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Concepts of Information Seeking and Their Presence in the Practical Library Literature

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Searching for information, retrieving it, and using it lie at the heart of library studies and librarianship. Libraries function by and for the human act of information seeking. The where, why, when, and how of information seeking continues as the topic of debate and discussion on both the theoretical and practical level of a variety of social science disciplines. In fact, the fields of psychology and communication in particular offer perspectives and theories on information seeking that enhance and illuminate the study of information seeking in library and information science.

Such a multi-disciplinary effort creates the potential to draw connections across paradigms and to develop a more holistic understanding of information seeking. As theories of information seeking in the sister disciplines of library and information science, psychology, and communication are identified and compared, important ideas emerge – concepts and principles that inform libraries and librarians in their missions. Yet, one important consideration remains: are these theories, and their resulting implications, appearing in the practical journals read and used by public librarians in the field? The answer to this question lies, at least partly, in explicating these theories and in searching for them in the messages and discussions of the practical library journals.

What Is Information Seeking?

The term *information seeking* often serves as an umbrella overarching a set of related concepts and issues. In the library world, discussions of database construction and management, community information needs, reference services, and many other topics resonate with the term. Yet, a single, serviceable definition remains elusive.

Like any other complex concept, information seeking means different things in different contexts. In the simplest terms, information seeking involves the search, retrieval, recognition, and application of meaningful content. This search may be explicit or implicit, the retrieval may be the result of specific strategies or serendipity, the resulting information may be embraced or rejected, the entire experience may be carried through to a logical conclusion or aborted in midstream, and there may be a million other potential results. Information seeking has been viewed as a cognitive exercise, as a social and cultural exchange, as discrete strategies applied when confronting uncertainty, and as a basic condition of humanity in which all individuals exist. In fact, *information behavior* may be a more appropriate term, rather than information seeking, to best describe the multi-faceted

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relationship of information in the lives of human beings, a relationship that can include both active searching through formal information channels and a variety of other attitudes and actions, including skepticism and ambivalence (Pendleton & Chatman 1998). While addressing some aspects of these many alternatives, this paper uses *information seeking* to denote experiences or situations in which content is accessed, used, and synthesized into personal knowledge.

How Is Information Seeking Conceptualized and Explained?

Whether viewed procedurally as a discrete series of tasks, or holistically as one vein in the body of existence, information seeking defies efforts to bend it to a model or scheme for the purposes of explication. However, one basic, if clumsy, means of describing the phenomenon exists in noting changes in an individual's thoughts, feelings, and actions during a single problem solving experience. After several studies into the research experiences of students, Carol Kuhlthau developed a model of information seeking she dubbed the *information search process* (1993). Kuhlthau describes the information search process as moving through *initiation, selection, exploration, formulation, collection*, and *presentation*. While it was developed primarily to explain the formal research performed to complete class assignments, this model does organize information seeking into a set of experiential stages that offer a rough framework for discussing what occurs in the search for information and the transformation of that information into knowledge.

Initiation

Initiation begins with the recognition of an information need and involves the first attempts to resolve uncertainty. In behavioral psychology theories, uncertainty, novelty, and variety provide the initial motivation for information seeking (Wentworth & Witryol 1990). A psychological desire to predict outcomes, to know the unknown, or to widen the range of experience serves as the primary impetus for information seeking from a behaviorist perspective. George Kelly departed from both behaviorism and traditional cognitive psychology to suggest that knowledge, and the information seeking that builds knowledge, emerge from personal construction rather than purely objective retrieval and application (1955). The process and product of this construction is a unique experience influenced by the cognitive, affective, and material situation of the individual. The need to modify personal constructs as new situations and experiences emerge fires information seeking.

Drawing on theories of communication and on qualitative methodologies, the sense-making approach to understanding information seeking and use elaborates upon some of Kelly's ideas, regarding information seeking as a dynamic, constructive, and negotiated phenomenon (Dervin 1999). Individuals constantly make and unmake their understanding and perspectives through the exploration of the wide and deep nexus of information that is life. This exploration occurs as a communicative process, an intersecting dialogue that extends beyond data to include emotions, ideas, values, opinions, superstitions, and beliefs on the personal and social level. From the sense-making perspective of complexity and change, the initiation of a specific act or situation of information seeking lies within this larger context.

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Selection

Once one recognizes the need to know, the question of what one needs to know must be answered. In selection, the individual ascertains his information need in relation to a general topic or field of knowledge. Formal information seeking situations may require an individual to relate a highly organized taxonomy of subject areas to their particular question or problem. For example, school term papers assignments often ask students to investigate their research question using prescribed methods, to utilize certain sources of information, and to present their findings in a uniform format. To complete the assignment, students must translate their information needs into the organizational systems that libraries and other information agencies have developed. However, all of this order and regulation belies the inherent messiness of actually placing an unanswered question inside the vast scheme of human knowledge.

Answering simple fact-oriented questions presents little difficulty beyond locating the appropriate discipline, topic area, or subject descriptor. Yet, complex problems often require a great deal of thought and effort. Individuals must limn what is known and what is unknown, follow the vast web of tangents and side issues to the heart of the dilemma, identify multiple disciplines with perspectives on the issue, and relate external hierarchies and systems of data to internal impressions of a unique and distinct personal need. Of course, the most relevant and crucial issues in life tend to be the most complicated. The philosophy of phenomenology, with its rejection of the subject/object dichotomy, suggests that each information seeking situation is a unique experience, made distinct by everything the seeker brings to the search (Budd 2001). Thus, while taxonomies are necessary and beneficial to the organization of information, the act of selection places a formidable demand on the individual to correlate the personal and peculiar to the objective and general. In her information search process model, Kuhlthau seems to recognize these challenges and stresses that individuals should be encouraged to proceed at their own pace in the process of selection and that feelings of anxiety common in this process should be recognized and affirmed (1993).

The exploration stage finds the seeker searching for information about their topic or topics of interest, grappling with the basic concepts, and identifying related issues. Exploration serves as the method by which the foundations of new constructs are laid, "opening up the personal dimensions of meaning in a universe conceived in terms of process (Warren 1991, 529)." Exploration provides the topography that one traverses to carve out an individual path of understanding. Both personal and social factors affect both the process and the product of exploration (Gandy 1998, Pendleton & Chatman 1998, Dervin 1999, Kuhlthau 1993, Budd 2001). Furthermore, individuals tend to value information gained from first-hand investigations within the sphere of daily life, such as learning from their own experiences and seeking advice from others within their social group (Pendleton & Chatman 1998, Myers 1998). This is not to suggest that information from outside the immediate personal and social realm is not relevant or helpful in information seeking, but that collaboration and communication afford the individual the opportunity to use such information in ways that are meaningful.

Another aspect of exploration that several theoretical models of information seeking address is the inherent risk that comes with admitting what is not known, or only partially known, and opening oneself up to new knowledge. From a social perspective, information

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seeking can be considered a socially normative process, a means by which individuals identify, adapt, and transfer values, beliefs, ideas, and codes of behavior (Pendleton & Chatman 1998). Information seeking is communication, and communication is more than the exchange of substantive data, it is a relationship in which participants share their ideas about themselves, their cohorts, and others outside of the relationship. Consequently, exploration becomes an instance of negotiation between the self, in all of its aspects, and the larger world in which the seeker's identity and social status are both vulnerable. Offering seekers the freedom to investigate at their own pace, fostering a non-threatening environment where mistakes are accepted and learned from, and encouraging cooperation may mitigate some of the fear and frustration that exploration and subsequent stages of information seeking entail (Wood et al. 2000, Kuhlthau 1997, Mokros et al. 1995).

As individuals begin to use general information to generate more specific and detailed questions, to narrow their topic, and to begin searching for information of greater depth than breadth, they engage in formulation. Formulation requires the seeker to make connections between different ideas, to think critically about the information reviewed thus far, and to make personally relevant choices based upon his or her learning. Shaping future inquiry depends on more than logical deduction, as new perspectives emerge out of the negotiation between new information and previous concepts within the full context of the individual's life (Gandy 1998, Warren 1991, Pendleton & Chatman 1998, Dervin 1999). Focusing information to the specific character and dimension of a particular problem requires specialized knowledge, and individuals should be considered experts in terms of understanding their world, their information needs, and the way that information may be applied to the specific contexts of their lives (Dervin 1999).

In formulating a clearer focus for their investigation, individuals consider how new information fits within existing constructs and confront the uncertainty that comes with re-shaping old ideas to accommodate new perspectives:

> Disconcerting feelings are commonly associated with formulation….Users
> experience anxiety and frustration as they encounter information available
> from many different perspectives, much of which is not compatible with their
> own constructs (Kuhlthau 1993, 115).

Just as in exploration, individuals must invest part of themselves in the reflection and turmoil of formulating a more deliberate direction for their search. (Kuhlthau 1993, Mokros et al. 1995). Although the stress of developing a specific area of concentration can cause some to abandon their search for information, those who succeed in finding a more narrow and individualized scope for their inquiries often experience greater enthusiasm as they proceed in their research (Kuhlthau 1993). Formulation can be messy and uncomfortable, but herein lies the experience that all creativity strives towards – an expression of one's unique perspective, a vision that will guide one's efforts to their fruition.

Collection

In collection, the seeker gathers and reviews resources that address the specific focus he or she has formulated. At this point, the individual should have developed enough of a general understanding of the principles and concepts underlying his or her problem to make

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decisions regarding relevance of both content and form. If the goal of information seeking is to develop personal understanding, then collection involves more than accepting or rejecting bits of data. Collection requires the individual to choose not only what is germane to the specific concern but also to determine how each new idea fits into the developing solution, to organize and to connect information in ways that are valid from both an objective and subjective perspective.

Presentation

Kuhlthau describes the presentation stage in her information search process model in terms of a report, speech, or other product for a school exercise or assignment (1993). However, all individuals present the fruits of their information seeking when they apply new knowledge. As information is put to use, issues of power and obligation arise. New knowledge may be a tool for resistance or assimilation. It may help to resolve an issue or reveal even greater depths of dissonance and controversy. It may provide insight into a problem, but it cannot guarantee that outside circumstances will allow for a solution. Regardless of its outcomes, the application and transformation of data into a new personal understanding serve as the crucial outcome that differentiates information seeking from information retrieval.

What Are the Implications of These Theories for Library Practice?

Works in the fields of psychology, communication, and library studies present a picture of information seeking as a dynamic and negotiated process that is intellectually intriguing. Yet, one question remains. How does this vision translate into the actual function of libraries? The explanations and models of information seeking previously discussed apply to the every day world of libraries and librarians in several ways. These theories of information seeking hold important implications for refining the practice of librarianship, only a few of which may be addressed within the confines of this journal article.

Information Seeking As a Cognitive, Affective, and Social Encounter

The depiction of information seeking as an event embedded in a complex interplay of personal and social factors possesses great resonance for librarianship. This idea has long enjoyed popularity in the ethos of library studies, but frequently loses out to the allure of a one-size-fits-all approach to reference work in the rush of day-to-day practice. Yet, if a person's information seeking encounter grows out of the whole of his or her experience, then generic reference solutions will not suffice. Assisting the patron in a search for information is more than a matter of locating the appropriate materials. It includes seeking to understand the situations that gave birth to the need, considering the information encounter from the patron's viewpoint, and giving him or her both the counsel and the freedom necessary to craft a meaningful answer.

Enacting a more personal and holistic approach to the each patron's information query means considering that individual differences may require distinct approaches to even the commonest questions and that all information sources and formats may not be created equal from the patron's perspective. Beyond their traditional role of locating sources and

suggesting standard research strategies, librarians may need to dialog intensively with patrons about how they envision solving their problem, assist patrons in choosing resources that provide information in ways that are intuitive and comfortable to them, and seek patrons' evaluations of the totality of their information encounter rather than simply asking if an answer was found.

Information As a Subjective Tool Not an Objective Value

Many of theoretical perspectives on information seeking herein discussed share a common view of information as being both created and disseminated through the negotiation of the personal, the social, and the objective or factual dimensions of experience. Thus, a piece of information does not exist independently as an unassailable and universal good. Rather, the success of an information search, and the value of the information found, depends significantly on the relevancy and meaning of both process and product to the individual.

Ideally, libraries adopting such a view of information and information seeking would function as places where individuals, with the help of professionals, could question, speculate, and experiment in ways that make sense to them, instead of having a standard strategy and answer determined for them. Fulfilling such a role would require libraries to develop diversity in their resources, flexibility in their design, and creativity in their methods and principles. Asking patrons to rely on a single source or format for their information, limiting library education to general orientations and generic brochures, and focusing on the technical aspects of information delivery over the personal aspects of knowledge construction may actually undermine the learning that libraries seek to facilitate.

Do Practical Library Journals Articulate Theories of Information Seeking and Their Implications?

As demonstrated previously in this article, many theories of information seeking from psychology, communication, and library and information science depict information seeking as an experience embedded in context and as a complex process that affects, and is affected by, the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of human existence. These theories have potentially profound repercussions for libraries as organizations and for the information professionals who serve within those organizations. Theoretical approaches to information seeking have long enjoyed much coverage within scholarly journals in the field of library science and in those of other social science disciplines. Yet, for these theories and implications to serve as a foundation for developing and refining the practice of librarianship, they must appear in those publications devoted to informing the day-to-day work of libraries. Review of recent volumes of those practical library periodicals commonly available to public librarians at work in the field will provide some indication of the degree to which this topic is explored and discussed.

Methodology

Three national library periodicals (*Public Libraries*, *American Libraries*, and *Library Journal*) and two state association magazines (*Texas Library Journal* and *Louisiana Libraries*) were chosen for this study as representatives of the types of professional reading

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commonly available in public libraries. This set of serial publications includes four magazines of professional associations and one magazine by a corporate publisher. The journals have varied publication schedules, making the number of issues reviewed for this study different for each journal (Appendix 1). While each of these magazines has a slightly distinct editorial agenda, they share a common purpose to inform the practice of librarianship.

Issues from the past three years of these publications were reviewed for articles or editorials that discussed theories of information seeking or the implications of such theories. Keywords and subject descriptors related to this topic were identified in three databases: FirstSearch's LibraryLit, FirstSearch's ERIC, and Ebsco's Academic Search Premier. The study evaluated each hard-copy issue of these journals for the past three years (2001-1999) and the indexing of these issues in the aforementioned databases. These evaluations then informed determinations of whether theories of information seeking or related topics arose as points of discussion or explication within any articles (excluding book reviews, letters to the editors, and any advertising or commercial supplements) of these issues.

The first step in the study involved reading the periodical issues in hard copy form. The table of contents of each journal issue and journal indexes were studied and possibly relevant articles were identified. Those articles marked during this preliminary review received first attention, but each issue of each journal was read regardless of whether or not they contained an article denoted as potentially germane. While these initial readings provided a general picture of the journals coverage of information seeking topics, they did not represent a highly methodical approach to evaluation. However, in the next phase of the study, databases searches served to narrow the focus of the study and to provide search terms that could be formally compared against the contents of the journals.

Two key word searches, one using the term information seeking, and the other using information behavior, were conducted in LibraryLit. This yielded a large number of results that were then evaluated for their common subject descriptors. Information needs and use studies occurred as subject terms in the highest percentage of articles in the "information seeking" and "information behavior" result lists. Two other common subject terms in both key word searches – cognition and communication – bore high relevance to the idea of information seeking as being both a psychological and social endeavor. These four subject terms and the keyword phrases information seeking and information behavior were used separately in a series of Boolean searches with the ISSN for the each of the journals and with the years selected for the study. Each title and abstract on the subsequent result lists received a thorough review for any reference to the how or why of information seeking. Any articles appearing to be relevant were then re-read.

The similarities between LibraryLit and ERIC allowed for an almost duplicate research process. Within the context of this study, the only relevant distinctions between the two databases occur in journal titles and volumes covered (Appendix 2). The term information seeking functions as a recognized subject term in ERIC, and it was thus applied in combination with the ISSN for the journals within the years of the study. Then, this search procedure was repeated using information behavior and the terms generated from LibraryLit as either a subject, if ERIC recognized the term as a descriptor, or keyword. Just as in LibraryLit, each term was combined with the standard number of a particular journal and then limited to the appropriate years. Many of the articles on subsequent result lists were the

same as those from the LibraryLit searches. However, any new articles underwent the same scrutiny of title, abstract, and, if necessary, text.

Because it is produced by another database vendor and has an organizational scheme distinct from that of FirstSearch, Ebsco's Academic Search Premier required slightly different treatment. Keyword searches using the terms information seeking and information behavior were performed. Each search was then limited by a journal title. The subsequent result lists were then studied for articles within the years 1999-2001. This process was performed separately for each journal in the study indexed by Academic Search Premier – *American Libraries*, *Public Libraries*, and *Library Journal*. Also, browsing Academic Search Premier's alphabetical subject list yielded two terms which seemed ideologically related to information seeking: *conceptual structures* and *knowledge representation*. These subject terms were then used in searches identical to those carried out for the keyword phrase information seeking. Once again, the detailed records of any articles not appearing on previous result lists were reviewed, and those addressing information seeking specifically were re-read.

Results

The initial reading of the journal issues produced no seemingly relevant articles, and the subsequent database searches confirmed this preliminary finding. As demonstrated in Appendix 3, the database searches using only the subject and keyword terms with limitations for the years in question yielded a high number of results. However, when the studied journals were placed into the searches the number of items on the result lists dwindled to few or none. While some articles in the studied journals did use the term information seeking in a title, abstract, or within the text, it functioned primarily as jargon. None of the journals seriously addressed theories of information seeking or the way such theories apply to everyday librarianship. Those articles that did mention the term information seeking primarily concerned statistics of library use, patron satisfaction measures, issues of electronic access, or the logistics of reference service. For example, while LibraryLit did retrieve a substantial number of *Library Journal* articles for the search terms used in the study, these articles were mostly articles on purchasing, maintaining, and promoting specific digital resources. None of the articles in this study critically explicated the dynamics of the individual's search for information, offered a model of information seeking based on research and formal hypotheses, or discussed the relationship between understanding the information search process and improving library practice.

Conclusions

While the narrow scope and methodology of this study precludes any broad or authoritative conclusions, this research does suggest a lack of attention to theory and research on the part of practical journals of library science in one key paradigm of the discipline – the ways in which individuals experience and accomplish the search for knowledge. Yet, research should do more than demonstrate facts or figures; it should discuss what differences this data makes, or could make, in the larger scheme of things. In terms of this research, the following questions must be entertained: what does understanding information seeking theory – or any theory – have to do with running a library, and why should journals devoted

to advising and supporting the actual work of libraries spend limited column space and publishing dollars discussing it?

One common sentiment heard often in the library field is that graduate school is for learning theory and library jobs are for learning practice – and that the latter is infinitely more important than the latter. Yet, without an underlying appreciation for theory, one finds it very difficult to understand, accept, or enact principles of practice. As research in the area of information seeking progresses, theories develop and change, and new ideas and connections emerge. If the exposure to theory ends with graduation, then how can librarians, or the libraries they operate, evolve in their understanding of and service to patron's needs.

The importance of discussing theory in practical journals becomes even more apparent when one considers that many library employees – even those staffing reference and research desks – have not had the benefit of being exposed to library theory through graduate study. These employees rely almost exclusively on work experiences, on-the-job training, and the practical professional literature commonly available to them in their workplace to expand and refine their expertise as librarians. Even though a great deal of what is required to help another individual in their information seeking efforts can be considered intuitive, such insights and anecdotal knowledge could only be rendered more precise and comprehensive through correlation to research and theory in the field.

Furthermore, the current climate of technological innovation and change makes discussion of information seeking theory increasingly important in the daily work of librarianship. When librarians and library organizations are constantly being encouraged to pursue the bigger, the better, and the faster in electronic resources, it's important to have the understanding necessary to determine not only what to do, but also why to do it. Connecting the theoretical and practical perspectives on the subtleties and complexities of the individual information seeking experience offers a firm foundation from which to build a library collection and plan library services.

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Appendix 1

Journal Publication Schedules

Publication	Publication Schedule	Total Issues 1999-2001
Public Libraries	6 issues/year	18
American Libraries	11 issues/year	33
Library Journal	20 issues/year	60
Texas Library Journal	4 issues/year	12
Louisiana Libraries	4 issues/year	12
		129

Appendix 2

Years Contained Within the Databases

	LibraryLit	ERIC	Academic Search Premier
Public Libraries	1984-2001	1990-2001	
American Libraries	1984-2001	1990-2001	1975-2001
Library Journal	1984-2001	1990-2001	1975-2001
Texas Library Journal	1984-2001		
Louisiana Libraries	1984-2001		

Appendix 3

Database Search Result Tables

FirstSearch LibraryLit Search Results
(bold indicates subject search)

	Term Alone	*Public Libraries*	*American Libraries*	*Library Journal*	*Texas Library Journal*	*Louisiana Libraries*
Information Seeking						
Results Total	324	0	0	3	0	0
Results '99-'01	88	0	0	0	0	0
Information Behavior						
Results Total	161	0	1	0	0	0
Results '99-'01	34	0	0	0	0	0
Information Needs						
Results Total	**1,365**	**4**	**2**	**6**	**0**	**0**
Results '99-'01	**157**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**	**0**
Use Studies						
Results Total	**2,660**	**22**	**7**	**46**	**3**	**3**
Results '99-'01	**452**	**2**	**3**	**9**	**0**	**0**
Communication						
Results Total	**798**	**13**	**8**	**21**	**1**	**0**
Results '99-'01	**114**	**6**	**4**	**2**	**0**	**0**

FirstSearch Eric Search Results

(bold indicates subject search)

	Term Alone	Public Libraries	American Libraries	Library Journal
Information Seeking				
Results Total	**2,252**	**3**	**8**	**1**
Results '99-'01	**239**	**1**	**2**	**0**
Information Behavior				
Results Total	11,502	4	4	4
Results '99-'01	691	0	1	0
Information Needs				
Results Total	**4,245**	**4**	**1**	**11**
Results '99-'01	**132**	**0**	**1**	**4**
Use Studies				
Results Total	**4,472**	**13**	**1**	**5**
Results '99-'01	**177**	**2**	**0**	**2**
Communication				
Results Total	89,062	10	7	15
Results '99-'01	5,433	2	2	3
Cognition				
Results Total	6,661	0	0	0
Results '99-'01	538	0	0	0

Ebsco Academic Search Premier Search Results

	Term Alone	American Libraries	Library Journal
Information Seeking			
Results Total	235	3	8
Results '99-'01	64	1	3
Information Behavior			
Results Total	22	1	0
Results '99-'01	7	1	0
Conceptual Structures			
Results Total	38	0	0
Results '99-'01	17	0	0
Knowledge Representation			
Results Total	49	0	0
Results '99-'01	30	0	0

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Information seeking is the process or activity of attempting to obtain information in both human and technological contexts. Information seeking is related to, but different from, information retrieval (IR). Traditionally, IR tools have been designed for IR professionals to enable them to effectively and efficiently retrieve information from a source. It is assumed that the information exists in the source and that a well-formed query will retrieve it (and nothing else). It has been argued that... Royal School of Library and Information Science, Denmark. Â The Concept of Information in the Natural Sciences (p. 360) The Concept of Information in the Humanities and Social Sciences (p. 367) Information in Information Science (p.377) Relationship with Librarianship and Scientific Documentation (p. 377) Information Retrieval and the Concept of Information (p. 380) Information as Assemblages of Facts (p. 384) Information and the Scientific Division of Labor [The specific roles of. Â The discussions about the information concept in other disciplines are also very important for Information Science because many theories and approaches in Information Science have their origins in other disciplines. @inproceedings{Yusuf2012InformationNS, title={Information Needs, Sources and Information Seeking Behaviour of Women Artisans in Offa Metropolis}, author={Tunde Idris Yusuf}, year={2012} }. Tunde Idris Yusuf. Published 2012. Business. INTRODUCTION Information is an important resource for individual growth and survival. The progress of modern societies as well as individuals depends a great deal upon the provision of the right kind of information, in the right form and at the right time. Information is needed to be able to take a right decision and also reduce uncertainty. Â Concepts of Information Seeking and Their Presence in the Practical Library Literature. Kelly Patricia Kingrey. Sociology. Introduction to Library and Information Science/Contextualizing Libraries: Their History and Place in the Wider Information Infrastructure. Introduction to Library and Information Science/Ethics and Values in the Information Professions. Introduction to Library and Information Science/Information Policy. Introduction to Library and Information Science/Information Organization. Introduction to Library and Information Science/Information Seeking.