

A Boundary-Centric Approach to Studying Mobile Information Sharing

Adam Worrall, Doctoral Candidate, Florida State University

College of Communication and Information, PO Box 3062100, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2100

apw06@my.fsu.edu

When we study information being shared “on the move,” I argue that a boundary-centric approach is necessary. With the increasing ubiquity of mobile technology, information is often shared with and placed within new contexts and environments (Courtright, 2008). Considering the boundaries between these contexts, how individuals and groups can span these boundaries, and the roles of boundary objects in bridging between environments allows for grounded, thorough, and insightful study of how information is shared within and across different groups and communities as individuals find themselves “on the move.”

Individuals may be “on the move” in a physical sense, between multiple different environments. We see this in much research on information behavior taking place at home, work, or school (Case, 2012); in information grounds (Counts & Fisher, 2010; Fisher, Durrance, & Hinton, 2004); and in the context of mobile technology (Mervyn & Allen, 2012). Individuals may also be “on the move” between different communities, the social groupings and sets of ties they find themselves a part of. An individual may participate within and across multiple communities or worlds while remaining in the same physical setting. The potential insight of a boundary-centric approach is strongest when the individual is “on the move” in different physical environments *and* in different communities at the same time.

Multiple theoretical lenses are compatible with this approach, and can provide the necessary context for physical and community boundaries that will enlighten our view of information as it moves across these boundaries, facilitated by mobile technology. Strauss’s (1978) *social worlds perspective* considers the *sites* where information behavior and information-based activities occur, the *technologies* used to carry them out, and *organizations* furthering them. Burnett and Jaeger’s (2008; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) *theory of information worlds* considers how *social norms*, *social types*, and *information value* judgments impact most information sharing in context. Star’s *boundary object theory* and its concepts of *translation*, *coherence*, and *convergence* (Star, Bowker, & Neumann, 2003; Star & Griesemer, 1989; Star, 2010) can be applied to the dynamics of information sharing within and between pre-existing and emerging place-based or abstract communities. The literature on *gatekeepers* and *boundary spanners* (Leonard-Barton, 1995; Levina & Vaast, 2005) considers how individuals facilitate information sharing across community boundaries.

All four of these perspectives can be synthesized and combined into an overarching framework that, I argue, can lead to significant insight into information sharing “on the move” via mobile technologies. For example, researchers interested in information sharing via a mobile messaging app can study the technology, the social typing of its users, how phones and the messaging system serve as boundary objects in translation, and how individual users serve as gatekeepers and boundary spanners in social messaging networks. Individual facets of this framework may also be isolated for a focused research study. Either way, being cognizant of the importance of boundaries and their roles in information sharing “on the move” will, I believe, lead to greater insights for individual studies and for the body of information behavior research as a whole.

References

- Burnett, G., & Jaeger, P. T. (2008). Small worlds, lifeworlds, and information: The ramifications of the information behaviour of social groups in public policy and the public sphere. *Information Research*, 13(2). Retrieved from <http://informationr.net/ir/13-2/paper346.html>
- Case, D. O. (2012). *Looking for information: A survey of research on information seeking, needs, and behavior* (3rd ed.). Bingley, UK: Emerald.
- Counts, S., & Fisher, K. E. (2010). Mobile social networking as information ground: A case study. *Library and Information Science Research*, 32, 98–115. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2009.10.003
- Courtright, C. (2008). Context in information behavior research. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, 41, 273–306. doi:10.1002/aris.2007.1440410113
- Fisher, K. E., Durrance, J. C., & Hinton, M. B. (2004). Information grounds and the use of need-based services by immigrants in Queens, New York: A context-based, outcome evaluation approach. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 55, 754–766. doi:10.1002/asi.20019
- Jaeger, P. T., & Burnett, G. (2010). *Information worlds: Behavior, technology, and social context in the age of the Internet*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Leonard-Barton, D. (1995). *Wellsprings of knowledge: Building and sustaining the sources of innovation*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Levina, N., & Vaast, E. (2005). The emergence of boundary spanning competence in practice: Implications for implementation and use of information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, 29, 335–363.
- Mervyn, K., & Allen, D. K. (2012). Sociospatial context and information behavior: Social exclusion and the influence of mobile information technology. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 63, 1125–1141. doi:10.1002/asi.22626
- Star, S. L. (2010). This is not a boundary object: Reflections on the origin of a concept. *Science, Technology and Human Values*, 35, 601–617. doi:10.1177/0162243910377624
- Star, S. L., Bowker, G. C., & Neumann, L. J. (2003). Transparency beyond the individual level of scale: Convergence between information artifacts and communities of practice. In A. P. Bishop, N. A. Van House, & B. P. Bittenfield (Eds.), *Digital library use: Social practice in design and evaluation* (pp. 241–269). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Star, S. L., & Griesemer, J. R. (1989). Institutional ecology, 'translations' and boundary objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. *Social Studies of Science*, 19, 387–420. doi:10.1177/030631289019003001
- Strauss, A. (1978). A social world perspective. In N. K. Denzin (Ed.), *Studies in symbolic interaction: An annual compilation of research* (Vol. 1, pp. 119–128). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.