who had a collection of music books) - referred to specific sources. Data describing the family and social life of interview subjects is summarized in Table 2.

(3) Information Sources Used

Table 3 reports the information sources used for residence activities, book selection, financial information, travel information, medical information, and church involvement. To find out what was happening within the place where they lived, participants relied largely on meetings. In Residence #1 there was a Tenants' Association

Table 2: Family and Social Life

	RESIDENCE #1	RESIDENCE #2	COMBINED
FAMILY CONTACT: Frequent	6	4	10
Occasional	1	-	1
Rare	-	4	4
CAREERS: Homemaker	3	2	5
Labourer	-	3	3
Teacher / Office worker	4	-	4
Small business/ Sales/ Unknown	-	3	3
ACTIVITIES-OUTSIDE:			
Shopping	4	3	7
Other	3	2	5
CHURCH: Outside	4	-	4
In-house	1	6	7
HOBBIES: Reading	6	3	9
Bowling	3	2	5
Playing Cards	5	-	5
Puzzles	2	1	3
Walking	3	-	3
Other (each selected by 1 or 2)	8	7	15

and in Residence #2 a Residents' Council. Six of the fifteen people interviewed spoke of attending meetings of these bodies where announcements were made and information shared. The presidents of both organizations were among those interviewed and a few others sat on committees. Communication through bulletin boards, staff members, and a newsletter were important to some in Residence #2 in particular. Staff members were singled out in both residences as being important channels of information. A woman in

Table 3: Information Sources

	RESIDENCE #1	RESIDENCE #2	COMBINED
FOR RESIDENCE ACTIVITIES: Meetings	3	3	6
Bulletin boards	1	3	4
Staff	1	4	5
Newsletter	-	2	2
Word-of-mouth	2	-	2
PA Announcements	-	1	1
FOR BOOKS: In-house library	5	4	9
Bookmobile	5	-	5
Public library	-	1	1
Personal library	1	-	1
Borrows from neighbour	1	-	1
FINANCIAL INFO.: Bank officer	5	-	5
In-trust or staff	-	5	5
Relies on self	3	4	7
Non-bank financial counsellor	1	-	1
Relative	1	-	1
TRAVEL INFO.: Travel agent	4	-	4
MEDICAL INFO.: Doctor	6	7	13
Relative	1	2	3
Other	2	1	3
CHURCH INFO.: Word-of-mouth	3	2	5
Church Bulletin	2	2	4
Denominational magazine	3	-	3
Announcements in church	1	-	1

Residence #1 explained, "Well, really, if I needed to know anything, living in this establishment, all I would have to do is go to Mrs. D__ [naming the administrator]." Another woman, this time in Residence #2, said, "Well as I told you all the information that I get is from J.H. [naming a staff member], or that other lady in the office." The president of the Residents' Council in Residence #2 mentioned fellow committee members and the head administrator of the home as her chief sources of information.

Seeing that reading was the most popular pastime for people in both homes, participants were asked to identify the genres they read and where they obtained their reading material. A wide variety of preferences were named when it came to reading, from biography and history, to hobby and craft books, to fiction (including mystery, romance, sea stories, and historical fiction). Both residences had in-house libraries and these libraries were the most commonly-used source for books. One person in Residence #2 said of her in-house collection, "You have any; you can get any kind of book in here - anything that you want from the Bible down to, to sports...there's all kinds of books here, every kind you want to read." These libraries consisted mostly of donated materials and more than one location was maintained for these collections in each site. Organization of the collections and access to them was informal. The travelling bookmobile service offered by the public library system in the more rural of the two sites was much appreciated by its users. A resident of this rural home whose reading tastes included *Anna Karenina* and *Bridge on the River Kwai*, described the mobile library as "marvellous" and praised the library staff saying, "They'll get me anything I want, absolutely marvellous! Oh, I ask for the most outrageous things! ... Oh, they're absolutely marvellous!" Another woman made use of large-print books found in the in-house library of Residence #2 as well as of books-on-tape obtained by her husband (who lived outside the home) from the local public library.

When it came to getting financial information, there was a clear difference between the main source used by people in the two sites. Five of those in Residence #1 (where tenants had their independence) favoured obtaining advice from their banker, while five in Residence #2 (where residents had less independence) relied on the institution and its staff to manage their money.

People living in Residence #2 seldom travelled outside their building and when they did usually went in a group outing. In Residence #1 four people spoke of travelling by air to visit family or friends in recent months, and all four consulted with a travel agent to plan their trip. Other travel by people in this location was mostly local, or at least no farther than the neighbouring province, and was taken in familiar territory for which no new information was required.

Medical information was acquired in almost all cases exclusively from the individual's own doctor or specialist. No one showed an interest in researching medical questions by himself or herself. Three people in Residence #1 mentioned that when they moved to their current location, they found the physician they were now going to by recommendation (from a friend, the residence administrator, or a list supplied by the area hospital). People in Residence #2 used doctors who serviced the residence as a whole.

Eleven of the fifteen interview subjects attended church, either outside the institution or in-house. To discover what was happening in their church or denomination,

most depended on informal word-of-mouth information exchange (including pastoral visits) or church bulletins obtained at the services or sent to them from their hometown.

(4) Use of the Media

The daily newspaper and the supper-hour television news were the two most popular choices for keeping informed on daily world events. Magazines most commonly mentioned were *Reader's Digest* and *CARP News* (a seniors' news magazine published by the Canadian Association for Retired Persons). The latter was appreciated by one man for its featured articles on lifestyle issues related to seniors and for its information on discounts available to seniors. Another person found the 1-800 numbers for government programmes related to seniors helpful. Other newspapers and magazines mentioned by participants were *Maclean's*, *Legionnaire*, *The Economist*, *The Times*, *National Geographic Traveller*, and *On Guard* (a federal government publication). A government directory was mentioned as used by three people, a hometown weekly newspaper by three others, and the radio was named as a source for news by two individuals. These findings are captured in Table 4.

Table #4: Use of the Media

	RESIDENCE #1	RESIDENCE #2	COMBINED
Daily Paper	4	5	9
TV News	5	3	8
<i>Reader's Digest</i>	2	2	4
<i>CARP News</i>	3	-	3
Government Directory	3	-	3
Hometown weekly paper	1	2	3
Other (selected 1 or 2 times)	7	2	9

Summary of Findings

Informal, interpersonal sources were preferred for residence activities, and for medical, financial, and travel information. For church involvement, participants used a balance of informal and printed information. Often, information was obtained from persons in a position of authority (as in the reliance on staff by those who live in Residence #2), or from persons in jobs that require some form of expert knowledge (e.g., bank officers,

travel specialists, medical doctors). There appears to be a tendency to rely on experience when it comes to participation in hobbies. Daily newspapers and TV newscasts are the main sources for information on news and current events.

DISCUSSION

When role theory was used as a basis for this study it was assumed that different everyday roles performed would lead to some variety in information sources and channels used for those roles. The findings show that there was no appreciable difference in source type chosen for most roles. For example, as stated above, for travel, medical and financial information, informal, interpersonal sources were preferred. Perhaps the distinction of roles made here was too fine. In reality, these three areas of activity may be one role, namely "consumer", with travel, medical and financial information-seeking being variations of the same role. For residence activities and for the role of church member there was some break from this pattern of using informal sources. To be sure, interpersonal sources were employed in these roles with information being gathered in meetings, from staff, and by word-of-mouth, but there was also a dependence on printed announcements and publications. As hobbyists, other than for reading, there was little felt need to seek information. The seniors who were studied in this project depended on their previous knowledge and experience for their hobby involvement.

The role theory approach may be well-suited to the study of workplace information seeking, but not as useful for the study of information seeking behaviour in everyday, non-work environments. In his study of non-work information seeking in the context of everyday life, Savolainen (1995) employed Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* which suggests that social and cultural influences help determine information choices. Savolainen found that the teachers and industrial workers he interviewed were alike in favouring informal sources but differed in their attitudes and inclination to types of media use. Teachers preferred factual information in various media and were not inclined to seek light entertainment while industrial workers favoured entertainment when watching television or listening to the radio. Those with a high level of education were more likely to seek information actively from various channels than those with less formal education.

Interestingly, Bourdieu's theory and Savolainen's research come close to suggesting the value of including social networks in the study of information seeking. In my study, participants came from two seniors' residences which differed not only in location and rural vs. urban setting, but even more so in the level of care provided. Residence #1 offered a lower level of care and greater independence than Residence #2. Residence #2 offered a higher level of care and was more staff-intensive than the other. The social dynamics in the two institutions were different, with residents in #2 more confined to their building and in more constant contact with one another than in #1. Several similarities were noticed in the two places. There was a reliance on verbal information shared in meetings in both settings. In-house libraries were popular choices for readings materials. Doctors were relied upon for medical information. Yet there were some noticeable differences. There were four

interviewees in their nineties living in Residence #2 and none in Residence #1. The age of residents and the higher level of care provided in #2 suggests a lesser degree of health for residents at that site than at #1. Reliance on staff for information increased in that environment (as evidenced in residence activities and financial decision-making). In the more independent environment of Residence #1 there was significant use of bookmobiles and more involvement in one's own financial decisions. At the very least, these differences support the conclusion that information seeking must be understood within a context. That context may be role context, Bourdieu's *habitus*, or the operation of social networks.

It can also be asked whether sex, education, or previous career influenced information choices. The findings show that both men and women used the in-house libraries, but women made more use of the bookmobile than men. Women were more apt to consult their banker than men. Also, those with a high school education or more made use of the bookmobile more than those with elementary school or only some high school. The higher educated sought financial advice from bank officers or a financial advisor, while the less-educated were less active in seeking financial advice and depended on the institution or staff members to help manage their money. White collar workers (teachers, office workers) were higher users of both mobile and in-house libraries than were labourers, with homemakers falling half way between these other two groupings. When it came to financial advice, both former white collar workers and former homemakers went to bankers or a financial advisor, former blue collar workers depended on staff or the institution. Thus, there were some clear differences in these categories, with women, the more-educated, and white collar workers using libraries more than others and being more active in seeking financial help than others. This observation is similar to the findings of earlier studies. All groups followed a similar pattern when seeking medical information.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Several avenues of exploration remain for those interested in understanding the information-seeking behaviour of seniors.

(1) Earlier it was pointed out that discussion of older adults should take note of different subgroups. In this study, more than half of the participants were over 80 years of age and only one was below 70. Thus most would fall into the upper end of the seniors population. In future studies it would be interesting to investigate "young" seniors (the under 70s group) who are closer to their working years and who generally enjoy better health and more independence and a more flexible life-style than those who are older.

(2) Seniors who live on their own, outside of an institutional environment, need to be studied. Seeing that context and setting make a great difference in social contacts and opportunities, it may be that the non-institutional setting would lead to some differences in choice of information sources. Seniors who live in a residence are a more captive audience, easier for researchers to find, but those outside such homes should not be ignored.

(3) Public libraries are interested in outreach to their communities. Thus the finding of this study that the bookmobile was an effective way to reach library users in Residence #1 is important. Continuing research into library programmes that can assist seniors in answering their information needs will benefit both parties.

(4) Governments must communicate with citizens and more of those citizens will be in the over-65 age group as the years go by. Currently, many governments make an effort to make their programmes and services for seniors known through various publications, and this will have to continue. ¹More and more government information is being placed on the web and yet only one of the fifteen seniors in this study had Internet access. The question arises, then, as to what is the most effective medium to use in order to communicate with seniors. Many seniors living in an institutional setting, it must be noted, depend on staff for their information, and that suggests that it is not only seniors who must be targeted with this type of information, but also those who service seniors.

(5) Information flow within seniors accommodations is crucial and becomes even more important as age and functional abilities decline. Thus, administrators and staff at these residences must be conscious of how best to communicate to their constituency. There is need to research how information is disseminated in these environments.

(6) There are many seniors clubs and associations at local and national levels. Government and community publications often list these organizations.² Some interviewees in this study spoke of their use of the magazine of the Canadian Association for Retired Persons (CARP). The role that these bodies play in information provision for seniors must be considered in order to get a fuller picture of how this age group obtains needed information.

The exploration of these avenues in future studies will do much to enhance our understanding of seniors and their information-seeking behaviour.

¹ The Canadian government publishes *Seniors Guide to Federal Programs and Services*, and in Nova Scotia there are such publications as *Programs for Seniors*, *Directory: Nursing Homes for the Aged*, and *Directory: Homes for Special Care*. Seeing that there are so many government-run and government monitored programmes and services for seniors, it is important that information be consolidated in publications like these two guides and two directories.

² The program guides mentioned in the previous footnote list some, as do national and local publications such as *1999 Canadian Sourcebook*, *Community Directory 1995* (published by the Halifax Regional Libraries), and *Did You Know?* (published by a local women's organization in Nova Scotia).

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APPENDIX A

Interview Instrument

1. Demographics: Please tell me about your background [education, work experience, interests].
2. Could you describe a typical week for you? In the past three months have you needed to find out something? What? [aim was to discover their activities so as to identify roles]
3. [Based on the roles identified, participants were asked questions such as the following.]
 - a. Think of the most recent occasion when you participated in a club/church event. Describe the event. How did you find out about this event? What information did you need to participate?
 - b. Think of the last trip you took or vacation you had. Where did you go? How did you plan your trip? What sources of information did you need to prepare for this trip?
 - c. Think of the last time you visited the doctor or hospital. To whom do you go for medical information (about health concerns, drugs, etc.)?
 - d. Think of the last time you did some banking or financial planning? What sources did you use to make a decision in this area (e.g., about an investment)?
 - e. Do you have any hobbies (e.g., reading, crafts, gardening, carpentry, movies)? How do you gather the information you need to remain involved in your hobby?
4. Do you have a computer? If so, do you use e-mail?
5. Do you read magazines or newspapers aimed specifically at seniors? How do they inform you?
6. Is there something that frustrates you when it comes to gathering information? If so, what is it?

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