“It will all come out in the wash”: Information behaviour in the laundromat and the shared communal experience of “place”

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Abstract

The study of information in everyday life settings has been pioneered by information scientists such as Savolainen and Fisher. Informed by this approach to information studies, this paper aims to explore and uncover the information-based behaviors that occur in a public space not typically associated with information seeking and behavior—the laundromat—using indirect observation and survey research techniques. Though far-reaching conclusions are not appropriate at this stage of study, using the laundromat as a staging ground serves to illuminate how context and the idea of place influence information-seeking activities in shared public spaces.

“I sort of like watching them,” he said; “I watch laundromat washers the way other people watch television, it’s soothing because you always know what to expect and you don’t have to think about it. Except I can vary my programmes a little; if I get tired of watching the same stuff I can always put in a pair of green socks or something colourful like that” (Atwood, 1969, p. 94).

— Duncan in Margaret Atwood’s The Edible Woman
In the above passage, Duncan, the mysterious English graduate student in Margaret Atwood’s novel *The Edible Woman*, describes what he does while waiting in the laundromat. It is a location where he can take a break from his thesis work and a place where the main character, Marian, finds him throughout the novel. This is but one example where a laundromat is used as a backdrop to stories in literature and movies. Perhaps one of the reasons laundromats are so often referenced is because they are a shared experience for most people. Though linked to a mundane, never-ending task, laundromats are interesting locations that afford brief connections with strangers over this shared chore, provide a great location for people-watching, and also present an opportunity to catch up on some reading or writing.

It is this idea of the laundromat as a shared place of cultural significance that prompted me to examine the setting further, by looking at the informational aspects that characterize them, an area of inquiry that seems to be rarely considered. More specifically, I decided to observe the types of information-based activities that individuals engage in during their time at the laundromat. Though the primary activity that users engage in is, of course, doing laundry, this task is punctuated by periods of waiting—and while some people, much like Duncan, fill this time with activities of a more meditative quality, many laundromat users engage in a range of information-based activities during this downtime. While I did not begin the study with a particularly theory in mind, some questions that shaped my approach were to consider whether laundromat users dedicated this waiting time to leisure information activities such as reading or text-messaging friends, or whether they used it to catch upon on work or school-related tasks. I also examined how the characteristics of being in a laundromat influence these activities.

The following descriptive essay is broken up in two parts. In the first half, I will briefly describe some relevant literature to the study, followed by the research methodology used. In the second half of the paper, I will present observations collected during the fieldwork sessions, concluding with reflections on the research process.

**Literature Review**

Determining how to find materials relevant to my proposed topic of information-based activities in the laundromat was difficult in the initial stages of research. After querying a reference librarian for advice on finding information related to topic and having minimal success, his ultimate conclusion was that this laundromat topic seemed “somewhat obscure.” As a result, it was necessary to approach the topic from a broader perspective, and to consider areas of academic discourse that studied similar contexts until relevant key terminology and established concepts became clearer. While my initial searches specifically using the laundromat as a key term proved ineffective, broadening the concept to include the idea of public spaces seemed to be an appropriate area for exploration.
Creswell’s *Place: a short introduction* (2004) provides a good starting point and overview of the idea of “place” from a human geography perspective. Of particular salience to the concept is Creswell’s discussion of geographer John Agnew’s suggestions as to what constitutes a “meaningful location” (p. 7) or why certain locations seem to hold significance for many individuals and communities. According to Creswell, Agnew presented the idea that a “meaningful location” consists of the actual physical coordinates; the locale, or actual construction or shape of the location; and finally a ‘sense of place’ or the emotional response people have toward certain locations. This concept of a “meaningful location,” aided in confirming and perhaps more clearly articulating the initial thoughts that I had about the laundromat as a place that resonates with people in general.

Within the field of Information Studies, Spink and Cole point out in the Introduction to *New Directions in Human Information Behaviour* that while the study of information has traditionally examined more formal locations of information exchange, such as libraries, since the 1990s more researchers have been studying how individuals use and seek information in informal settings. Savolainen (1995), for instance, looks at how teachers and industrial workers use information in their everyday lives, both in their work and leisure time. This is one approach to examining information use in non-traditional information settings that substantiated my chosen location as a topic worth examining more closely.

The final and most influential research in my study comes from Fisher and Naumer (2006) who conceptualized the idea of “information grounds,” or a location where people from diverse backgrounds congregate “for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing” (Fisher et al., 2005, n.p.). A related term discussed by Fisher called the “hostage phenomena” refers to information grounds characterized by the requirement of having to be present; for example waiting in airports, and mentioned in passing, laundromats (Fisher, Landry and Naumer 2006, n.p). Fisher and her colleagues’ various articles provide a great deal of insight into how one might approach the collection of data about information use and seeking in non-traditional environments. Of direct relevance to my study though is Fisher, Landry and Naumer’s “Social spaces, casual interactions, meaningful exchanges” article, as it helped to expand my conception of the types of activities that could be considered information-based. For instance, I had not considered the “serendipitous” or the non-intentional information exchanges that occur among people using the same public space; however, with some reflection based on field observations, observing whether information exchanges between individuals in the context of the laundromat actually did occur was an important element in my study. More specifically, the questions that Fisher and her colleagues asked the student participants, specifically those that belong in the “How Information is created and shared” category includes activities such as talking to an
employee, talking to a non-employee, or overhearing a conversation. These were ideas that I had not thought about before and used to expand the types of behaviours observed during my field-work sessions.

Research Design

The laundromat studied is located in the west end of Toronto, in an area known for its recent urban regeneration and characterized by a multicultural population. The laundromat itself is fairly unremarkable, except that its walls are adorned with pictures of Hollywood stars – more specifically, yellowed photos of stars who were popular circa 1985 – which lends the location its particular charm. It also has a number of signs in Portuguese and English highlighting rules and directions for laundromat patrons. The physical space of the laundromat consists of a large room where the actual machines are located, with a smaller waiting area to the front of the laundromat designated as a seating area that faces onto the main room (See Appendix A for the floorplan).

For the purposes of this study, I decided to limit my observations to the waiting area of the laundromat, because consideration of the information related activities in both areas would have been too vast for a study of this length. As well, much of what I identified as information-based activities occurred within this area and it seemed that it would be the most fruitful during the relatively short time frame of my research. Besides observing what people were doing in relation to information, I also noted the types of reading material that were left on the coffee table in the waiting area during each visit.

To collect data, I was both a participant in the activity of doing laundry and an observer of information use at the laundromat. To uncover patterns or characteristics of information use in this location, I incorporated a number of research techniques at different stages of the project that would help to provide some insight into the topic. The idea of exploration as posited by Stebbins, the originator of the study of serious leisure perspective, formed the basis of my preliminary examination of the laundromat as a potential context for study. Exploration is applicable in instances when a researcher is interested in observing the information related behaviours in a particular context, but has yet to confirm whether these behaviours indeed exist. Further information can be found in Stebbin’s 2001 book Exploratory Research in the Social Sciences.

The observation and data-gathering took up the bulk of the time spent in the field, and included unobtrusive observation of activities and note-taking about these activities. As stated earlier, I was a laundromat participant at the time I took field notes so as not to make patrons uncomfortable, and also because by fitting into the community of laundromat patrons, I was able to observe more natural behaviour in information use. Since there is no real element of deception in the study, it seemed ethically acceptable to record the activity of the patrons. The final phase of my fieldwork included a short questionnaire used to interview three patrons. The interviews were not lengthy
so I have not transcribed them verbatim. However, the questions were designed to generate a more complete understanding as to why individuals choose to engage in, or in some cases, to not engage in, certain types of information-based activities while at the laundromat.

**Key Observations**

For the unobtrusive research phase, which formed the bulk of the information that I gathered, I was in the field for five visits of approximately two hours in duration. Over the course of the visits, I observed that the information-based activities fell into four main groupings: electronic, traditional reading materials, interpersonal engagement, and other; representing activities such as work, or creative activities such as drawing. Associated with these categories were two broader groupings: whether the information that laundromat patrons engaged with was already present in the laundromat, or whether they brought in their own material in order to pass time while they waited for clothing to dry. Other observations noted during the visits to the laundromat concerned the various reading materials left on the table in the waiting area by unknown individuals. These consisted most frequently of the *National Post, Toronto Sun*, and religious tracts. Occasionally, two- to three-year-old fashion and entertainment magazines were deposited in this area for people to read. In addition to print material, there was a television in the waiting area provided for general use by the management.

When I observed the information-based activities that patrons engaged in, a large number of individuals accessed information through the use of personal electronic tools, with cell phones and MP3 players representing the majority of this activity. PDAs and portable gaming devices were also used as part of the laundromat experience for many people, and occasionally, people watched the television located in the waiting area. Although electronic devices seemed to be popular, the majority of the patrons I observed engaged in more traditional information-seeking behaviours, specifically reading the newspapers and magazines left behind in the waiting area (though no-one ever read the religious tracts). As well, they were bringing in their own papers, books and what appeared to be work-related articles, based on the highlighting and notations that patrons added to these documents.

For the interview portion of my study, I approached three people with a survey asking them about the types of activities they prefer to do on their downtime at the laundromat. Two interviewees were males approximately thirty years of age, and one was a woman in her forties. The key point obtained from one of the two male survey participants was that he did not bring his own materials to read and preferred to wait outside of the laundromat. In the case of the woman, she occasionally watched the television. Interestingly, both of these individuals chose to remain in the waiting room upon this occasion. The other participant, and second of the two male survey participants, indicated that he preferred to use an electronic...
device, specifically an iPod Touch. Upon questioning him further in an attempt to elaborate beyond the scope of the survey, he stated that he preferred to listen to podcasts and go online to read the news while he waited. None of the participants indicated that they ever spoke to other patrons who they did not know. While the interviews provided some insight, I did encounter a few difficulties that may have affected their responses. With two of the participants, English was not their first language and it was difficult to convey to them what types of information activities that I was interested in. In addition, their answers were not indicative of the behaviour that I had generally observed during my fieldwork. In future studies, a more comprehensive survey tool that requested detailed information about information-based behaviours administered to a greater number of participants would probably elicit more representative results.

The survey coupled with the unobtrusive observations was nonetheless valuable. It became clear that even though people can view the main laundry room directly from the waiting area, there was still a perception of interrupted time, or an inability to really partake in an activity of practical value, as reflected in the choice of activity that the majority of people engaged in. For instance, in terms of the reading materials that people chose to read, it was rare to see someone with a novel. Instead, patrons read newspapers or magazines, which might suggest a preference towards material that would not involve a great deal of concentration and would facilitate interruptions to go check on one’s laundry. As well, the popularity of phone usage, including talking and text messaging, illustrated that within the laundromat context there is a definite sense of individuals passing time by use of different devices that do not require intense concentration. The other interesting aspect of the observation was how rarely people interacted with one another, even though they spent a significant amount of time together within the vicinity of the small area of the waiting room.

Analysis

These observed characteristics of information behaviours, along with the survey responses from patrons, illustrate some key ideas mentioned in the literature review that describe the shared human experience in this particular location. Considering the idea that information grounds can be characterized by a hostage phenomena, the essence of this concept is definitely a shared one though the term may be unfamiliar to the general public. This was exemplified by the continual appearance of religious pamphlets. To explain more fully, these materials seemed to be placed in the laundromat setting with the hope that, because patrons have so little to do, they might pick up one of these works as a way of passing the time. Referring back to Agnew’s “meaningful location”, the observations of the laundromat highlighted that there is a definite quality or communal emotional response to the laundromat in the form of a shared ennui.
Concluding Reflections

Overall, there were a few areas of exploration that I wished that I could have included in the study; one would have been to consider how first-time users of the laundromat use the information located in the main space. Also of interest is how new patrons receive information in the form of advice from other patrons regarding the use of the laundromat’s facilities. This is similar to Fisher, Landry and Naumer’s conception of serendipitous information exchanges that occur in information grounds. For example, in this particular location, the change machine does not seem to accept ten-dollar bills. This is not stated anywhere, but when a new patron attempts to change a ten, other patrons do volunteer the information that it is not possible. Unfortunately, the time allotted for fieldwork would not have guaranteed witnessing this phenomenon frequently enough to use within the study.

Another topic of reflection that came up during this process was due to a common question that I often encountered when I discussed my research with others, and that was of course related to broad concerns of what exactly can one do with this information. The small collection of observations may not be enough to draw any major conclusions, but I think there could be some broader issues worthy of further exploration within a more wide-ranging study. I believe the laundromat does provide a prime location to observe a number of information behaviours. For example, an examination of how electronic devices change the way people interact with one another in a public space, a fairly popular and current topic, could be undertaken here quite effectively. And at the most basic level, laundromats are great places for people-watching, and through observation of their chosen information activities, some small facet of the shared common experience can “come out in the wash” (“Wash” 2004, n.p.).
Appendix A: Floorplan of the laundromat
References


