

**An Analysis of the Information Seeking Behavior of Journalists:  
a Literature Review and Fieldwork Summary**

*A LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH REGARDING THE INFORMATION  
BEHAVIOR OF JOURNALISTS*

The study of journalists' information seeking behavior (IB) provides a superb model for studying IB in general. Journalists must work within strict constraints of both time and content, and, as such, have economized the process of gathering and filtering information. The process begins the moment a journalist has been assigned a specific story angle by her editor. At this point, an information need arises. The angle, defined by Campbell as the "perspective that dominates a story" (1997, p. 61), functions as a general assumption or conjecture, which is then either proved or disproved by the information gathered and processed by the journalist (Attfield, Blandford, & Dowell, 2003, p. 440).

Attfield & Dowell (2003, pp. 192-193), describe three disciplinary constraints for a story's angle to be a good one:

1. *Originality* - Has this angle been written about before?
2. *Truth* – Is the information in the story true?
3. *Newsworthiness* – Is this story engaging to the readership? Is it interesting?

Once a good angle is established, the journalist begins gathering information. The direction a journalist takes is dictated by several factors. In her 1997 article, Fiona Campbell argues that time is the most important of these factors, compelling the journalist to seek out information that can be obtained the fastest with the least amount of effort (p. 60). But speed is not the only

factor. Nicholas, Williams, Cole, & Martin (2000), who surveyed over 300 journalists and media librarians about their use of the Internet for information seeking, found that the Internet was not extensively used for this purpose. The reasons given were poor access to the Internet (plus significant availability of information from other sources), and concerns about the veracity of its content. When the Internet was used, it was primarily for fact-checking of information gathered from primary sources, typically in the form of interviews and newspaper databases.

While ease of attainability is a critical component of information gathering, journalists would not only like to optimize speed, but also to reduce uncertainty. Uncertainty is “a natural, essential characteristic of information seeking rather than [...] the primary objective of information seeking” (Kuhlthau, 1999, p. 15). Journalists’ IB provides a clear illustration of this idea. During the journalists’ search process, new information can result in new uncertainties, which in turn can influence the original angle of the story. The journalists’ search process is constantly in flux and being destabilized by changes to the initial motivation of their search (Attfield et al., 2003, p. 441).

Dervin’s Sense-Making model describes the individual’s cognitive and emotional state, privileging the internal factor of self-construction, while also accounting for external factors that partially determine the information gap (Dervin, 1992). Therefore Dervin’s model is applicable to the IB of journalists, which is shaped by such disciplinary constraints (i.e. external factors) that could be considered cultural, historical, and institutional.

Journalists’ information seeking may also be motivated and shaped by cognitive contexts, such as the construction of a personal background on a specific topic. Such contexts may complicate the way journalists experience uncertainty and determine what information is relevant (Attfield & Dowell, 2003).

#### *A DISCUSSION OF OUR METHODOLOGY AND SUMMARY OF OUR FIELDWORK*

The research methods employed in this study were interviews and surveys. A total of ten surveys were filled out and four interviews were conducted. Surveys were chosen so that responses of multiple of subjects would be comparable. The surveys were kept short and straightforward, so the busy professionals we contacted would be more likely to participate. The surveys and interviews consisted of a list of questions developed based on the literature we reviewed and the “generic” interview questions provided with the assignment description. Each journalist, who agreed to participate in our survey, was asked to consider a story they were working on and walk us through their information search process. The surveys were supplemented with interviews, allowing us to redirect the focus of our original questions and add new questions that emerged from our initial survey results. Questions were tailored to address the specific topic the interviewer was focusing on. For example, Kevin included questions related to *uncertainty*, and Sara included questions related to *relevance* (see appendix for a full listing of our survey and interview questions).

The levels of experience among our respondents ranged from two to 30 years. Eleven of our 14 respondents currently write for local or community papers with relatively small circulations. One writes for the on-line edition of a national Hungarian paper, one is a freelance magazine writer in Hungary, and one writes for a daily paper in a large urban area in Washington State. Six of our respondents cover local government, two cover local human interest stories, one focuses on popular science, and three are newspaper editors. We discovered the results from our fieldwork were largely consistent with the descriptions of the information behavior and information use of journalists provided by Attfield, Blandford, & Dowell, and Nicholas, Williams, Cole & Martin.

The provisional nature of the angle and the reciprocal relationship between the initial information need and the new information uncovered during the search was discussed by several of our journalists. Many respondents described how they would attempt to collect as much information they could on a topic and then “let that information lead [them]”. One respondent described the process this way:

The average day begins with a meeting of the editorial board staff to decide on the topics of the day. Topics are ferreted out, and each individual journalist begins to seek information on the topic. Depending on the information found, the “angle” may change, which is then taken back to the board for re-evaluation. The board decides how to proceed with the new information. Research continues and an editorial piece is finished by the end of the work day.

Our research also revealed that journalists rarely used the Internet. Many participants agreed with the statement that “veracity is the big hindrance for using the web [...] we can’t trust its information”. The primary sources they used (which all of our respondents testified to) were *live* sources, including, but not limited to: interviews, speeches, tours, and public events. Electronic sources were generally consulted only to corroborate the information from primary sources, to check facts, and, as stated by six of our participants, to gather background information on the topic they were writing about. Three of those six participants expressed that such background information was critical in order to develop a balanced perspective and to prepare questions for interviews.

Although interviews and other *live* sources were generally considered to be, as one journalist put it, at “the heart of journalism—we can’t trust anything else,” one interesting development in our research was that interviews, like the Internet, were also considered questionable in regards to the reliability and accuracy of their information. Two respondents suggested the questionable nature of interviews resulted from the inherent fallibility of any information which is subject to the point of view and memory of a human observer. Another

respondent linked this concern to more insidious factors, like bias: “journalists always need to keep in mind that every source has an interest in framing the issue in a way that benefits them”.

The respondent continued:

In political journalism, most sources are people, all of whom offer their own findings of fact, all of which is biased toward furthering their goals. I personally accept none of those "facts" at face value, even from trusted sources. Sometimes independent research can confirm or clarify the facts, sometimes the information has to be presented as possibly biased.

We found examples in our fieldwork that differed from IB literature we consulted regarding the initial source of a story angle or information need. In Attfield’s study, the story angles were assigned by an editor, whereas in our fieldwork many of our participants described being assigned a “beat”; a specific area of interest, such as “human-interest stories,” or a specific region, such as “Southwest Portland.” This phenomenon alters the pattern of the information search, because, having to cover a specific area, and being responsible for monitoring the happenings within it, a persistent kind of information need is created, requiring the journalist to maintain in-depth knowledge of her/his territory. In this way the “beat” forms an overarching information need, which specific story-angles may fall under. One respondent put it this way:

Stories are sometimes assigned, though it’s my responsibility to cover my beat and keep track of what’s going on so as not to be scooped by competition.

In the interest of time economy, when working on a deadline, it is necessary for the journalist to maintain a steady relationship with reliable sources. One journalist we interviewed explained, “Because deadlines are so tight, there’s not much of an opportunity to get too creative.” Therefore the journalist must rely on what has worked for them in the past. “I typically bust out my little black book full of sources and contact the relevant source.” A news writer for a free weekly describes an important element of his work as:

Maintaining relationships with the political actors in the city and the state, especially with the people who work in the background... That's important, because it means I'm not just scrambling in the dark. I know what their priority issues are and what they are likely to know.

*CONSISTENCY WITHIN THE INFORMATION BEHAVIOR OF OUR PARTICIPANTS*

Despite the variety of journalists we chose as subjects for this study, we found their information behavior to be consistent within the group we studied, and to be consistent with the broader literature we used as sources. Our study focused on a variety of types of journalists, and yet the findings were generally the same, which strengthens the conclusions of Campbell, Attfield et al. and Nicholas et al. In addition, we made the novel observation that journalists often regard *live* sources as unreliable in the same way that Nicholas et al. described their attitude towards Internet sources. We also observed the phenomenon of the “beat,” which refers to an area, either physically or of expertise, for which a journalist may be responsible. The common element of the findings between our study and the literature is that journalists’ information seeking behavior is determined foremost by their task, rather than by other factors.

We speculate that such consistency results from the nature of the task of writing newspaper articles. Because the task and the disciplinary constraints, associated with the task, are consistent across geographical borders, it is not surprising that the information behavior (and challenges connected to information seeking, gathering, and use) of our participants would also be consistent.

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## APPENDIX: SURVEY AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### SURVEY OF THE INFORMATION BEHAVIOR OF JOURNALISTS

1. How long have you been working as a journalist?
2. What do you do as a journalist?
3. I'd like you to think of situation that occurred within the past month where you needed to find out about something or learn something for your work. Does such an incident come clearly to mind?
4. I'd like you to walk me through this event by describing what happened step by step. Let's start by hearing about what prompted the information need. Can you tell me what was going on that at that time?
5. So, in order to address that information need, what did you have to do?
6. So what did you do from there?
7. How did you know about this source? Did you read about it? Do you keep a file on it? How did you think the source would help? What else do you think might have helped? How did it turn out?
8. Does the situation you described differ--in terms of what you did and what happened—from similar situations?
9. How do you keep track of all those types of sources that you use in your work?
10. Is there anything more you'd like to add about the event or how you use information?

SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS USED IN THE INTERVIEWS:

Are there any particular moments in your search process where you encounter uncertainty? (e.g. the initial development of a story angle, or, perhaps, a moment when the information you encounter during your search increases uncertainty rather than decreases it...both? others?) Is more information always better?

Can you envision ways in which an information system (e.g. a search engine, a library catalog, etc) may be tailored to address your information search process in particular and the kinds of information needs you typically encounter?

Do you come up with story ideas on your own, or are you assigned them?

I'm interested in the notion of relevance and how it relates to your profession. How do you determine if a story is "newsworthy" or relevant to your readership?

Do you have a process of narrowing down your sources, focusing on what is most relevant to your angle?

Do you find yourself needing to refine your angle as your research deepens, often changing the direction of the story altogether?