

Toward a Theoretical Framework for Digital Age Information Behavior of Youth

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1. BACKGROUND

Recent studies in various disciplines—such as Education, Communication, Media Studies, Psychology, Law, Business, Sociology, and Library and Information Studies [LIS]—suggest that today's young people think, learn, socialize, shape identity, and seek information differently in this digital information age, the era of Web 2.0 and of participatory culture [1]. Several terms are applied to describe members of this unique generation who are growing up immersed in digital technologies from the start of their lives, including the Net Generation, Generation M (M for Media), 21st century learners/ students, Digital Natives, and digital age youth. In general, researchers define these groups as including individuals who were born after a certain year, ranging from 1978-1989.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study assumes that contemporary youth's predominant engagement in digital media culture influences many aspects of their lives and results in some fundamental changes in their information behavior from the social constructivist point of view. For example, they use multiple media sources to seek information, are exposed to an increased array of information with diverse perspectives, actively create information, and exhibit interactive, nonlinear, and collaborative information behaviors. Since the attributes are quite different from those of traditional information behaviors, it is important to understand digital age youth's approaches to information seeking and provide information services that match their new characteristics and patterns.

Yet, few theoretical frameworks and empirical studies exist to identify and explain changes in digital age youth information behavior in iField. The most recent national guidelines and standards for school libraries reflect the momentous changes for learners in the digital age, addressing multiple literacies, a continuing expansion of information and the social nature of learning facilitated by digital technology. However, youth information behavior models and frameworks have not been updated to manifest the changing notion of information literacy, which has become more complex, as well as the variety of information behaviors in youth everyday life.

3. RADICAL CHANGE THEORY

The theory of Radical Change proposes that three digital age principles—Interactivity, Connectivity, and Access—explain changes in youth information resources and behaviors in the digital age [2]. A typology with three types of changes, each with indicators, operationalizes the theory for identification/ explanation of changes in information resources. The theory, however, has been applied to information behavior of youth without such a typology. Therefore, the proposed study seeks to further develop the theory by establishing a typology (or model) and accompanying variables that address young people's (a) cognitive status, (b) identify/value negotiation and information creation, and (c) social interaction during their interaction with information. The Radical Change theory with a new model resulted from the proposed study will help understand youth information-related activities as a whole and their interrelationships, not just studies of individual tasks or search sessions isolated from the context.

4. RESEARCH PURPOSE

This proposed research aims to understand contemporary young people's information behavior in the digital age based on a solid theoretical and empirical ground. In particular, the exploratory study focuses on new and distinctive behaviors of youth who are engaged with digital media culture. The theoretical and empirical processes of the study result in adding to the original Radical Change theory a model that identifies the key characteristics of youth information behaviors in the digital age.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study's research questions are:

1. What are the key characteristics of youth information behavior in the digital age?

- 1) How do digital age youth seek information and learn? (Cognitive aspects of information seeking)
- 2) How do digital age youth perceive themselves and others? What part does the creation of information play in negotiating values and forming identities? (Identity, value negotiation; information creation)
- 3) How do digital age youth access information and seek community? (Information access; collaborative, participatory community seeking)

2. How can Radical Change theory, including a newly added model through the current study, be used to describe, explain, or predict youth information behavior?

6. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative research design due to its exploratory and holistic nature. A three-phased qualitative methodology design is developed, where each phase must be conducted sequentially because the results of the previous phase will inform and lead to the specific design of the subsequent data collection and analysis. Phases One and Two are intended to answer Research Question 1 (i.e., what are the key characteristics of youth information behavior in the digital age?) and aim at creation and validation of the model of digital age youth information behavior, respectively. Phase Three applies and tests the model in a specific phenomenon of youth formation behavior in this age, focusing on Research Question 2 (i.e., how can Radical Change theory, including the new model of key characteristics, be used to describe, explain, or predict youth information behavior?).

Phase One is a content analysis of existing research studies (creating a model of digital age youth information behavior). Phase Two consists of focus group interviews with a public library Teen Advisory Board, a group of approximately 8 – 10 youth ages 13 – 18, (enhancing credibility of the model from the perspective of youth). Phase Three will be a document analysis of the ThinkQuest Web database, a collaborative online learning platform in which students work across city, state, and country borders to create learning projects. ThinkQuest students are chosen because they are actively engaged in activities using digital media; this population will provide a valid answer to the question of whether Radical Change Theory can describe, explain, or predict information behavior of digital age youth. Data to be analyzed include each element of the ThinkQuest Project, Competition, and Library, followed by online chat interviews with 3- 6 student participants who collaborate to create a ThinkQuest project. It is expected that Phase Three will demonstrate the applicability of the model to explain a specific phenomena of youth information behavior.

The target population for the entire study is digital age youth in the U.S., 5 – 18 year olds. Students of all ages will be covered in the content analysis of research in Phase One. Phases Two and Three will focus on a sample of older youth, ages 13 – 18, in order to examine more active participation and interaction with digital media with relatively greater autonomy. Collected data will be analyzed using Atlas.ti software for qualitative data analysis.

7. LIMITATION/SCOPE

The study does not conduct a comparative study of information behaviors between older generations and digital age youth. In

order to see if some of the noticeable characteristics in today's youth information behaviors are really new, it might be ideal to compare current young people's information behavior and the information behavior of older generations in their childhood, to the extent that such data is available. However, the research does not study youth information behavior historically for comparison purposes, because the goal of the study is to enhance understanding of today's young people and serve them better. Some of the radical change characteristics identified by the study may have also existed to some extent in the past (though they are much more prevalent nowadays), but this fact does not mitigate the importance of understanding such characteristics to provide relevant library and information services for youth in the digital age.

Also, the study focuses on the processes (including cognitive process) or actions while youth engage in information-related activities. Therefore, it is not intended to assess if and how information needs of today's young people have been changing. Assessing information needs of youth in the digital age is beyond the scope of the study.

8. CONCLUSION

Today's young people are engaged in a variety of information activities, and the ways that they interact with information have changed significantly within the past two decades. It is important to understand the changing nature of youth information behavior in order to provide relevant and updated information services for youth that match their unique patterns and approaches to information. Applying the theory of Radical Change, the study suggests that contemporary youth information behavior shows distinct features due to the characteristics of the digital society, which include the digital principles of Interactivity, Connectivity, and Access proposed by the theory. Multiple phases of qualitative research develop and add a new model, which identifies key types and characteristics of digital age youth information behavior, to the Radical Change theory. The most significant scholarly contributions of the proposed research include a theoretical contribution to iField, which provides a new perspective and potential for encouraging research on youth information behavior in the digital age.

9. REFERENCES

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