Hunter or the hunted: The informational behaviour of web-based apartment searches

Rebecca Noone

Rebecca Noone is a Master of Museum Studies candidate at the University of Toronto. She currently works as the public programming assistant at the University of Toronto Art Centre where she has also curated student art exhibitions. She is interested in community engagement, education, and arts-informed research. This past summer she travelled across Canada with the Shout Out! Media Group facilitating media literacy, storytelling, and video production workshops for adolescent girls. Her work reflects her desire to explore new frontiers in museum and information practices.

Abstract

Now well beyond the age of feudalism, the act of renting space carries with it the autonomy of choice and the burden of decision. This study presents findings from a preliminary ethnographic examination of apartment hunters, specifically those individuals looking for shared accommodation. The paper reveals that ‘the hunt’ is based on more than simply a need for a room, but also a desire for friendly roommates and a livable neighbourhood, suggesting that apartment hunting is as much a search for community as it is a search for shelter. To focus these interactions, I look specifically at the web-based information systems used in facilitating the apartment hunt. Use of these web-based systems implies a process of decoding texts and images in order to find a place of residence. The subtext of roommate searching requires personal reflection and the interpretation of abstract characterizations. This paper explores how web-based information systems are managed, interpreted, evaluated, and shared throughout the act of finding a home and forming relationships.

Introduction

Own the contents but lease the container: such is the apartment renter’s quandary. Now well beyond the age of feudalism, the act of renting space carries with it the autonomy of choice and the burden of decision. Yet, how do people find apartments? Which informational systems and behaviours inform these choices and frame these decisions? This study presents findings from a preliminary ethnographic examination of one apartment hunter who looks for shared accommodation.

This paper reveals that ‘the hunt’ is based on more than simply a need for a room, but also a desire for friendly roommates and a livable neighbourhood, suggesting that apartment hunting is as much a search for community as it is a search for shelter. Looking for a shared unit also implies an amount of ‘selling oneself’ on the part of the apartment hunter for the benefit of the existing tenants. To focus these interactions, I look specifically at the web-based information systems used in facilitating the apartment hunt, since during my study I observed apartment hunting to be a web-intensive process. The searcher must encounter, interpret, and evaluate physical spaces and real living people through the texts and images presented in the
digital realm. This paper explores how web-based information systems are managed, interpreted, evaluated, and shared throughout the act of finding a home and forming relationships.

**Literature Review**

Research on web-based classified systems and ‘finding homes’ is nothing new. Reijo Savolainen’s (2009) work on the information behaviours of homebuyers empirically examined the cognitive mechanisms at play through use of printed and on-line resources. As Savolainen (2010) concluded, the homebuyer, much like the apartment hunter, relies on the use of informational cues to interpret and evaluate these resources.

With precedent in mind, it is important to assert some definite distinctions between the behaviours of homebuyers and apartment hunters, especially regarding renters looking for shared accommodation. Time is a factor that works both for and against the apartment hunter. Apartment hunting, as a search for a ‘temporary’ home, does not carry the same pressures of mortgages, taxation, and investment that make home buying reflective of long-term planning. Instead, renting follows an informal process defined not by financial and legal intervention, but instead by a need for a place to live, and is therefore a quick and somewhat competitive process. Perhaps the most crucial distinction between the two groups addressed by this paper relates to how apartments, specifically shared accommodations, are fundamentally characterized by the people who inhabit them. Therefore, the information behaviours behind apartment hunting reflect the search for roommates as well as a hunt for a ‘home.’

**Methods**

I followed one apartment hunter on her search to find an apartment in Toronto. Although my field research took me through the entire process of apartment hunting, I focus the paper on the web-based processes of the search, including the use of on-line classified sites and email correspondence. I limited my study to the digital realm in order to closely examine the on-line information systems of apartment hunting and how virtual correspondence is actualized in a real apartment with real people.

For confidentiality purposes, I refer to the participant in the study as ‘LL.’ In order to follow the informational processes navigated by LL, I based the study on observations at the formal stages of web-based searches. I also conducted three interviews with LL: two to walk me through the search process and one to walk me through the process of email correspondence. The ethnographic process included my own document analysis and photo analysis of resources used by LL. Interaction with LL occurred over a two-week period in November 2010.

In order to convey the personal meanings behind interpretation and evaluation, I employed an arts-informed approach to my interactions with LL. I provided LL with coloured markers and apartment descriptions printed directly from
web-based sources. I instructed LL to draw/write/scribble on these printouts as a direct response to the text. Rather than make LL feel under surveillance, which could prove problematic in a creative sphere, I also drew alongside LL as a means to facilitate a free and comfortable space, while still observing the process. The resulting creative expressions became a means for LL to illustrate an individualized response to the posted room descriptions.

**Preliminary Findings**

**Scanning the “tag-line”**

The apartment hunter first uses web-based information systems as a means to scan and assess the multitude of housing options available. As observed in the field, LL first approaches the use of informational systems through the interpretation and evaluation of the ‘tag lines,’ or the hyperlinks found in on-line resources such as Craigslist. Each of these ‘tag lines’ is a one-sentence apartment listing meant as a kind of headline to capture the apartment hunter’s attention. In order to formalize an interest in these lines, the apartment hunter must have an understanding of what he or she is looking for in an apartment. LL based the criteria on cost, location, space, and the existing tenants.

‘Tag lines’ are foundational to the apartment hunter’s process, as the hunt is a period in which the hunter can identify choice and assess the choice relative to personal needs. Information usually shared in these ‘tag lines’ includes price of apartment, location of apartment, number of bedrooms, as well as qualitative references to cleanliness, size, neighbourhood, and aesthetic appeal.

The initial phase of title search can be defined as a casual ‘scan’ in which the apartment hunter redefines his or her own parameters, incidentally based on reading through the web-based listings. The ‘scan’ begins a process of seeing ‘what is out there’ and what types of places are available. During this phase, we see the apartment hunter go through a process of both affirmation and reevaluation. The screen shot (Figure 1) provides a visual representation of this scanning process.

Based on field observations of LL, the initial ‘tag-line’ scans revealed that LL needed to increase her cost parameters in order to accommodate for higher-than-anticipated apartment prices. Location-based parameters, on the other hand, were narrowed from their original generous definition to approximately a quarter of the original size. This process of reevaluation and redefinition, based on the interpretation of informational cues from the tag lines,’ is never formally recorded, suggesting how easily it can be changed,

---

*Faculty of Information Quarterly, 3(2) January/February 2011*
especially in the low-commitment scanning stage of information use.

In the instance of highlighted links, LL responded to key words or phrases to determine whether or not to click on the title link, thereby entering the next stage of apartment hunting: reading the apartment descriptions. When asked about how frequently LL finds ‘promising’ tag lines, LL responded:

I would say that for every 10 (pause) at least 10, there might, might be one that I like. At best... Here’s one at Lawrence. Yuck! One around Finch. No thank you. One way out in the East End. One way out in the West End. Islington. Lots that I’m not even a little bit interested in.

It is also interesting to note, that in cases where location and price meet the standards, LL uses word-choice as a means for assessment. The following excerpt from an interview conducted in the field demonstrates that LL is beginning to make evaluations of the people in the home even at the early stages of ‘tag line’ scanning. Responding to an apartment that is described as ‘awesome,’ LL justifies subsequent dismissal of the place:

Well for one, the word ‘awesome’ is in the room description. I mean, yes, I use the word awesome a lot but, like, I wouldn’t put it in print. I don’t know; it just seems a bit try-hard or something.

The personal nature of apartment hunting is made evident even at these early stages of the process. Although primary concerns focus on the detail-orientated information of location and cost, LL is nevertheless aware of the ‘big picture.’

Decoding the blurb

The following stage of apartment hunting is based on the interpretation and evaluation of the information provided in the ‘blurbs.’ The ‘blurb’ is the block of text, sometimes supplemented by photographs, found on the various web-based systems, which serves to further describe an apartment. The reading of the ‘blurb’ is the most important component of choice-making and decision-making as it determines whether or not contact with the potential roommates will be made. During this stage, LL responds to textual and graphic cues in terms of opportunities or constraints of action.

Having previously responded to price and location gathered from the information shared in the ‘tag-line,’ LL now responds to qualitative information related to the environment of the home and the people in it. It is important to note at this point, in drawing on LL’s conception of a desirable apartment, there is still no written account of informational criteria. Instead, such information is stored in LL’s memory and called upon as LL reads through the ‘blurb.’
In order to understand the above process of memory-based informational systems that work in correlation with web-based informational systems, I employed a method of arts-informed research. LL responded to the text and images through visual renderings, which highlight both the positive and the negative responses to words, phrases, and images located in the ‘blurb.’ As seen in the example below (Figure 2), LL outlined phrases that drew attention to the interpreted negative aspects of this particular shared apartment. Examples of this include the writing of ‘yuck’ in bold letters over ‘Furnished Room,’ ‘Hoops Bar,’ ‘Starbucks,’ and ‘MacDonald’s.’ LL drew question marks around sections that confused her.

Similarly, LL responded to images that depicted tree-lined views and natural lighting to suggest these were desirable traits (Figure 3). LL drew ‘peace’ symbols in response to references to massage tables and to a local massage college. These representations demonstrate that positive responses from ‘tag-lines’ can then turn negative once the ‘blurb’ is further decoded. This turning point came based on LL’s reaction to the characterization of existing tenants. Since LL did not respond well to the masseuse references, LL decided not to pursue looking into the place at a later date.

The ‘blurb,’ however, ultimately functions as the launching point from which contact is made with the potential future home. Finding such apartments within the informational system of the ‘blurb’ serves to affirm personal tastes. The process of informational affirmation is evident during an interview, when LL reveals a favoured apartment listing based on the textual information provided by the current inhabitants:

LL: There’s this other place, College and Dufferin, too. Hm, I’m noticing my own trend here. Well it’s just fewer than six hundred and has two other roommates. I like how they talk about galleries in the area and the farmers market at Dufferin Grove. I love that one! And one is a guy and one is a girl. I like that balance. Yes, this is my favourite so far.

RN: Why your favourite?

LL: Like, they seem like I have the most in common with them and that we would get along. That’s important to me. I want to like living with whom I’m living with.

Here we note the informational cues that are present within the blurb to evaluate the apartment and conclude that this is the one LL likes. Such a conclusion is based on the description of what is in the neighbourhood, such as art galleries and a farmers market, and how the inclusion of these information pieces reflects well on the roommates. It becomes evident that LL interprets the ‘blurb’ as meaning the roommates are interested in art and local food and therefore they all share the same interests. We also note the use of comparison as a self-reflective agent between LL and the potential new roommates.
Ultimately, this stage of using information systems involves the use of textual and image-based decoding, personal reflection, and the subsequent comparison of information gathered from the two. The process is not written down, but instead exists within the realm of memory, though it can be articulated as observed in creative and conversational expression.

Encoding the email

The final stage of web-based interaction, a stage unique to apartment hunters looking for shared accommodation, is based around email correspondence between the person seeking a new apartment and the person(s) looking for a new roommate. During this stage, the apartment hunter must share information about him- or herself with these ostensive strangers. The interaction asks: how do apartment hunters navigate the expressive side of information and manipulate informational cues in response to favourable listings?

Knowing that evaluative responsibility is now in the hands of others, LL must be aware of what information is shared in the email contact. The email is written as a direct response to the posting. As seen in Figure 4, some ‘blurbs’ specify favoured character traits as well as describe some of the features key to their homes. These descriptive texts have the alternative function of cryptic coding meant for the potential roommate to decipher. As a result, the most promising email responses should display similar interests, in this case local food and art, in order to appropriately reflect the tastes of the tenants. Therefore, the process can be described as a responsive encoded email written with the hope of favourable decoding by the receiver.

Assessing email correspondence does not end with the first email, nor does it suggest that the proverbial ball is out of LL’s court at this stage. If the email proves of interest to the potential roommate, then he or she will respond with another follow-up email, even though a telephone number was provided. It can be interpreted that those involved in the exchange are not prepared to step out of the virtual realm quite yet. In this follow-up email, LL makes a further document analysis based on the language, style, and syntax of the email in order to verify previous conclusions about the potential roommates.

In one instance, the potential roommate responded about being tight for time during the week because they had to attend the gym before and after school. LL interpreted this response as being self-involved and obsessive, and therefore never followed up further. However, those email responses that LL interprets friendly set up a time and place to meet. Friendly emails demonstrate a positive response to the initial email, excitement to meet LL, and flexibility in meeting. After this email exchange, the
apartment hunt shifts into the world of the real, away from the virtual and the imagined.

I noted how even the initial stages of LL’s contact with potential roommates are facilitated by web-based systems rather than by telephone or personal contact. This suggests that there must be decoding done by both sides of the interaction in order for face-to-face or telephone contact to take place. The Internet has become an important intermediary between strangers, and plays an important role in the facilitation of human interaction. This suggests that initial social decoding is a personal, self-reflective practice, one most easily facilitated by text and image. Similarly, as suggested by LL’s email interaction, it is a depersonalized means to accept or reject people without insult or commitment.

Conclusion

Web-based resources play a significant facilitation role in the apartment hunter’s search for shared accommodation. However, the apartment hunter must translate information presented in the digital realm into an understanding of real living people and places. As a result, the apartment hunter is involved in a process of decoding texts and images in order to find a place of residence. The process is complicated by its subtext of roommate searching, which requires further scrutiny in the on-line forum based on personal reflection and interpreted characterizations.

As a result, time and cost become easy factors to negotiate: The apartment hunter can simply ignore listings that do not fit into set standards. What becomes more nuanced in the search are those factors reliant on preference. Information regarding leisure pursuits and pastimes were the main means by which the apartment hunter found a promising apartment and roommates. The appearance of roommates, never shared during this process, seemed secondary, as did other defining factors like heritage, occupation, and income. Therefore, I suggest that searching for a roommate is similar to making a friend: it is a process based on shared interests and mutual enjoyment.

Despite the personal and subjective nature of this interaction, the depersonalized world of web-based systems is the preferred form of contact, suggesting a preference towards distance when getting to know new people. However, there is the risk that within on-line communication some of the intended message might be lost. Therefore, apartment hunters are as reliant on the people who post the listing as on the information itself. Perhaps the symbiotic relationship between people and information reflects the fundamental nature of the hunt for shared accommodation itself: it is as much a personal quest for new roommates as it is a search for a new home, thus indicating that human relationships are often cultivated through what is comfortable and home-like.
References
