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“Everyone Forgets That Knowledge is the Ultimate Weapon”: Information Seeking Practices in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

Abstract: This paper examines how information seeking practices are depicted in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. As popular culture reflects culturally held assumptions, this paper examines what the depiction of information seeking practices in a popular television show can tell LIS researchers and practitioners about how such practices are culturally understood.

Résumé: Cette communication examine comment les pratiques de recherche d'information sont dépeintes dans « Buffy contre les vampires ». Puisque la culture populaire se veut le reflet de pratiques culturelles existantes, cette communication s'intéresse à ce que les pratiques de recherche d'information montrées dans une émission de télévision populaire peut apprendre aux chercheurs et aux praticiens en BSI sur la compréhension culturelle de la pratique.

1. Introduction

Television's influence on our society is powerful. It reflects back to its viewer society's underlying values and relationships (Fiske and Hartley 2001). Its narratives, both fictional and nonfictional, represent and, ultimately, influence its audiences' experiences (Todd 2011). When watching television, viewers recognize their own lives and experiences and, in turn, have these experiences affirmed and validated. This paper argues that depictions of information seeking practices on television can provide insights into how information users understand their own information needs and seeking practices. Following Gainor (2011), this study will examine the fictional information seeking practices in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Buffy)*. Originally aired between 1997 and 2003, the titular Buffy Summers and her circle of friends solved supernatural mysteries and threats for seven television seasons. Information seeking holds a central place in nearly every episode. During the first three seasons, for example, a primary location for the narrative was a high school library and a central character was a librarian. Although new episodes of *Buffy* are no longer being made, *Buffy* is still a popular television series, with strong DVD sales and a regular presence on television through syndication. Due to its popularity and its regular depiction of information seeking to solve mysteries and threats, *Buffy* serves as excellent source material for this study.

To address what the depiction of fictional information seeking practices can tell us about how information users understand their own information needs and practice, this paper tackles three questions:

1) What are the information seeking processes portrayed in the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?

2) Do the processes portrayed in *Buffy* reflect an accurate and realistic information seeking model?

3) As popular culture reflects culturally held assumptions, can information seeking processes derived from a popular television show tell us something about how students and other library patrons understand their own information needs and seeking practices?

2. *Buffy*, Popular Culture and LIS Research

Popular culture has been used in LIS research primarily to study and comment upon popular images of librarians (e.g., Adams 2000; Highsmith, 2002). As one of its central characters is a school librarian, *Buffy* has received a fair amount of attention in the LIS literature. Not surprisingly, much of this attention has focused upon how Rupert Giles, the aforementioned librarian, represents the profession. DeCandido (1999), for example, argues that Giles is a positive, if flawed, popular representation of the profession, even describing him as “our hero librarian” (DeCandido 1999, 44). In contrast, Cullen (2000) describes Giles as a Luddite and claims that he provides “one of the most negative and oversimplified images of a librarian ever depicted by the entertainment industry” (Cullen 2000, 42).

Studying information seeking practices using popular culture, however, has received significantly less attention in the LIS literature. Gainor (2011) explored the possibility of applying a narrative analysis to detective novels to create a model of information behaviours, while Dill and Janke (2011) explored the information seeking behaviours portrayed in the film *The Big Lebowski*. Sheffield (2009) completed an information audit on the first season of *Buffy*. She found that “information is the currency of the Watcher-Slayer [Giles and Buffy] relationship and the system of slaying” (Sheffield 2009, 6). As part of her audit, Sheffield compiled a list of the (fictional) information resources used in *Buffy* to solve supernatural mysteries and mapped the flow of information in the first season to demonstrate the importance of information in the slaying of demons and monsters. Additionally, Wandless (2001) explores how the depiction of research in *Buffy* changes once the teenage characters graduate from high school, although his discussion is more about the characters’ friendship dynamics than it is about the nature of the information seeking practices. Missing from both Dill and Janke (2011) and Sheffield (2009), however, is any attempt to move beyond the limits of the information practices as depicted in the text to compare them to models and understandings of actual information seeking practices. The authors limit their comments to how the fictional characters could improve their ability to find information – Giles overcoming his technophobia, for example. Yet, no attempt is made to posit what such a limited depiction of information seeking might have on actual perceptions of research and finding information.

3. Method

To get a complete understanding of the information seeking practices in *Buffy*, all 144 episodes of the show were viewed. Previous studies of the research and information practices have been limited to either the first season (Sheffield 2009) or the fourth season

(Wandless 2001). For each episode, the steps of the information seeking process were recorded from the initial presentation of the information problem, to the various sources consulted, to any mentions of the search process itself, to the “solving” of the information problem (i.e., Buffy slaying the main threat in the episode). All instances of information seeking were recorded, regardless of the information need. Therefore, not only instances of information seeking related to the major plot of the episode were recorded, but also any examples of seeking for non-major plot reasons (i.e., homework). The researchers independently viewed and mapped the information seeking process for each episode of season one, recording each information problem and its initial presentation in the show, the steps in the information seeking process for each problem, the characters involved in the search, the sources consulted (including type of source, the number of sources, and any details regarding how the sources were found), the physical location of the search, including time of day, and any indication of the length of time of the search. The mapping process was then compared for consistency. Any disagreements were discussed until a consensus was reached. The remaining six seasons were divided among the researchers for mapping. The information seeking process for each season was modeled to provide a visual depiction of the practice in each season. These models were then compared to existing models of information seeking behaviours and practices to see if a realistic information seeking model was depicted.

4. Preliminary Results from the Mapping of Season One

Each episode in season one contains instances of information seeking practices, whether related to the central problem of the episode, or to a separate information need. There were 35 different instances of information seeking throughout the 12 episodes of the season, for an average of 2.9 instances of information seeking per episode. All of the main characters were involved in some part of the information seeking processes depicted, whether that was as an inquirer asking a known expert for help, as the known expert, as a searcher of both books and the Internet, or as the giver or receiver of unsolicited, or serendipitous, information.

Information seeking, within the context of the show, is an everyday occurrence. There are both active and indirect instances of information seeking. Although there is usually a central problem for which the characters are seeking information, the acts of gathering information are often not systematic; instead, information is gathered in an almost piecemeal process that includes a range of different practices. As such, McKenzie's (2003) two-dimensional model of information practices provides an effective framework for analyzing the information seeking process in *Buffy*. In this model, there are four modes of information practice: active seeking, active scanning, non-directed monitoring, and by-proxy. These modes may intersect with two stages of the information seeking process: connecting and interacting.

Active seeking includes practices such as specifically seeking out a previously identified source, conducting a known-item search, asking a pre-planned question, and planning or employing active questioning strategies (McKenzie 2003). This mode is present in *Buffy* in multiple instances. Buffy and her friends, Willow and Xander, often seek contact with a source to meet a specific information need, such as going to the library to speak with Giles regarding the occult. They also reconnect with previously used sources to meet new

needs. For example, once Giles learns that Angel, a vampire with a soul, is a valuable source of information, he returns to him for future information needs.

Active scanning is identified as seeking and recognizing appropriate information sources; not actively seeking information about a particular issue, but keeping a list of information needs in mind (McKenzie 2003). In *Buffy*, the characters often place themselves in the library, a place with multiple research resources. At times, they browse the stacks looking for information on a general topic. The characters are able to recognize a relevant resource when they find it.

Non-directed monitoring includes regular activities that people do without actively seeking or scanning for information (McKenzie 2003). This occurs when characters monitor an information source, such as the newspaper, which may serendipitously provide them with information about the major problem in the episode. Serendipitous encounters also occur in interactions with other students at the high school, or with creatures that Buffy is fighting, such as vampire minions.

By-proxy involves occasions when people make contact or interact with information sources through the initiative of another agent, either the information source or a gatekeeper (McKenzie 2003). In *Buffy*, Giles often acts as a gatekeeper in his role as Buffy's Watcher and occasionally in his role as school librarian. He provides access to particular research resources, as well as other people in his network. Willow also acts as a gatekeeper in terms of her computer hacking expertise. Buffy and her friends also obtain information from listening to other people's stories or experiences. This often occurs when speaking to other students about an issue at hand.

In *Buffy*, the characters often turn to sources that they know and trust, such as Giles. Giles acts as both an expert, with his in-depth knowledge of the occult, and a friend. It should be noted that Giles's position as a school librarian primarily serves as a plot device to explain his presence in the school. There is no indication that Giles has received any professional education to work as a librarian, although viewers do learn about his extensive training as a Watcher. Ultimately, the information seeking process depicted in the show is a collaborative one. Giles, Buffy, Willow, and Xander almost always work collaboratively in their information seeking. This supports recent research illustrating how people routinely assist each other in solving information problems (Taljia and Hansen 2006).

5. Conclusion

Buffy the Vampire Slayer offers an excellent case study of depictions of information seeking practices in popular culture. The act of information seeking is central to the plot of almost every episode, as demonstrated by the preliminary results of season one. It presents a range of information seeking practices and demonstrates the complexities of the research process. Information seeking is depicted as an important activity, not only for slaying vampires but also for surviving high school. This representation of information seeking allows us to examine how information seeking, retrieval, and use is depicted and understood by audiences, and ultimately, society at large. This study demonstrates the larger cultural context of how people interact with information through its depiction in popular culture. The use of popular culture in the study of information

seeking practices is potentially rich and future research directions could include examining whether or not information seekers are aware of the influence of popular depictions of information seeking practices on their own behaviours.

6. References

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