

Seniors and Everyday Life Information Seeking

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Literature Review

A common focus of the information behavior literature is on how professionals seek and use information to perform job tasks and achieve work-related goals. Another burgeoning research area focuses on non-work information seeking, a concept defined by Savolainen (1995) as Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS). Our study focused on the ELIS behavior of seniors, whom we chose because they typically lack the work structures that define many groups' lives. They cannot easily be understood with any one information behavior model.

Although we identified several articles on the topic of seniors' information seeking, the majority were from outside the Information Science literature. For example, we consulted articles in *Heart and Lung*, *Journal of Medical Internet Research* and *Educational Gerontology*. We did not focus closely on these studies because they do not approach information seeking from an information perspective. However, the frequency of this topic in a range of health sciences journals highlights the importance of health as an information need for seniors. The health information seeking behavior of the elderly is obviously of concern to medical professionals and increasingly so to librarians and information professionals who design information systems and services for them.

Studies in the Information Science journals were rarely based on populations in the United States. The leading research studies on seniors' information behaviors were Australian, British, and Canadian. We found few studies focused specifically on American seniors, whose government benefits and health care structures differ from those of seniors in other countries. We were sensitive to these cultural and political differences that frame seniors' lives when using these studies. Nevertheless, we drew extensively from these sources.

Three articles from the Information Science literature were particularly useful in conceptualizing research, framing questions and building a theoretical foundation. Savolainen's (1995) ELIS model borrows heavily from Bourdieu's *habitus*, defined as a system of socially and culturally determined characteristics that organize an individual's life. Source preferences and problem-solving methods are considered at once individual and socially conditioned. Coupled with *habitus*, Savolainen's concept of "way of life" (the structure of time budget, models of consumption of goods and services, and nature of hobbies) offers a solid framework for analyzing everyday information seeking behavior of different populations. Concerned with non-work information seeking, Savolainen contrasted the behavior of teachers and blue collar

workers to develop the ELIS model. We pushed his questions further to consider how seniors develop everyday life structures, time budgets, and seek information in the absence of imposed work structures. We were guided by Savolainen's observations that ELIS often concerns health and hobbies and his remarks about how individuals manage leisure time activities.

In a study focused explicitly on older adults' information seeking, Williamson (1997) emphasizes the individual's particular physical and social context, as does Savolainen. She constructs an ecological model of the information-seeking behavior of older adults. Williamson's model is useful in considering how an individual's particular context and life structures shape her information behavior. She finds that family and friends are the most important source of information for this population. Their contact was primarily mediated through the telephone. Her summary of older adults' primary information needs—health, income and finance, government pension, recreation, and volunteerism—guided our study and anticipated our results. Williamson's model built upon Savolainen's core concepts and provided theoretical foundation.

Wicks' (2004) study of older adults' information seeking provides theoretical models and concrete findings, methods, and questions that guided our work. Wicks' theory is heavily derived from Savolainen's "way of life," hence his sensitivity to the influence of roles and settings on individual's information behavior. His interview instrument and observations about the flow of information within senior accommodations as well as the role of institutional sources of information guided the development of our study. As with Williamson and Savolainen, Wicks emphasizes an ecological or contextual approach to understanding everyday life information seeking behaviors. We drew heavily from each of these studies in conducting our own.

Method

Residents in an urban community of the Seattle Housing Authority's Senior Housing Program (SSHP) participated in the study. The sample consisted of 15 residents aged 58 to 83 or older. To qualify to live in Seattle Senior Housing, a resident must have an income below \$40,600 and be at least 62 or disabled (Seattle Housing Authority, 2005). Despite these basic similarities, our participants were diverse according to ethnicity, age, state of health, and activity level. Residents are independent individuals living in a community which caters to their needs.

We chose two methods for the research. To collect qualitative data, we conducted two group interviews with seven participants in each group. The interviewers worked in pairs; one conduct a semi-structured group interview using a prepared instrument (Appendix B) while the

other took notes. Participants were asked to discuss a recent information need, the sources they use, and their frequency of use. A survey was given to participants immediately after the group interview. The survey covered demographics, information types, sources, and frequency of use (Appendix A). We pre-tested the survey questions on a 60-year professional, and used MS Excel to analyze the quantitative data.

We coordinated the study with the Community Builder at SSHP. She reviewed and critiqued our survey and instrument, and offered information on the SSHP and its residents that helped us form appropriate research questions. She facilitated access to the community and helped us gain the residents' trust, which is essential to procuring rich data. Our willingness to do a follow up program may have also provided an incentive for their participation in our study.

The group interviews were conducted in the building's community room. We got a sense of the community's common spaces and shared information sources during a tour of the housing lobby, where community bulletin boards are located. One resident explained that urgent information is posted in the elevator, general information is posted on the community bulletin board, and there is an entire table dedicated to magazines, catalogs and newspapers.

Findings

Of the 15 survey respondents 9 (or 60%) were women. We looked at age ranges based on Griebel's "age wave" (Wicks, 2004) and found that the majority (8 or 53.33%) fell into the 68-82 age range. At the time of interview nearly half of the respondents (7 or 46.67%) reported that they were neither working nor seeking any paid or volunteer positions. Over half (8 or 53.33%) of the resident respondents had worked in careers involving manufacturing, production, service or maintenance prior to retirement. Some professions included registered nurse, nurse's aid, engineer, teacher, secretary, prison program administrator, Boeing industrial worker, freight transporter and homemaker. No significant relationships emerged between profession and current information seeking behavior.

Surveys showed that 9 (60%) residents felt that health was a primary topic of interest. Other interests were current events, travel and hobbies. "Signing up" for social security benefits and Medicare was a topic of concern affecting all residents. Everyone had received paperwork in the mail, yet many residents felt confused about the process and "doing it wrong." This example is consistent with other studies and demonstrates that government information is a source of frustration and anxiety.

Another typical information need, which came out in the focus group, was for travel related information. This need included basic transportation for everyday mobility as well as travel to distant places. Seven out of fifty-seven total residents drive a vehicle. Others ride the bus, take cabs and those with less mobility rely on a public transportation service called *ACCESS*, which caters to seniors and people with disabilities. Because of this reliance on public transportation there is tremendous need for information regarding transit within the community.

The primary preferred source for information regarding health was a nurse or physician (9 or 60% of respondents). Regarding hobbies, the primary preferred source for information was newspaper or magazine (6 or 40% of respondents). In both cases, residents felt accuracy was most important when selecting an information source. One aspect that our survey fails to address is that an overwhelming majority of residents indicated a preference for the telephone when seeking information regarding health, hobbies, and other activities (i.e. travel). “The phone is the best way to get information, but one of the problems is that 80% are automated systems with no human,” said one participant. Only one participant out of 14 claimed to consult the internet when faced with a health related question saying “the internet is a tremendous source of information and it’s up to date, but you can scare yourself or misdiagnose.” Both statements demonstrate typical frustrations with technology-mediated information-seeking.

Another major source for information was word of mouth. The SSHP community provides a network channel for residents. One resident explained “networking is important: you can find out anything to overcome a difficulty if you ask around and know people.” The survey reflects the use of word of mouth as an information source: 11 residents (73%) indicated at least one interpersonal source used in the last week. The trust placed on friends and family in regards to information seeking further contributes to Granovetter’s (2005) “Strength of Weak Ties” theory, which shows that people will often seek advice from their strong ties (i.e. friends and family) before acting on information.

Both our interview questions and surveys asked specific questions regarding the use of a physical library and, more specifically, the Seattle Public Library’s “Bookmobile.” Survey results show that approximately one quarter of the residents (4 or 26.67%) regularly visit the public library. On the other hand approximately two-thirds (10 or 66.67%) of the residents indicated that they utilize the Bookmobile. The use of the Bookmobile has a lot to do with the decreased mobility of the residents who find it easier to utilize this service every other month

rather than going “down the hill.” One resident reported being turned away at the library and told “just to use the Bookmobile.” Many residents seem to rely on the Bookmobile and the library to read up on topics of interest, which are not necessarily as time-sensitive or urgent as health issues. Some research interests include geographical studies and technology advancements as well as family and world history. These results further Savolainen’s (1995) structure of time budget, which takes into account an individual’s available time as part of the search process. Krikelas’ (Henefer and Fulton 2005) model of information seeking, which highlights differences in response to immediate and deferred information needs, is also supported by these results.

Another focus of our research was the use of computers and the internet in the residents’ everyday life information seeking. Six of the fifty-seven residents (or 10.5%) own a computer. Currently the Seattle Housing Authority has not installed a computer terminal in the common area. When asked whether this was something they were interested in most responses were negative. Some said they would “rather read a book than use a computer” or that they simply had no idea how to use a computer and would need tutoring. According to survey results, only 3 of the residents (or 20%) indicated that they use the internet on a regular basis. Some residents indicated that they do not go to the computer directly, but often receive information from the internet indirectly through friends or family. One major instance of this phenomenon was talked about in relation to the purchase of airline tickets. Residents indicated that they asked friends or family with internet access and computer skills to purchase online airline tickets for them. Others shared that they would often buy airline tickets from a travel agency, to avoid frustration with the internet, even though these transactions would ultimately result in higher costs.

Participants in the focus group briefly mentioned other often used sources of information. Approximately twenty newspaper subscriptions arrived at the building daily. According to our survey 9 (or 60%) of respondents used newspapers and magazines as information sources within the last week. Many residents mentioned subscriptions to mail order shopping catalogs, perhaps another result of decreased mobility. Another frequently used source for information was the television; 8 (or 53.33%) respondents reported watching the television in the last week. In the focus groups we found that many residents enjoy watching PBS programs and sports. The use of sources like newspapers, television, magazines and catalogs might be referred to as “infotainment”. These sources may not be used intentionally for information seeking purposes, yet there is a certain level of serendipity in their employment. This corresponds with

Williamson's (1997) conclusions about the high frequency of "incidental information acquisition" among seniors as opposed to "purposeful information seeking."

Conclusion

A primary interest in our research was testing Savolainen's (1995) ELIS model with a group whose lives were not primarily defined by work or school. In the absence of imposed work structures we considered how seniors develop everyday life structures and time budgets and seek information. We found that seniors create their own structures and routines based on hobbies, exercise, volunteering, church activities, and family. While Savolainen's model suggests that career influences ELIS behaviors and preferences, we found that participants' past careers do not significantly affect their information preferences and orientations. Consistent with Williamson's (1997) ecological model, we found that current context, regardless of past work experience, most profoundly determines everyday information behavior.

Although we anticipated a correlation between age and internet use, no clear patterns emerged. Those who used the internet fell into three separate age categories, and residents of all age groups indicated that they never accessed the internet. Wicks (2004) suggests that age is inversely related to computer experience, and that the gap between younger and older seniors will narrow over time. Given that we found internet adoption by older seniors and internet avoidance by younger seniors, future research should look at other contextual factors (e.g., language barriers, physical disability) that help or hinder online access among seniors.

As expected, the primary information needs of the seniors revolved around health and leisure activities, but government benefits and transportation information needs were also highlighted. Preferred sources varied by topic, but interpersonal sources were significant, particularly for urgent needs. The community setting of our population facilitated access to these interpersonal information sources and future research should examine how seniors might retain these sources in more isolated living situations. Moreover, research might examine the potential for introducing technology to seniors through interpersonal channels (e.g., advocacy by community leaders, workshops for seniors and their younger family members, etc.). Chatman (1991) suggests that mass media use among seniors becomes increasingly significant with age as it mediates their access to the larger world. In this light, understanding the information behavior of aging adults becomes an important tool for assisting potentially information-impooverished populations.

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Appendix A: Quantitative Survey

1. What is your age range? (check one)

2. What is your gender?

<input type="checkbox"/> 51 - 57	<input type="checkbox"/> 58-67	<input type="checkbox"/> 68 - 82	<input type="checkbox"/> 83 or older	<input type="checkbox"/> Male	<input type="checkbox"/> Female
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2. What is the highest level of education that you've completed? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Grammar School	<input type="checkbox"/> Associate or Technical Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> High School or GED	<input type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate (4-year) Degree
<input type="checkbox"/> Some College	<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate/Professional/Doctoral Degree

3. What best describes your current work situation? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> I work in a paid or volunteer position.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am not currently working, but I am interested in a paid or volunteer position.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am not currently working, and I am not interested in a position.

4. How would you describe your current or previous career? If you've had more than one career, choose the one that you feel best describes you. (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Management/Business/Finance	<input type="checkbox"/> Manufacturing and Production
<input type="checkbox"/> Science/Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Service and Maintenance
<input type="checkbox"/> Healthcare Professional	<input type="checkbox"/> Law Enforcement/Criminology
<input type="checkbox"/> Legal Professional	<input type="checkbox"/> Administrative Support
<input type="checkbox"/> Educational Professional	<input type="checkbox"/> Sales
<input type="checkbox"/> Other Professional	<input type="checkbox"/> Homemaking

5. Which of the following types of information are you typically interested in?
(check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Current Events/News	<input type="checkbox"/> Hobbies	<input type="checkbox"/> Job/Volunteer Information
<input type="checkbox"/> Weather	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation	<input type="checkbox"/> Personal Improvement
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal Finance	<input type="checkbox"/> Nutrition and Exercise	<input type="checkbox"/> Religion and Spirituality
<input type="checkbox"/> Consumer Information	<input type="checkbox"/> General Health	<input type="checkbox"/> Other
<input type="checkbox"/> Travel	<input type="checkbox"/> Local Events	_____

6. How many hobbies do you participate in? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3-6	<input type="checkbox"/> More than 6	
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7. How frequently do you participate in hobbies? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Daily	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 times/week	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 times/month	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2 times/year	<input type="checkbox"/> Never
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8. If you need information about a **hobby-related matter**, which of the following would you be most likely to consult **first**: (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Television	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nurse or Physician	<input type="checkbox"/>	Book
<input type="checkbox"/>	Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>	Seattle Housing Authority Staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Print Materials (Flyers, Posters, etc)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Newspaper or Magazine	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friend or Acquaintance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family Member, Partner or Spouse
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Librarian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other

9. When you are looking for information about a **hobby-related matter**, which of the following is **most important** to you? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Easy to understand or use	<input type="checkbox"/> Accurate Information
<input type="checkbox"/> Trusted Source	<input type="checkbox"/> Readily Available/Easy to Access

10. How would you rate your current health? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> Very Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor
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11. If you need information about a **health-related matter**, which of the following would you be most likely to consult **first**: (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Television	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nurse or Physician	<input type="checkbox"/>	Book
<input type="checkbox"/>	Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>	Seattle Housing Authority Staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Print Materials (Flyers, Posters, etc)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Newspaper or Magazine	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friend or Acquaintance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family Member, Partner or Spouse
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Librarian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other

12. When you are looking for information about a **health-related matter**, which of the following is **most important** to you? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Easy to understand or use	<input type="checkbox"/> Accurate Information
<input type="checkbox"/> Trusted Source	<input type="checkbox"/> Readily Available/Easy to Access

13. How frequently do you do each of the following? (check one for each question)

	Daily	1-2 times/week	1-2 times/month	Never
a. Visit an On-site Library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b. Visit the Public Library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c. Visit any other Library	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d. Access the Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

14. Do you utilize the Bookmobile? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Always	<input type="checkbox"/> Most of the Time	<input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/> Rarely	<input type="checkbox"/> Never
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15. Do you feel that you can get the information you need when you need it? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> Always	<input type="checkbox"/> Most of the Time	<input type="checkbox"/> Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/> Rarely	<input type="checkbox"/> Never
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16. What do you feel is the **biggest** barrier you face in getting the information you need? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/> I don't have enough time to look for information.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm not sure where to go for information.
<input type="checkbox"/> I know where to find the information I need, but I'm not sure how to access it.
<input type="checkbox"/> There's too much information; I'm not sure where to begin.
<input type="checkbox"/> There's not enough information to answer my question to my satisfaction.

17. Which of the following information sources have you used **within the last week**? (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/>	Television	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nurse or Physician	<input type="checkbox"/>	Book
<input type="checkbox"/>	Radio	<input type="checkbox"/>	Seattle Housing Authority Staff	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Print Materials (Flyers, Posters, etc)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Newspaper or Magazine	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friend or Acquaintance	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family Member, Partner or Spouse
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Librarian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other

18. Which of the following would you be **most** interested in learning about? (check one)

<input type="checkbox"/>	The Internet	<input type="checkbox"/>	The Seattle Public Library	<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Health Resources	<input type="checkbox"/>	Local Entertainment Resources
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Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Instrument

Introduction: Hello, thanks for coming to talk with us this afternoon. We certainly appreciate having you here. We are graduate students at the University of Washington interested in how different groups of people get information about various topics which affect their everyday lives. We are interested in your community and how living in this environment has helped or hindered your information seeking. Everything we are discussing is confidential, and all questions are optional.

1. We'd like to start by introducing ourselves... My background is ... But what we're really interested in are your experiences. What types of work experiences have you had? Where did you live and go to school?

Purpose: Getting to know you; demographic social information, etc.

2. Think about your daily or weekly routine. For instance, I spend a lot of time in front of the computer, reading, in the library etc. Some of you may work or volunteer. Some of you may be involved in hobbies. For instance, [give an example of an information need we've had recently. Include people as well as sources].

Purpose: Determine general interests, and how they structure their day.

3. Think about a recent time that you've needed information. What kind of information did you need? How did you go about getting the information that you needed? Was your question answered or are you still searching?

Purpose: Understanding general search strategies

4. Think about a recent time that you needed information and had difficulty finding it. What did you do? How did you feel?

Purpose: Understanding search barriers

Now we'd like to talk about specific places and sources you might use to get information.

5. Do you go to the library? If yes, think about the last time you went to the library and describe it.

6. Do you use the bookmobile? If yes, what kind of materials do you check out?

7. Do you have computer access here? How often would you say that you use the internet either to browse or find information?

8. Sometimes different information sources are better for different situations. What is the first place you'd look for information? What do you think is the best source?

- a. Health
- b. Hobbies

If necessary, the following sources can be used as prompts:

- a. newspapers or magazines
- b. radio and/or TV
- c. libraries (public, academic, in house, bookmobile)
- d. a trusted friend or relative

9. How can _____ and the surrounding community help facilitate more efficient access to information?