

My Favorite Unreliable Source? Informal Information Networks and Acquisition Through Informal Networks

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ABSTRACT

Informal information networks are the personal connections of friends, family, and colleagues that people use to help them find information. Recently, a great deal of attention has been paid to social network sites, and other social media, as a key source of information in contemporary society. This panel will probe deeper, to investigate the factors that underpin and lie behind the social connections visible on social network sites, and their importance as more of our everyday lives are moved online. We will deliver a panel on what we do and do not know, about how people find information through others, both online and offline. In this panel we hope to create a network of scholars interested in creating a research agenda for informal networks a focus of study going forward.

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INTRODUCTION

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While a lot of attention has been paid to the explosion of information sources in the last two decades, research continues to demonstrate that other people remain a key source (e.g. Cross & Sproull, 2004; Hertzum, 2014; Miller, 2015; Willson, 2016). As people connect to one another and share information continues to be of interest, new technologies and digital platforms there are new, and ever increasing, ways in which information is acquired. This panel will explore the various ways in which information is acquired.

endeavour” (Wenger, cited in Smith, 2003/2009) that share a domain of practice (Smith, 2003/2009). While communities of practice can be informal, a shared domain of interest and a practice distinguish it from an informal network. Informal networks are also related to the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). The potential of weak ties (acquaintances and contacts) to expand the range of information available to individuals beyond their familiar networks, and bridge social

Within informal networks, information can be acquired in many different ways: seeking information by asking questions (e.g., Willson & Given, 2020), seeking information through informal interactions (e.g., Erdelez & Makri, 2020), visiting a place in which the main activity is not sharing information but is a situation in which information can be shared (e.g., Fisher et al., 2007), or receiving information through third parties (receiving information by proxy) (e.g., McKenzie, 2003). Environmental contexts encountered can be physical (e.g., homes, schools, stores, libraries, cafes, etc.) or digital (e.g., search engines, digital libraries, social media) (Jiang et al., 2019). However, there is growing research on the use of social network sites and other social media on informal networks. Social network sites, information, and a high proportion of social network site activity is about social network sites (Morris, Teevan, & Panovich, 2010). In terms of information, the best evidence suggests that a proportion is spread through social network site posts (Buchanan et al., 2016; Buchanan, 2016), with in-person and private digital communication having a smaller proportion of exchange. Furthermore, building new relationships online is more common than that in social network sites, discussion boards or other forms of social media (Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). This discussion is part of a larger current shift toward more and more of everyday life moving online.

Informal networks can become particularly important for individuals who are marginalized, groups and who experience information poverty (Chatman, 1996) or who have limited social capital (an individual’s capacity to access information) (Counts & Fisher, 2007). Social norms and attitudes facilitate (or determine) the ways in which community members interact (Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008). For marginalized groups, stigma complicates access to information and can include behaviors such as hiding information resources to avoid negative consequences (Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). While current research has focused on mainstream information, understanding of how the marginalized are protected by copyright and reserved

- Each of the panelists will provide a five-minute overview of their networks, describe a key contribution where this research contributed to the topic, and ending by proposing a pivotal question (or question answered) (35 minutes total, including 5 minutes for handover);
- Each member of the audience will receive a postcard when entering the room (1-4), a short scenario, and 2-3 discussion questions (related to the scenario). Based on the number on their postcards, audience members will form small groups, one for each panelist, to discuss the scenario and begin to answer the discussion questions. During time for the small group discussion, the entire audience will reflect on the discussion opportunities, and possible next steps with research into informal information science sessions of 15 minutes, plus a 5-minute recap between the sessions.
- The Moderator will close the session by reviewing the topics that were discussed in the panelists' presentations and the dialogue from the small group discussions, and ideas for establishing a network of scholars and a research agenda for future research on a topic of future research (15 minutes).

PANELISTS

George Buchanan

George Buchanan is an Associate Professor and Director of the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on developing novel technologies to support the discovery and analysis of information, though constructing models of users' information behavior in informal information science. He has published over 150 articles, and introduced a number of key concepts in information work, including the collapsible outline used in many contemporary information systems.

George's talk will focus on his research into informal information networks and of patients with a variety of medical conditions, including HIV. He is interested in understanding of human information behavior in informal networks that synthesizes these behaviors with the spread of misinformation in marginalized groups. There are several factors contributing to the proliferation of misinformation and cognitive factors that are found in informal information science.

Gary Burnett This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.

Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea, and in 2016-2017, at several universities throughout Asia.

Drawing on both his work with theory and earlier work on online communities, he explores the information world's concepts of social norms and information value, especially in informal information networks. Together, social norms (the shared sense of what is in observable behaviors within a world) and information value (shared perceptions of what information are of value and about the appropriate ways of evaluating and using information) influence what kinds of information are typically exchanged throughout a world. Information is structured and represented, and the patterns and practices by means of which information is exchanged through a world. Information networks are specific to specific information environments. Values, information, and social interaction are inextricably intertwined, and together they form a character and characteristic "feel."

Nicole Ellison

Nicole Ellison is the Karl E Weick Collegiate Professor in the University of Michigan's School of Information. Prof. Ellison is internationally recognized as an expert in social media and information sites, and has published extensively on how people use social media as a part of their lives. Her research has investigated how new digital platforms shape personal communication, and how they are adopted and exploited by users to maintain their social networks. Her research is strongly influenced by her training in communication theory and her experience with communication technologies.

In this panel, Nicole will discuss the transmission of information in online communities. We will know of the strengths and limitations of in-person and virtual communication, and the degree to which social network sites reflect established behavior in communication. Communication technologies shape, and are shaped by, the social structures that underpin them.

Sanda Erdelez

Dr. Sanda Erdelez is a Professor and Director at Simmons University School of Management and Science. She received her LL.B. and LL.M degrees from the University of Michigan and Ph.D. in Information transfer from Syracuse University. Her research focuses on information behavior, human-computer interaction and usability evaluation.

ability to discover useful ideas. In contrast to intentional mechanisms, then, and unintended acquisition of information, and social contexts serve to multiple ways.

Mike Twidale

Michael Twidale is a Professor in the School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Champaign, and was the founding director of the Master of Science in Information Science. His research interests are at the intersection of computer supported cooperative learning, collaborative learning, human computer interaction, and sociotechnical systems. His projects include studies of informal social learning of technology, the impact of collaborative approaches to managing data quality, collaborative information learning and problem solving activities at the intersection of search, learning, and problem solving. He is interested in how people informally learn new technologies and new features, and how they succeed, fail, struggle, tinker, help their friends and try to search for information.

Mike will contribute to the panel by discussing the collaborative nature of learning and knowledge. He will highlight the degree to which supposedly new behaviors have already established offline, and the impact that groups have always on the ways that knowledge is refined and communicated. Prof. Twidale will also touch on the ways that technology performs poorly as a means for learning, by impeding group interaction, and how previous research has already drawn attention to.

Rebekah Willson

Rebekah (Becky) Willson, PhD, is an assistant professor at McGill University in the School of Information Studies. She is in the field of information behavior/information practices in the contexts of higher education and workplaces. Her research focuses on transitions, particularly early career academics and adjunct faculty members. Her research is examining the influence precarity and marginalization have on information access. She is actively involved in the information behavior and information science community as an Editor for *JASIS&T*, the Chair of SIG-USE (Use, Seeking, and Needs), and a member of the Research Engagement Committee.

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In this panel, Rebekah will discuss factors that facilitate information exchange.

within a new context. Information shared within an informal network frequently is “insider” information that is frequently not recorded nor available to

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