The Neighborhood Book Exchange:
Community Catalyst or Media Hype?

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Abstract

Through this poster we introduce the recent appearance of Neighborhood Book Exchanges (NooX) across North America and outline our plans for an empirical investigation of the phenomenon. Our investigation draws upon social networking theory, information seeking behavior scholarship and literature from community informatics to frame and investigate the following questions: Does the use of NooX engender stronger community ties amongst its users; In what ways do NooX support (or not) users' information behaviors? Are there identifiable patterns between the NooX content and its location over time? Through this submission we develop a working description of a NooX, propose an initial investigation of the NooX phenomenon, and anticipate contributions to contemporary information theory.

Keywords: neighborhood book exchange, social network theory, social capital, community informatics, information seeking behavior

Introduction

Whether called Book Trading Posts; Little Free Libraries; Pop-up Libraries, or Community Book Exchanges, hand-crafted hutches filled with books are sprouting up in neighborhoods across North America. Over the past two years media articles have covered story after story of Neighborhood Book Exchanges (NooX) taking root in neighborhoods. Some of the media coverage frame NooX as supporting literacy and community building (Gessner, 2011; Kelley, 2011; Jones, 2012; Christian, 2012; Newcomer, 2012), similar to the benefits purported by public libraries. However, those who take an item from a NooX do not need to concern themselves with library cards, Dewey decimal numbers or due dates (Smith, 2012). In addition, NooX cater to walk up (rather than drive and park) visitors, providing a "literary water cooler" atmosphere where neighbors can gather and share their love of reading (Todd Bols in Kelley, 2011).

Reporters' interviews with the stewards and visitors help detail what the NooX are and how they serve their neighborhoods: they welcome all kinds of visitors and are available for use twenty-four hours a day, three hundred and sixty-five days a year; they brave rainy and snowy weather (Ward, 2011), and receive midnight visitors who browse by flashlight (Scrivener, 2011). The book exchanges rely on an honor system: if you take a book, then you will replace a book and help maintain the resource (Bicak, 2012).

The media hype concerning Neighborhood Book Exchanges is impressive. NooX are credited with bringing people together (Jones, 2012; Gold, 2012; Lee, 2011). One media account describes long-time neighbors meeting for the first time while browsing a NooX (O'Connor, 2012). They are also touted as a convening spot for block parties (Scrivener, 2011; Christian, 2012). In one neighborhood, the visitors became so familiar with their neighbors' reading tastes that they include notes recommending certain reads for particular people (Atkinson, 2012). Some suggest NooX represent a reaction to the rise of electronic books (Jones, 2012), the weight of information overload, the cuts to government funding for education and libraries, and the loss of community life (e.g., Jones, 2012; Smith, 2012). None of the media articles question the hype concerning the book exchanges' constructive value.

Despite the recent attention NooX have garnered, to date there are no scholarly investigations into the phenomenon. A rigorous, empirically informed investigation of NooX is needed to explore the motivating factors in their creation and use, the trends in their content and the casual claims regarding their relationship to community building.

Describing the Neighborhood Book Exchange

Our working definition of a Neighborhood Book Exchange (NooX) is based on information from the media articles referenced above, visits to numerous NooX in the Greater Vancouver area and informal conversations with a number of NooX stewards when we first became intrigued by the phenomenon. We use the term NooX to describe a small physical container used to host a book exchange system. Although each NooX is unique, they are typically hand-crafted in the likeness of miniature houses. They are enclosed structures with one to many shelves that store a small collection of books and, occasionally, other media. NooX enclosures are typically placed a few feet off the ground on the periphery of a community member's private property where it is accessible to a public right of way. A volunteer steward builds and/or maintains the NooX. Typically this steward constructs and maintains the NooX physical structure, as well as stocking the initial collection and pruning the content.

Visitors to a NooX include anyone who browses the contents of the NooX, regardless of the frequency of their visits or whether they take part in the exchange. Visitors are not limited in definition to neighborhood residents where a NooX is located. They may take one or many books, leave one or many books, do both, or neither.

Our use of the term exchange in Neighborhood Book Exchange is asynchronous. Changes in content—books taken or books left—happen at different times and transactions may occur between periods of inaction. The exchanges are usually anonymous; the book donations and pickups typically lack attribution.

NooX propagate through both unofficial channels and professionally organized efforts. Some are initiated independently by stewards who have seen or heard of NooX. Other stewards seek financial, logistical and/or technical support from professionally organized efforts, like the Little Free Library organization (www.littlefreelibarary.org). The location and time of the first appearance of a NooX—a book exchange that meets our criteria above—is unknown to us.

Investigating Neighborhood Book Exchanges

Drawing upon social networking theory, information seeking theory, and community informatics, this project aims to explore the following set of research questions:

- *Does the use of NooX engender stronger community ties amongst its users?*
- *In what ways do NooX support (or not) users' information behaviors?*
- *Are there identifiable patterns in the content of a NooX over time with respect to location?*

In order to explore the motivations for using NooX and the implications for their communities, we are considering a mixed-methods approach. We plan on administering surveys and conducting face-to-face interviews with individuals who live in NooX neighborhoods (both NooX users and nonusers) along with a longitudinal content analysis of NooX holdings. Because we are in the process of designing our study, we believe this is the opportune time to hone our research questions and methodological approach through engaging experts in social networking, information behavior and community informatics (i.e., iSchool conference attendees).

Abbreviated Literature Review

Community Informatics

To better understand how an information resource could impact a community, we look to Community Informatics, a field that focuses on the relationships between Information, Communication Technologies (ICT) and community life (e.g., Gurstein (2007); Loader (2010); Stoecker (2005)). We

consider NooX to be a non-digital ICT and a place-based engagement; therefore, this exploration will contribute to discussions in Community Informatics, which focuses almost exclusively on digital ICTs.

Social Capital & Social Networks

Our interest in Social Capital and Social Networking theory (e.g., Granovetter (1973); Williams & Durrance (2008)) is best illustrated by the following questions: Are weak ties formed between actors through a NooX even if these actors never physically meet? Does the presence of a NooX favor bonding or bridging social capital or neither?

Information Seeking Behavior

NooX provide a unique instance to study information seeking behavior. They are peculiar information resources: there are never many items available at one time; new items are added on an irregular basis; the type, topic, and quality is unpredictable; and the collections are disorganized and untraceable. Yet visitors use the NooX as an information resource and, even, make return visits. This information seeking behavior is somewhat striking; why return to a resource that seems so unlikely to provide a book that is relevant or interesting? Three areas within information seeking behavior may provide useful leads: casual-leisure information seeking behavior, browsing behavior, and serendipitous information encountering (e.g., Elsweiler, Wilson, & Lunn (2011); Erdelez (1995); Twidale, Nichols, & Paice (1997)).

Conclusion

This poster will include an analysis of recent media coverage of NooX, our working definition of NooX, highlights from our literature review, an overview of the study design and updates on our progress. Our investigation will be a first step in developing a deeper understanding of the NooX phenomenon. We anticipate contributions to discussions in Social Networking, Social Capital, Community Informatics and Information Behavior research as we investigate non-digital information exchanges through NooX.

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