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Further Extending the Concept of Place in Studying Mobile Populations

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Introduction

Information is everywhere—it is a map tucked into the driver's seat of a vehicle, a YouTube video viewed on a smartphone in a parking lot containing directions for installing solar panels, a gig economy app for location-based odd jobs, or it can be word of mouth from a kind person offering safe spaces to park overnight in an unknown area. Our environments afford and impact information that exists in any given place, resulting in information existing everywhere.

Developing more complex theoretical understandings of place in information behavior is necessary to better identify the ways that environments impact individual and collective information behaviors. With the prevalence of information accessed from anywhere via the Internet, it is important that Library and Information Science (LIS) takes stock of the impact a person's environment has on the ways they search for and interact with information. Environments may facilitate or restrict information access, especially Internet access. For instance, a person living in their vehicle, attempting to find safe places to park via the Internet, must be in a place that is within service range. This research explores intersections of place, mobility, information needs, and information access among a mobile population that lives out of their vehicles. In this paper, I define place as a concept before delving into the ways place has been studied and interpreted in information behavior. I will then describe the theoretical framework used to structure this research before I explain why LIS should include theoretical understandings of how place impacts information behavior.

Defining Place

Place is as an interdisciplinary social science paradigm; theoretical and research traditions in the exploration of place-based issues draw from geography, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines (Trentelman 2009). In comparison, the information behavior discipline is just beginning to describe the importance of place beyond context in information interactions (Cox and Fulton 2021). I take a geographic perspective in addressing two aspects of place to further explore

concepts of place within information behavior: humans are at the center of their own natural world (Relph 1970) and humans give meaning to space, transforming space into place (Tuan 1975).

Relph (1970) postulated that humans are placed at the center of their own natural world, and fully experience their immediate environment. Therefore, a human can inhabit a space and bring meaning to space over time. When humans assign meaning to a space, that space can be considered a place. For instance, a house is only a space before humans purchase it and make it a home through the experiences, meaning, and relationships that are built within that space. Space becomes a home—a place—over time. Tuan (1975) called social scientists to adopt this phenomenological perspective that requires place to be understood as "a center of meaning constructed by experience" which occurs over time (Tuan 1975, 152). Tuan (1977, 118) discusses the importance of considering time and place as co-dependent on one another: "my ideas of place thus far have made no mention of time, which is, however, implied everywhere in the ideas of movement, effort, freedom, goal, and accessibility." Taking time and place together, in amalgamation with the phenomenological perspective, requires that places are interpreted through human experience, as the product of human interactions in addition to the solution to both human problems and needs (Tuan, 1975).

This paper explores the intersections of place, mobility, information needs, and access as experienced by people living in their vans. Using Sonnenwald's information horizon's theory and Savolanien's (2007) extension of the spatial metaphor, in union with Gibson and Kaplan's (2017) concept of spatially orientated information seeking zones, this conceptualization of place considers the expansion and collapse of information seeking zones in transit. By focusing on the resolution of information needs in terms of distance, space, and place over extended periods of time, this work has the potential to fill a gap to better understand the information behaviors of mobile populations in transit.

Problem Statement

Because their vehicle is a space with vital meaning and importance, people living in vans often search for vehicle maintenance information or automobile repair shops, places to handle their critical resources like water supply, waste, and looking for safe spaces to park—all of which have been informed by my pilot study. Refuge and affordable spaces to park are often out of service and Wi-Fi range, making information seeking difficult which advances the importance of bodies in space seeking information, further accentuating that place matters (Savolainen, 2007).

Theoretical Framework

I use the following LIS frameworks: Sonnenwald (1999), Savolanien and Kari (2004), and Gibson and Kaplan (2017) to slightly redirect and extend current perspectives about the concept of place

in information behavior. Sonnenwald (1999) proposed that places and information are influenced by, and influence, human behavior. Thus, Sonnenwald (1999) introduced the concept of information horizons: within a context situation exists an "information horizon" in which we can act. Every individual has a relative and specific information horizon which may include social networks, documents, information retrieval tools, in addition to experimentation and observation in the world (Sonnenwald 1999).

Defining Place in Information Behavior

Recently, a coherent body of information behavior theory related to place has begun to appear. In the early 21st century, information behavior researchers have refined their understanding of the significance of place, the communities that affiliate with place, and the social influence of information (Bishop 2011; Burnett 2015; Burnett, Besant, and Chatman 2001; Jaeger and Burnett 2010).

Places are spaces that people have made meaningful over time; humans develop relationships with places that are inherently subjective and emotional: memories, meanings, and history (Corbett and Loukissas 2019). Therefore, placemaking as a process, "denotes the ways in which settings acquire recognizable and persistent social meaning in the course of interaction" (Dourish 2006). A place is not a place without the act of ordinary people naming, identifying, and representing places (Norrie and Singer 2005). This notion of place is packaged within Sonnenwald's (1999) perception. A place may trigger a feeling or memory of an interaction. Places contain location—fixed coordinates on the globe—or a setting for social relations (Withers 2009). Therefore, the spatial, combined with the structural and the social, create place (Gibson and Kaplan 2017).

There is benefit in understanding how place fits into the LIS discipline to continue to refine our understanding of how information behavior theory relates to place. In some cases, place is only implied through context, as in information grounds theory; Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton (2004) investigate "temporally transient" information places. In other cases, time, space, and place are intertwined as Dervin (1983, 7) posits that sense-making is constructed on the assumption that "all people live in time and space." Lloyd (2006; 2010) adds that information landscapes are complex, information ecologies, which form and situate particular discourses and narratives, intertwining people within time and place. Savolanien (2006) argues that Dervin's (1983) perspectives about spatial metaphors are based in physical and cultural experiences, grounding her time-space metaphor to a physical place. Savolanien posits that spatial factors both restrict and allow information seeking and sharing; for instance, in small worlds (Chatman 1991); they are also components of information grounds (Fisher et al., 2004). Wiegand (2005) argued for conceptualization of "library as place," especially in the life of the user, which was followed by

Prigoda and McKenzie (2007). Most (2011) investigated the role libraries played in their specific geographic location and social settings, similarly to the ways that specific locations function as information grounds (Counts and Fisher 2010; Fisher, Durrance, and Hinton 2004).

Moving beyond the idea that place is more than context (Cox and Fulton 2021; Dourish 2006), this research understands that our environments directly impact information behavior. With this perspective, humans can consider all of their information sources and understand that information is everywhere. A person's immediate environment and setting shapes the ways that they understand, perceive, search for, and interact with information.

The Importance of Place in Studying Mobile Populations

Considering place is vital when studying the information practices of mobile populations. Because their information seeking is categorically mobile—because they live in their vehicles—much of the information queries are place-dependent (i.e. Where is the closest public restroom? Where is the closest automotive shop? Using Google Maps to find desolate roads for parking). Their current location, their desired destination, and the time it takes to get there are necessary and frequent information searches. Time affords mobile populations entrance into new places and as they enter a place, their information environment changes because it is place dependent. This work can help develop more place-based and spatially orientated understandings of information access which has the ability to support more structured assessment of information inequity.

Conclusion

LIS needs to continue to refine its understanding about the physical properties of places and how they constrain or facilitate information access. Further development of place related concepts and information behavior will refine examinations of information access and services to support mobile populations.

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