Behind The Closed Door: An Ethnographic Study Of Information-Seeking Behaviour In A Closed Stack Media Library

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Abstract

Through unobtrusive observation and participant interviews, the following ethnographic study seeks to discover the various sources of information used by patrons in order to borrow a video from the University of Toronto Libraries Media Commons. Drawing from a number of examples, the paper suggests that information-seeking is multifaceted, individualized, and often seemingly non-purposive in nature. Emphasis is placed on the use of conversation as a means for serendipitous discovery and information exchange. Building on this, it is argued that such conversations are not necessarily transactional in nature, but rather are used as a means to share information as well as foster connections.

Keywords: Audiovisual libraries; Ethnography; Information-seeking behaviour; User experience; Information acquisition; Information exchange; Serendipity

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to follow the role information-seeking performs in the selection of audiovisual material from the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) Media Commons. Information-seeking is a complex and iterative process. The aim of this research is to explore what sources of information patrons use when making a selection, as well as to examine how information is exchanged between patrons and staff, and how browsing assists in facilitating the decision making process.
The Media Commons is one of the many special libraries within the University of Toronto Central Libraries System. Its mandate is to support the curriculum and private study interests of the broader university community which includes students, faculty, staff, and the general public. Unlike the majority of the text-based collections at UTL, the Media Commons stacks are closed to patrons. In order to borrow an item, patrons must first request it from a member of the circulation staff.

**Literature Review**

Bates (1989, 2007) makes a clear distinction between browsing and “berrypicking” as methods for information-seeking. The former is a “series of glimpses” which may lead to a closer, more finely tuned exploration, whereas the latter is an evolving, episodic query. Browsing does not necessarily have a well defined objective, yet may be replaced by complex “berrypicking” with the accumulation of information over time.

Bogers’ (2015) study of the Internet Movie Database (IMDB.com) attempts to improve upon our understanding of how people search for movies – a relatively underdeveloped topic in the Library Information Studies (LIS) literature. The study suggests that the search for movies is a form of everyday information-seeking, incorporating complex queries that are subjective and outside the realm of topical relevance (content, metadata, known-item).

Chuttur’s (2011) study of video collection browsing behaviour in an academic library demonstrates that patrons have a tendency to employ identical patterns of information-seeking for print and web-based material as they do for video collections. Scanning, browsing, searching, exploring, and wandering are some of the information-seeking behaviours that emerged over the study and have particular relevance to the following research (Chuttur, 141).

Ross’s (1999) study on information-seeking in the context of reading for pleasure reveals influencing factors that share commonalities with the search for movies. Aspects such as physical appearance, subject matter, and genre as well as prior knowledge and recommendations from varied sources factor into individual search criteria. Moreover, the influence of visual appeal and the type of experience wanted – cover art, and genre or theme for example – are essential determinants when browsing for audiovisual materials.

**Research Methods**

This study, in an effort to detail the multiple approaches to information gathering and information exchange used by patrons of the Media Commons, employed a number of data gathering techniques. They are as follows:

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1The collection in this study is open, yet much of the behaviour demonstrated in Chuttur’s findings have comparable implications to the manner in which informants in this study experience the Media Commons.
1. A photographic inventory (Figure 1) of the public area of the Media Commons was conducted, attention given to such information rich areas as the Service Desk, the “Staff Picks” display and display cabinets, as well as the catalogue access terminals.

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 1**: Selection of images from the photographic inventory. Clockwise from the upper right: first range of DVD titles as seen from the patron side of the Service Desk; catalogue access terminal; selection of pamphlets and signs about the Media Commons and its borrowing policies; “The Forbidden Zone” – “Staff Only” leading to the video and microform stacks; slip of paper with a list of patron selections.

2. A floor plan was sketched as a means to trace the movement and actions of patrons as they borrow items from the collection. Additionally, this period was used as an opportunity to gather preliminary data which was used to inform two further sessions of unobtrusive observation.

3. As the Service Desk and its immediate environs are a central hub, this area was considered to be the most opportune spot in which to observe a wide range of patron activities. Jottings were taken and non-structured interviews were conducted with Service Desk staff during these sessions.

4. Information Horizons\(^2\) Interviews were administered to two regular users of the Media Commons (Figure 2). Both informants are between the ages of 25 to 40, frequent consumers

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\(^2\)Information Horizons Interviews are a technique developed by Diane Sonnenwald to investigate information seeking behaviour. Participants are asked to describe recent information seeking situations and graphically represent or map all of the resources (including people) used in that particular endeavour. The resulting graphic representation is analyzed in conjunction with interview data. See citation in the reference section.
of movies and television, and possess a broad range of tastes that encompass a variety of genres spanning from screwball comedies to documentaries on the one hand, and period dramas to horror on the other. Moreover, it should be noted that both participants are full-time employees of Robarts Library as well as Master of Information candidates in the UofT Faculty of Information.

All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and they freely gave their consent to be recorded, photographed, and quoted in the findings. Additionally, the names of all informants have been changed, and any revealing characteristics have been removed. It should also be noted that Media Commons staff were informed about the nature of the study and the various methods that would be employed prior to the commencement of any fieldwork.

Findings and Discussion

At the Service Desk

The majority of exchanges at the Service Desk are transactional in nature; however, the desk also functions as a site for the reciprocal transfer of information between patrons and staff. During a period of unobtrusive observation, patron movement was traced on a floorplan of the Media Commons (Figure 3). The following diagram illustrates the flow of patrons as they navigate their
way through the space in order to borrow an item:

Of particular interest is the relatively uniform manner in which patrons move through the environment. As illustrated above, patrons either head directly to the Service Desk in order to perform a transaction, or sit at one of the catalogue terminals (bottom right) or study tables (centre right) to search for an item before approaching the counter. Moreover, the “Staff Picks” display (Figure 4) is generally perused by patrons as they wait for the circulation staff to return with their selection. This example supports the notion that many patrons already know what materials they wish to borrow prior to their visit. Indeed, during one observation session, Jerry (a Student Library Assistant working at the Media Commons) was able to confirm that the majority of patrons do approach the counter with a call number or title in mind. He continues, “Students are usually borrowing something for a course – no one gets anything just for the sake of watching it – and staff typically come with a list, or request the next season of a series.” Asked whether or not he opts to give out personal recommendations to patrons, Jerry remarked that he is not likely to offer an opinion unless he knows the patron and their tastes. He intoned that this type of exchange is too personal, and he would not want to make the wrong choice on the patron’s behalf.

As the above examples illustrate, patron led information-seeking is the norm in most [Figure 3: Floorplan of the Media Commons featuring patron movement.]

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A matrix was designed to track common activities performed by patrons such as borrowing a new item, renewing an item, or asking a reference question.
Service Desk transactions; however, there is the odd occasion in which a patron is not sure of what they want. One such instance is the exception that, perhaps, proves this rule. Towards the end of the 2017 winter semester, two women in their late 20s were observed entering the Media Commons. They approached the Service Desk and were greeted warmly by the staff. The first woman announced that she would like to borrow some DVDs, but was not sure what she should get. Prompted by the staff, she replied she likes to laugh, and she also likes to cry. This broad query sent the staff into action. There was much conversation between the two parties, and several titles were recommended, retrieved from the stacks, and either discarded or accepted.

The preceding example draws attention to the collaborative nature of the “search” query, and the level of trust the patron placed in the staff led search and retrieval process. While the knowledge and intuition of the staff assisted the patron with her selection process, the patron’s final decision, as demonstrated by Ross (1999), was ultimately based on mood, the intrinsic elements of the material (plot), and the relative ease in soliciting a satisfactory answer from the service desk staff. Additionally, the combination of broad yet specific search criteria that was voiced by the actor is similar to what Bogers’ (2015) study of the IMDB “Lists & recommendations” message board revealed, namely that, requests for recommendations of movies to watch are often highly complex and can either include or exclude several disparate elements. Furthermore, the information-seeking strategy exemplified

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4This data was captured prior to commencing this study; however, I found it so striking that it became imbedded in my memory and was the impetus for the following research.
above aligns itself with Bates’ (2007) definition of browsing: it began as an entirely visual process, enacted by a series of glimpses, items of interest were examined, and culminated in a final selection.

**Into the Stacks: Virtual and In-person Browsing**

Browsing, whether conducted virtually or in-person, allows for a greater chance of serendipitous discovery. Semi-structured interviews revealed that both informants (Helen and Elaine) regularly engage in both types of browsing, and this is one of their primary methods for discovering new content.5

**Virtual Browsing**

The following excerpt is from an interview that was conducted with Helen:

I use the library catalogue in a couple of different ways. I either go to the Media Commons subsite – it is easier than trying to navigate the whole catalogue – and I navigate to 'New Arrivals'. I will scroll through this section to see what interests me, and I will write down the call numbers on a list that I keep in my desk...I will also use 'shelf browse' (if it is working.)

Later in the interview Helen mentioned that she will often supplement browsing the catalogue with visiting third-party sites such as IMDB, remarking that the UTL catalogue does not always have material indexed in a manner that is useful for her decision making process.

Of particular interest in the preceding excerpt is the multiplicity of information sources that Helen employs when browsing online. She is relying on her domain knowledge when performing a search and recognizes that in some instances the library catalogue is not sufficient to meet her needs of purposive browsing. To that end, her search can be impeded by differences in controlled vocabularies or levels of specificity in individual query strings and/or catalogue records. Moreover, Helen often bases her decisions on actors of directors she likes. Sites such as IMDB provide the entire filmography of a given individual, and she has discovered works that were unknown to her prior to using the site. Thus, serendipitous discovery such as this may not have been possible using the UTL catalogue alone.

**In-person Browsing**

Both Helen and Elaine hold staff positions at the University of Toronto Libraries, and – as a matter of collegial privilege – are permitted to “come behind the counter” to peruse the stacks at their leisure; however, neither did so until each was formally extended an invitation to by the staff. It has since

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5For the sake of clarity the following interview excerpts have been subcategorized to reflect the type of browsing behaviour.
become a routinized part of their browsing behaviour. Helen divulged that her standard technique is to start from where she remembers leaving off and either move forwards or backwards through the range of newest acquisitions. Elaine, on the other hand, is less directed in her in-person browsing patterns and will wander through the stacks, scanning the spines of the DVD cases, selecting titles that catch her attention. She says of the experience:

> Usually I would just be able to look over the counter and see what there was in that first row that I hadn’t seen... When I started to become buddies with the people, that was when I was welcomed back behind the counter... [when I] went into that second range I started to realize how fantastic this canon of 80s action movies really was. I really enjoyed browsing the stacks more than anything.

In this regard, being “welcomed” in became an “education” for Elaine. Through a combination of serendipity and staff recommendations, she began to discover movies – lovingly labelled “Sunday Afternoons on Fox” by her and Frank, another Media Commons staff member – that she had missed growing up, as well as a whole host of other titles in the collection that she would have otherwise overlooked while browsing virtually.

Similar to the example in the previous section, the in-person browsing behaviors of both Helen and Elaine conform to Ross’s (1999) discussion of everyday-life information-seeking in the context of readers choosing books for pleasure. For Helen, previous experience and meta-knowledge of actors and directors play an important role in browsing, whereas, Elaine is motivated by nostalgia and is seeking a particular experience in her search and acquisition process. Moreover, in-person browsing is better suited to making chance connections between items in the collection as it need not follow a linear path, and is imbued with a greater potential for spontaneous discovery.

**List Making and Inventories**

Inventories, by way of list making, are sense-making activities central to personal information-seeking. While interviewing Helen, she mentioned that she keeps a list in her desk of the movies she has found while browsing the Media Commons website (see Figure 5).

In addition to this list, Helen maintains a spreadsheet, shared with her partner, that lists titles, call numbers, and physical locations of titles they are interested in borrowing. This inventory also includes a column to indicate whether or not both parties are interested in watching a particular title. While these documents are consulted prior to making a selection, they also have the capacity to function as a catalogue of past viewing experiences. Moreover, the list serves as a reminder for,
in Helen’s words, “future me.” It remains in her desk, and she transfers the call numbers and titles of items she is interested in retrieving to a sticky-note on the day she plans on visiting the Media Commons. Furthermore, as the “master” list is ongoing, she has no expectation that a particular item will be available, nor does she consult the catalogue prior to her visit.

The list and the spreadsheet have evolved overtime. Not only do they track viewing habits, they are used to aid future viewing choices. Moreover, they are products of virtual and in-person browsing, engagement with social media, conversations with friends and colleagues, and previous viewing experiences. Similarly to what Taylor and Swan (2005) discovered in their study of organizational systems in the home, these two artifacts have been adapted to meet the needs of their users. The information contained within will only make sense, and be useful to Helen and her partner. In this sense, they are informational shorthand that is specific to the individual user(s).

While Elaine also compiles lists to track what she has watched, she revealed that they function as a quasi-diary, on the one hand, and as a “recommendations generator” to share with her peers, on the other. The image below (Figure 6) depicts a screen capture from her LetterboxD account:

As illustrated in the image, Elaine has given each movie a personal rating, and each one is cross-referenced to the date in which it was viewed. She shared that she tracks everything that she watches, including formats (VHS, DVD, etc.); notes her favourites; and rates and comments on what she has watched – she even went so far as to use a Media Commons specific tag when she began to record of

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**Figure 5**: Helen’s list of title and call numbers for items she has found browsing the Media Commons website.

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\(^1\)LetterboxD is a social networking service that allows its users to post, share, and rate the movies they watch. It also has a diary function in order to track the date that a particular piece of media was watched.
her viewing habits. This type of inventorying serves two purposes: primarily as a personal archive, and secondarily as a means of sharing or information exchange among her peer group.

Compared to Helen’s analytical, or service oriented approach to tracking, Elaine’s use of list making comes from a place rooted in emotion. This is a diary in its truest sense; however, far more idiosyncratic and inscrutable to an outsider than its text based cousin. For Elaine, each movie on the list is a representation of self: a feeling, mood, or thought process that only she can decode. Yet, to the outsider it is an annotated list of what she has watched, a snapshot of her leisure practices, and a shared resource. Yet more than that, it is a way for Elaine to recommend specific titles she has enjoyed and initiate virtual discussions.

“Shooting the Shit”

Conversation, in-person as well as online, is a primary tool to gather and exchange rich sources of information about movies and television series. Over the course of the two interview sessions, discussion naturally touched on the value of conversation as a purposive method of discovery. Helen relayed that she will often come to the Media Commons with the express intent of talking to the cataloguer about their mutual recreational pursuits. While the conversation does not always relate to the Media Commons collection, she agrees that these conversations do generally result in some form of serendipitous discovery of new and upcoming titles that may be of interest to her.

Like Helen, Elaine also comes to the Media Commons in order to “shoot the shit” with the staff.
Such occurrences are not always for the purpose of borrowing material; rather, her goal is to engage and connect with her colleagues, talk about movies, and exchange recommendations. Additionally, conversation, for Elaine, is an extension of a multifaceted browsing process that can occur online just as well as in real life. Accordingly, she posts photos of her “media consumption” to her twitter feed as a means of sharing her tastes and discoveries, and as a method of soliciting feedback. Moreover, she uses these online interactions to champion the Media Commons, remarking that “having these conversations in public is a way to let folks around us know just how fucking brilliant they are.” Figure 7 illustrates one such interaction:

While the initial exchange may appear to be fairly innocuous, of particular interest is the amount...
of information being shared between the various parties. The photo of Elaine’s “holiday haul” is rife with an assortment of elements essential to choosing a book (and by extension, a movie) for pleasure such as visual appeal, name and genre recognition, and the quest for a specific type of experience. Ross (1999) calls these factors alerting sources which employ a combination of elements for choosing an item for pleasure such as recommendations from trusted sources, as well as engaging in serendipitous discovery.

In both of these examples, Helen and Elaine typically put out “antennae to scan their everyday environments for clues”, and “tuck away for future use in memory or on lists” the names of videos they wish to borrow (Ross, 1999, pg. 789). Trust is also an important component in their browsing endeavours. They have confidence in the knowledge and expertise of the Media Commons staff, as well as their peers and extended social networks, which has been fostered over time by the mutual exchange of information through conversation.

**Conclusion**

This study set out to uncover the information-seeking behaviours specific to patron selection of audiovisual material from the Media Commons. Over the duration of the study, it was discovered that – overall – most transactions at the Service Desk neither lend themselves to rich, nor complex exchanges of information. Indeed, the majority of patron led information-seeking either takes place offsite, or is disguised as (seemingly) non-purposive browsing. That the catalogue is used can almost be taken as a given; however, the idea that different information needs require different information access methods (Bogers, 2015) became apparent as the data was collected.

It was discovered that the Service Desk is an opportune site for the reciprocal transfer of information between patrons and staff; browsing is a complex and multifaceted activity that allows for an increased possibility of chance and discovery; lists and personal inventories are tools people use to make sense of their world and self; and conversation is better than any database for finding material that will be of interest. Yes, information is essential for borrowing an item from the Media Commons; however, how that information is elicited is as particular as the individual's tastes, and relies on one's previous experience, meta-knowledge, and the ability to trust the judgement of others.
References


