



---

# INFORMATION NEEDS AND SEEKING BEHAVIOR OF HISTORIANS

Ugochi J. Nwachuku<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lincoln University

## Abstract

The intent of this article is to explore the information needs and resources used by historians in searching and retrieving information for their research projects. The objective is to drive behavioral models of the information-seeking patterns of historians.

## Keywords

Information, Historians, Research Projects

---

## Introduction

Information-seeking means different things in different context. It involves the search, retrieval, recognition, and application of meaningful contents. Research has shown that information-seeking described the seeker of information as an individual who in the state of uncertainty queries an information system hoping to get answers that meet his/her information specific needs (Vakkari, 1998). The information-seeker may be a member of a general public who wants to know why a given problem arises. The questions may be generated within the context the information searcher's own life expectations and experiences. In the course of the seeker's everyday living, he/she is confronted by information needs and desires that he/she uses textual information system.

Wilson, T.D. (2000) defined information behavior as the totality of human behavior in relation to sources and channels of information, including both active and passive information seeking and information use. Personal information management is concerned with the processes and activities individuals employ to locate, acquire, create, maintain and organize information as to the information in future (Donkor & Nwagwu, 2019).

The need of searching for information may originate from information professional. It might also be done by end-user of information sought. The success of the process of information-seeking is evaluated by panel of expert judges (Dewdney & Ross, 1994). To qualify as information-seeker, an individual must experience a "problem situation", and then formally initiate search process by querying information system.

In the world of library and information sciences, discussions of database construction and management, community information needs, reference services, and many other topics echoes around the term, information-seeking. Information behavior seems to be a more appropriate lexicon, rather than information seeking that best defined the multi-faceted relationship of information in the lives of human beings. This relationship could include both active searching through all information channels and a series of other attitude and actions

Historians are usually a class of scholars who regard themselves as the collective memory of the past experiences. They are interested in gathering information from reliable sources, filter them for accuracy and be objective in disseminating the information. Furthermore, they are involved in using any viable tool or tools in the information acquisitions. Historians adopt to what is usually known as "Historical Process". This is essentially a methodology which guides historians in their search for facts, accuracy of the facts and objective analysis of the facts.

Dalton and Chamigo (2004), in their writing discussed lengthily historians' methodology in information material search. Lord Chesterfield's conception of history as "only a confused heap of facts," creates a need to make sense from the heap of facts. These confused heaps of facts will have to be sorted or in historian's jargon, filtered to bring goal oriented order to human past. Bringing order essentially involves research, analysis, and interpretation.

The major sources of information for historians are government and institutional records, newspapers, journals, periodicals, magazines, photographs, films, personal letters, diaries as well as unpublished manuscripts.

These constitutes historians' primary sources of raw materials.

Historians and other social science scholars add flesh to the primary sources through analysis and interpretation. Their analysis and interpretation constitute secondary sources which, more often than not fall victim to subjectivity. As historians craft depends largely on acquiring valid sources of information, they became for the most part, prominent in the development of research interest which encompasses political, economic, social, military and cultural history

The above areas of interest and the historian intellectual bent to create a necessity for the historian to develop an academic relationship with the library and librarians. Unlike other group of information seekers, historians are rarely fuzzy about their topics in reference to what they want. In the digital age, historians have trained themselves in information retrieval and accuracy validation using internet, databases, and CD-ROMS.

Duff and Johnson, (2002), are concerned with the information-seeking behaviors of historians. Ten mid-career historians participated in semi-structured interviews in investigating how they locate and retrieve primary sources to carry out their research on archival materials. These activities included: Orienting the historians to archives, finding aids, sources or a collection, seeking known materials, building contextual knowledge, and identifying relevant materials.

From literature review, it is observed that historians are expert users of texts (Case, D.O., 2012, p.660). They are voracious readers. They read all available secondary sources on new subject areas as a background before they embark on primary sources. They are aware that their reading and interpretation of primary sources shape their understanding of the past. As Michael Stanford correctly stated, the historian regards it as obligatory that, "one should read and reread the sources until one can at most hear the voices." Historians often browse and scan a textual environment, to identify relevant sources in the archives. Historian researchers, more often than not, utilize the assistance of the library archivists in locating materials in the archives. They also use finding aids in their research exercise. It is pertinent in the above context to understand how the historian researcher frames his/her archival reference questions to achieve his/her research goal(s).

Regarding the information-seeking behavior of historians in relation to their research in archives, four types of information-seeking activities are noted. These types were: orienting the researcher to archives, finding aids, sources, seeking known materials, building contextual knowledge and identifying relevant materials.

Chassanoff, A. (2013), discussed the approach that academic historians take in their efforts to use primary source materials. To understand the historians' approach, historians completed an online questionnaire about extent information practices and possible information needs in an archival setting.

The result from the questionnaires illuminated the understanding of the methods usually used by historians in their search for primary source materials. The result from the responses of the questionnaires showed the type of primary source document that historians most likely use, are the factors that influence the historians' decision to use archival materials, or online ones.

Chassanoff concentrates on discussing how the historians search and utilize primary source materials. Using questioning strategy, one discovers the type of primary source documents historians would most likely use, how they access materials and how they evaluate online digitized primary source materials.

In archival setting, historical researcher adopts a multiusage, iterative process whereby the historian would use a broad path-breaking research, proposing new ways of looking at old problems. The historian might prefer a narrow micro historical approach, documenting a specific community of interest or problems. The historian often begins his/her research in the archives, orienting him/herself to collections, building on contextual knowledge and acquiring relevant materials. In the process, the historian refines and develops his/her information needs.

Digital technologies have impacted on research practices of the historians within archival setting. Many archives provide online access to digitalized version or primary source materials, and personal capture devices are now permitted in many reading rooms. Digital cameras, flatbed scanners, and laptops allow the historian to personally document archival materials of interest. The historian is much at ease with using digital cameras and scanning equipment.

It is a common practice for the historian to consult a large number of institutions during the archival research process. The archival institutions may include public or university libraries, academic special collections/repositories, historical societies, state or federal government archives or museums. However, the specific topic of historical research determines the historian's choice of institution that would be consulted.

The online materials used by historians have placed the library archivist in a prominent role. The archivist has to know how to choose what materials to be digitized, and archival research environments need to support the hybrid nature and nuances of the historical research process, itself, and the ever-changing set of information practices.

The surge of computers and their digital environments in the research dimensions of the historians' inverse has necessitated efforts of historians to reflect on the long term effects of the new information and communication technologies on the history profession (Daniel, D. 2012). A survey was thus conducted to identify the main concerns that historians may have. The response to the surveys indicated some ambivalence in some of the concerns. They wondered if the new computer and technologies would transform the nature and practice of history

or simply facilitate access to resources while research practices remain fundamentally the same. The landed the democratizing effect of the Web and Digital Media. However, students' ability to use information tools responsibly, and worried about the decline in their library and research skill.

Burton, et al., (2003), not only do technology impact on the professional historian in his/her effort to achieve desired research goal, they also redefined their relationship to libraries and their staff. Historians are used to print culture. It has served their research needs and they are apprehensive of some the limitations of the Digital culture. They fear that with rapid and invasive infusion of technological advance in the information and communication, the print culture might be extinct, and this might lead to rendering libraries irrelevant on which the historians depend so much on.

Students of history profession must adapt to the new information source and information retrieval tools which are revolutionizing methods for research work. Students must learn to create a balance between research tools using print materials and digitals, and using computation and all its ramifications. But the historians advise that eBooks should not replace printed books.

Cut in the inevitability of technology being a pertinent feature of information material landscape, it is suggested that historians should find a middle ground but to the extent that they make optimal use of new technologies for historical scholarship and teaching (Cohen and Rosenzweig, 2006).

It is comforting that students who are prospective historians are largely "Google generation." (Digital natives). They are thoroughly immersed in the modern technology as almost their sole tool for information material storage and information retrieval. What the students need is not how to find information through technology but what they need to research on. The burden is not teaching the students how to research the past, but what aspect of the research they should embark on? The intellectual understanding of the subject matter becomes very important. The libraries would be of services to the students as the libraries have redefined the philosophy of their function in society. Rather than regard themselves as a dying breed with the advent of technology, they have instituted a policy by which they have embraced technology as an important aspect of their function. They house all necessary technological tools, good digital ambiance and socially enabling environment that entice interest in patronizing the physical libraries.

Professors of history, no matter the branch of history are often intrigued by reading (Challener, J. (1999). Art historians are generally characterized by the traits that are present in the research behavior of historians. Art historians subscribe to art journals and magazines that deal in art related subjects. They also read newspapers.

In an interview of twenty-seven art historians, they admitted that they use extensive slides in their research as well as in their various classrooms. They supplement their information materials with secondary sources that are books written by colleagues on art subjects. Some of the art historians take their students with an intension to find a research subject as well as some research information materials. They also use technology tool in their search tools, and consult databases.

Challener, J. continued by conducting interview of 75% of art historians. The 75% of art historians interviewed indicated that they were at much ease with soliciting help from librarians. The librarians assisted them in information materials' locations and sometimes guided them in databases searching and more often than not, reference librarians would send potential acquisition to the professors for their advisory opinions. One of the interviewee admitted that a reference librarian taught her how to use the computer to search and retrieve information materials from databases from home. Essentially, all the art historians interviewed admitted that the library and the reference personnel in particular appear to be indispensable tools in their research activities.

Like other historians, art historians use indexes in their research activities. Eighty-eight percent of the ones questioned admitted using index as one of the research tools. They use a general periodical index, including the Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA). They used the hard copy for the most part. Some however, use CD-ROM and some use BHA online. They use the BHA to look for books, periodical articles and exhibition catalog.

The art historians surveyed on technology's impact on the information-seeking behavior of art historians were drawn from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Areas of information- seeking materials included: Works on paper, oil painting, vase painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaic, artifacts, and illustrated manuscripts.

In a survey, a good number of art historians used either connoisseurship or iconography in their research approach. In their information gathering, art historians consulted people, places, and looked at things.

People were defined as anyone consulted during the research process. The most frequently consulted person was the art librarian for resource discovery rather than subject knowledge. Networks of scholars in the discipline are referred to as, "Invisible College" are sometimes communicated with a few times a year. They discover that colleagues are often the most current sources of information that have not yet been published.

Places are defined as anywhere information is sought during the research process. Libraries served this purpose. All art historian researchers use libraries as places of researches. Libraries are very useful in regards to secondary sources, compiling of bibliographic materials, basic reference resource and browsing. They also consulted the archive sections of the libraries.

Internet, museums, interlibrary loan service, and also archeological sites are also part of the places where the art historians use as research tools.

Things, as part of research fondant, are defined as anything the researcher consults during his/her research process. Print monographs, electronic journals, as well as print journals, catalogs, reference books, microfilm, photographs, curatorial files, dictionary of arts, all fall within the category of "things".

In recording, sorting and analyzing information materials, art historians are still at ease with the traditional approach. They still use notebooks, loose-leaf binders, and index card. They use the above tools for recording hand written notes, compiling bibliographies from books.

Stieg, M. F. (1981), discussed the different formats and tools available to historians for their research and their feelings of various tools in their research activities. Informal habits and approaches are also examined. In studying the information habit of the historians, citation and users study approach are used. Each of the two approaches contributes something different to the understanding of the field of history. Citation study indicates what the writer has actually used, whereas the user study reports the impressions of the information consumer. They each have drawbacks. Citation studies can only analyze what is actually cited. It cannot show relative importance among sources. Some historians find certain formats inconvenient, like maps, films, pictorials, tape recordings and video-tapes. It is not clear why the above tools are not convenient for some of the users.

Microfilm was seen as an inconvenient tool of research. There is complaint of eyestrains. Some argue that eyes are too important and too susceptible to damage and fatigued to have to use backlighted and poorly screened film. There is a feeling of microfilm users that microfilm is an interposition between the scholar and his materials. And that microfilm must be used in the library during library hours is an added dislike for microfilm. Historians feel that their right to work at home is denied.

The problems in using microfilm seem to be much. Library arrangement for the use of microfilm increases the inconvenience factor. There is often not enough space and equipment is poor and often broken down. The film is not always of adequate quality. Microfilm is a roll. On a roll, it is difficult to locate a single reference and the general custom of having end notes rather than footnotes is particularly annoying to the historians.

Manuscripts also are perceived by some historians as inconvenient format, but a different kind of inconvenience. Usually, manuscripts are located in only one place, and one has to get to the place to access information from them. This would involve time and money. Also manuscripts could be written in a language that the user cannot read and understand.

Newspapers also present problem of procurement. They lack guide, especially indexes. Because they are bulky, they are uncomfortable to handle. They tear easily.

Interlibrary Loan is another user format in procuring information. It is important to historians with their need of access to information to be wide range of materials. But too often, interlibrary loan is painfully slow or cannot be obtained. It also has restrictions.

According to Weller, T. (2014), the field of information history is a subject that has been theorized as well as discussed as an independent area of scholarship. Information history discourse has formed its own identity. It is a study of information in the past. While libraries and books form repositories of information, physical institutions, and artifacts, information history emphasizes the idea and the concept. Information history attempts to put into context the themes of information dissemination, censorship, preservation, access, privacy and so on within a broader historical discourse. Information boom was triggered by socio-economic and technological changes in communication, printing, development in the transport and literacy. These developments placed information within a historical context.

Traditionally, information was gathered, sorted, and essentially preserved. This dynamic necessitated the creation of libraries. Information history then, does not exist in isolation but complements ideas from other areas, books history, library history, the sociology of knowledge and so on. The computer has brought improvements in the mechanism of gathering information materials. Through internet, databases, digitization and CD-ROM, online and even Google, information gathering, storage and retrieval have become easy.

It is important that library reference personnel should be conversant with having precise knowledge about the information needs and information gathering patterns of constituent groups. Knowledge of information needs and information gathering patterns can assist librarians to be more effective competitors because, the general public and faculty members prefer interpersonal sources. Many constituent groups feel that academic and public libraries lack the specialized resources of other information providers.

Teaching faculty members often show preference for using information which is most physically accessible. They often collect information for their personal collections and supplement it with resources within the department. The frequency of library use seems to be determined by the discipline, institutional mission, whether or not the courses taught are introductory, whether the faculty member can be characterized as reader, perceived value of library resources in comparison to what can be obtained elsewhere.

In regards to historians' information gathering behavior, certain questions are pertinent. These are: what are the most frequently used types of information resources? For what purpose do historians consult a library? And, how do historians locate the actual resources used? For historians, books, periodical, manuscripts, newspapers, government publications and dissertations are often use.

For historians conducting research, the general rank of order of methods used for discovering relevant published sources appear to be review of the subject literatures, books reviewing, library catalogs, abstracts, and correspondences. Historians who use research methodology designed to elicit data, perceived the library as less important than informal channels of information gathering. On the other hand, historians who use a "Traditional descriptive method" rely more heavily on the library. As more libraries expand their collections and services to include machine-readable data, quantitative oriented historians may depend more heavily on them for access to statistical data and the computer manipulation of these data.

***Future Trend:***

A central issue of how historians retrieve information revolves around the extent to which new technology will make an impact upon the information gathering strategies of members of academic institutions. Some authors envision "a paperless society" in which electronic communication largely replaces print-on-paper publishing. When this happens, libraries for historians may become obsolete. Electronic mails, bibliographic, numeric and full-text databases, video discs, teletext services, home computers will have a significant impact on information needs and gathering patterns of historians.

***Geographic and temporal scope of information history:***

The scholarship on information history had centered in the scholarship of Anglo-American areas. With time, this arena has expanded to the other parts of the world with the explosion of global political news. Information histories expand beyond history. They can be subdivided into technological, political economic, social or cultural categories.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that the field of information history has expanded and grown strong since 2008. But there has been a shift in how historical understandings of information have changed, from technological to political to cultural emphasis. Information does not have a history to explore.

The calibers of information publishers who publish the materials are university presses that do not take books to market unless there is a strong commercial case for success. Usually, scholars do not call themselves "Information Historians." There is no single history of information, but the history of information is multifarious and complex.

If electronic resources offer new ways of accessing primary materials, the growing availability of such resources also offer new ways to bring the materials into the classroom. A sharpened sense of how the history profession is responding to and using e-resources can help collection officers stay abreast of developments and work with faculty as they adapt to the demands of generations of "wired" students.

Additionally, writers of information needs and seeking behaviors of historians, conclude in arguing that many librarians are "resource and input" oriented. They focus on processing and ordering materials ultimately for access from card catalog and reference works. They advocate a refocus and the placement of "resource input" into a broader picture, examining "outputs" and actual information users, their needs and gathering patterns.

## References

### Books

- Boop, R. E. & Smith, L.C. (2011). *Reference and information services: An introduction*. (4<sup>th</sup>.ed.) Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited.
- Budd, J\_ M. (2005). *The changing academic librmny: Operation, culture, environmets*. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries.
- Rubin, R. E. (2010). *Foundations of library and information science*. (3<sup>rd</sup>. ed.) New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.

### Articles from journal entries

- Challener, J\_ (1999). Information-seeking behavior of professors of art history and studio art (Master thesis) Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED435405.pdf>
- Chassanof (A. (2013). Historians and the use of primary source materials in the digital age. *The American Archivist*, 76(2), 458-480.
- Dalton, M. S. & Charnigo, L. (2004). Historians and their information sources. *College & Research Libraries*, 65(5), 400-425.
- Daniel, D. (2012). Teaching students how to research the past: Historians and librarians in the digital age. *The history teacher*, 45(2), 261-282.
- Donkor, A. B. & Nwagwu, W. E. (2019). Personal factors and personal information activities behaviors of faculty in selected universities in Ghana. *Library and information science research*, 41(4), 1-9.
- Duff, W. & Johnson, C. A. (2002). Accidentally found on purpose: Information-seeking behavior of historians in archives. *Library quarterly*, 72(4), 472-496.
- Hermon, P. (1981). Information needs and gathering patterns of academic social scientists, with special emphasis given to historians and their use of U.S. government publications. *Government information quarterly*, I (4), 401-429.
- Rose, T. (2002). Technology's impact on the information-seeking behavior of art historians. *Art documentation: Bulletin of the art libraries society of North America*, 21(2), 35-42.
- Stieg, M.F. (1981). The information of needs of historians. *College & Research libraries*, 42(6), 549-560.
- Weller, T. (2010). An information history decade: A review of literature and concept 2000-2009 *Library and information history*, 26(1), 83-97.