The Meta-Context of Information Behavior: The Importance of Multiple Lenses and Mixed Methods Tension

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The advantages of mixed methods research designs (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) for studies of information behavior cannot be overstated. In combining qualitative and quantitative methods together, they allow multiple paradigms to contribute to knowledge building (Ridenour & Newman, 2008) about information behavior in varied contexts. An ethnographic study incorporating mixed methods allows multiple lenses and contexts to be considered, respected, understood, and applied within a given study, "actively engag[ing] with epistemological differences" between them (Greene, 2007, p. 27). This can lead to tensions and contradictions between contexts, as sometimes seen between the person-in-context and socially constructed context views related by Courtright (2008). This lightning talk presents an empirical example to strengthen the argument that such tension can lead to insight about what we might call the meta-context for information behavior, learning the most from our data and producing true, thick description and "conversation" about the cases we study (Geertz, 1973; Greene, 2007).

My recent study of groups of users on LibraryThing and Goodreads included the facet of information behavior as part of describing the roles they play within and across communities (Worrall, 2014; further publications in preparation or under review). This was my chosen meta-context, but providing for a full, thick description of the roles required examining multiple other contexts within this framing. Much data on the social context came from content analysis of 519 messages posted in the nine groups selected for the study, which led to observing conventions, sharing of information, editing of posts, creation of new threads, and following of structure within the socially constructed context of each group and thread. The additional context provided by the two sites as a whole, beyond each individual group, factored into this; many users used the technological features provided to link beyond their group to pages for books, authors, or series, within the flow of their information behavior. Group moderators provided further context by encouraging activities that they understood would help build their groups as communities.

Individual and cognitive contexts were an additional necessary component of the study, and showed a stronger role for information behavior than the social context lens. One primary source for this data was from a quantitative survey of 142 users of the nine groups. Individual facets of information behavior and activities were examined by asking users about their experience with and use of LibraryThing or Goodreads. Participants provided individualized cognitions of whether their information behavior and needs were similar to the broader context they were part of. This data found LibraryThing and Goodreads to play strong, significant ($p < 0.001$) roles in the information behavior and activities of users. Another source of data on cognitive contexts came from qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 11 of the users who completed the survey. Interviewees discussed their information behaviors and needs with the researcher, explaining how they used the site and groups they visited, and discussed the social context of their behaviors, considering which behaviors and needs they shared with other users they interacted with. Tension occurred when findings differed from the content analysis or between interviewees.

Synthesis of this data across interviews and with data from the content analysis and survey addressed this tension through careful consideration and analysis. Having data from multiple contexts allowed nuances and facets of information behavior to play off of each other, leading to deeper and richer conclusions on the multiple contexts of users' information behavior in LibraryThing and Goodreads and on the meta-context of the groups as communities. Information behavior and activities, as facilitated by

LibraryThing and Goodreads, play a clear role in the latter; this role is not always manifest as evident in the tensions and differences seen in the data. This should not be surprising; context is important to information behavior, and none of the participants shared the exact same context.

Three roles were identified as played by LibraryThing and Goodreads in users' communities, of which a *structure*-based role was strongest for the phenomenon of information behavior. This was most true for participants who found the sites fit their chosen individual information behaviors and activities, which were often mutually influenced by other users or by the social contexts participants found themselves in. The technology provided by the two sites and by the Internet as a whole was a significant contextual factor in facilitating users to engage in the full spectrum of information behavior. Moderation of the role allowed many threads and groups to have sufficient information behavior in common with other community contexts on the site, thus encouraging broader convergence across each site. Some conflicts were observed where these contexts differed enough to cause disagreements. Those contexts and communities leading to engagement in everyday life information behavior (Savolainen, 1995) contributed to a *social network*-based role being significant for some users, as the establishment of connections, social ties, and a common community culture enhanced a network context for them.

This example illustrated the incorporation of a view through multiple lenses and of multiple contexts through a mixed method research design, which can be vital for meaningful study of information behavior. A meta-context may be necessary for our research purposes, as it was here. Such a meta-context can be very complex under the surface; cognitive and social facets shape information behavior, and other phenomena such as the site, technology, or value judgments may become significant factors and present tensions in the data and in information behavior. As Courtright (2008, p. 293) has argued, mixed methods research that iterates through "ethnographic observation and study of artifacts" alongside "questioning of human actors" can help a "dynamic view" of the meta-context of information behavior emerge from such tension. We should continue to practice this in individual research studies (as in this example), but also work together as a field in applying a multi-contextual view to users and their information behavior as individuals, collectives, and societies.

References

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