

# My favorite unreliable source? Information sharing and acquisition through informal networks

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## Abstract

Informal information networks are the personal connections of friends, family and colleagues that people use to help them find information. Recently, a great deal of attention has been paid to social network sites, and other social media, as a key source of information and misinformation in contemporary society. This panel will probe deeper, to investigate the personal connections that underpin and lie behind the social connections visible on social network sites. This issue is of increasing importance as more of our everyday lives are moved online. We will debate what we actually know, and do not know, about how people find information through others, both on- and off-line. From the panel we hope to create a network of scholars interested in creating a research agenda to make informal networks a focus of study going forward.

## KEYWORDS

informal networks, information sharing

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

While a lot of attention has been paid to the explosion of information sources that has taken place in the last two decades, research continues to demonstrate that other people remain the preferred information source (e.g., Cross & Sproull, 2004; Hertzum, 2014; Miller, 2015; Willson, 2018). Therefore, how people connect to one another and share information continues to be of great importance. With new technologies and digital platforms there are new, and ever increasing, ways for individuals to connect. This panel will explore the various ways in which information is acquired and shared within informal networks.

Very simply, a network is “a group of people who exchange information and contacts for professional or

social purposes” (Oxford Dictionary of English). While many networks have a specific purpose – such as to connect professionals working in a similar area – an informal network lacks set structure or purpose. It is a loose connection of individuals who regularly interact with one another, who may, or may not, have explicit shared interests. When information is exchanged and learning takes place within an informal network, it shares similarities with communities of practice. “Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour” (Wenger, cited in Smith, 2003/2009) that share a domain of interest, a community, and a practice (Smith, 2003/2009). While communities of practice can be informal, the requirement of a shared domain of

interest and a practice distinguish it from an informal network as discussed here. Informal networks are also related to the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983), which sees the potential of weak ties (acquaintances and contacts) to expand the range and variety of resources available to individuals beyond their familiar networks, and bridge social networks (Day, 2007).

Within informal networks, information can be acquired in many different ways, including actively seeking information by asking questions (e.g., Willson & Given, 2020), serendipitously encountering information through informal interactions (e.g., Erdelez & Makri, 2020), visiting an information ground in which the main activity is not sharing information but is a situation in which information is likely to be shared (e.g., Fisher et al., 2007), or receiving information through the initiative of someone else (receiving information by proxy) (e.g., McKenzie, 2003). Environments where information can be encountered can be physical (e.g., homes, schools, stores, libraries, cafes, etc.) or virtual (e.g., search engines, digital libraries, social media) (Jiang, Fu, Guo, & Song, 2019). However, there are limitations to the impact of social network sites and other social media on informal networks. Not all social media carries information, and a high proportion of social network site activity is about maintaining relationships (Morris, Teevan, & Panovich, 2010). In terms of information, the best evidence is that only a small proportion is spread through social network site posts (Buchanan, Cunningham, Blandford, Rimmer, & Warwick, 2005; Bussone, Stumpf, & Buchanan, 2016), with in-person and private digital communication both accounting for a high proportion of exchange. Furthermore, building new relationships online is known to be problematic, be that in social network sites, discussion boards or other forms of social media (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). This discussion is particularly important with the current shift toward more and more of everyday life moving online.

Informal networks can become particularly important for individuals who are part of marginalized groups and who experience information poverty (Chatman, 1996) or who have low levels of information capital (an individual's capacity to access information) (Counts & Fisher, 2010). Within small worlds, norms and attitudes facilitate (or determine) the ways in which community access information (Burnett, Jaeger, & Thompson, 2008). For marginalized groups, stigma complicates information practices, which can include behaviors such as hiding information resources to avoid negative reactions (Lingel & boyd, 2013). While current research has focused on mainstream information behaviors, a systematic understanding of how the patterns found in marginalized groups and core users differ is yet to be formed.

This panel examines how information acquisition – active or passive sharing, finding, searching, browsing, monitoring, or encountering – takes place within both physical and virtual informal networks, and how information acquisition is facilitated or inhibited within particular contexts.

## 2 | PANEL STRUCTURE

- The Moderator will introduce the panel and provide an overview of the topic and introduce how the panel will run (5 min);
- Each of the panelists will provide a five-minute overview of their research related to informal networks, describe a key contribution where this research contributes to our understanding of the topic, and ending by proposing a pivotal question (or questions) that remains to be answered (35 min total, including 5 minutes for handover);
- Each member of the audience will receive a postcard when entering the room with a number (1-4), a short scenario, and 2-3 discussion questions (related to the panelists' questions). Based on the number on their postcards, audience members will form a group, led by a panelist, to discuss the scenario and begin to answer the discussion questions. Following some time for the small group discussion, the entire audience will reflect upon challenges, opportunities, and possible next steps with research into informal information networks (two sessions of 15 min, plus a 5-min recap between the sessions for 35 min total);
- The Moderator will close the session by reviewing the topics that emerged during the panelists' presentations and the dialogue from the small group discussions, as well as discuss ideas for establishing a network of scholars and a research agenda to make informal networks a topic of future research (15 min).

## 3 | PANELISTS

### 3.1 | Rebekah (Becky) Willson

Rebekah (Becky) Willson, PhD, is an assistant professor at McGill University's School of Information Studies. She is in the field of information behavior/information practices, undertaking research in the contexts of higher education and workplaces. Her research focuses on individuals undergoing transitions, particularly early career academics and adjunct faculty members. Currently, Rebekah's research is examining the influence precarity and marginalization have on information behavior and information access. She is actively involved

in the information behavior and *ASIS&T* communities, as an Editor for *JASIS&T*, the Chair of SIG-USE (Use, Seeking, and Needs), and the incoming Vice-Chair of the Research Engagement Committee. In this panel, Rebekah will discuss factors that facilitate information exchanges between individuals in an informal network, particularly physical proximity and casual interactions, as well as the characteristics of information that is exchanged. The physical layout of an environment can promote information sharing; physical proximity supports frequent and easy interactions in which information is shared as a by-product. The affordance of proximity is the casual interaction that facilitates the formation and maintenance and social networks. The casual, everyday nature of these interactions promote social relationships, which can foster feelings of safety that aid in the formation of information relationships, as well as the serendipitous sharing of information. Proximity and casual interactions are particularly important for new members of an informal network, who may lack information capital within a new context. Information shared within an informal network frequently is timely, convenient, and is “insider” information that is frequently not recorded nor available to those outside the network.

### 3.2 | George Buchanan

George Buchanan is an Associate Professor and Director of the University of Melbourne iSchool. His research focuses on developing novel technologies to support the discovery and communication of information, though constructing models of users' information behavior, and drawing on cognitive science. He has published over 150 articles, and introduced a number of key interaction paradigms for information work, including the collapsible outline used in many contemporary websites. George's talk will focus on his research into informal information networks of humanities academics, and of patients with a variety of medical conditions, including HIV. He is currently developing a model of human information behavior in informal networks that synthesizes these various studies, and a model of the spread of misinformation in marginalized groups. There are emerging links between the proliferation of misinformation and cognitive factors that are found in informal networks of all types.

### 3.3 | Gary Burnett

Gary Burnett, a Professor at the School of Information at Florida State University, received his PhD in English

from Princeton University and his MLS from Rutgers University. His work focuses on theoretical approaches to “Information Worlds,” exploring the social, political, and economic contexts of information access and exchange within specific communities; and “Information Domains,” which attempts to theorize information in terms of relationships and interactions between individuals, social worlds, and practices of signification. His book, *Information Worlds: Social Context, Technology, & Information Behavior in the Age of the Internet*, co-authored with Paul Jaeger of the University of Maryland, was published by Routledge in 2010. In fall 2016, he was Visiting Professor at Sungkyunkwan University in Seoul, South Korea, and in 2016-2017, he lectured at more than 30 universities throughout Asia. Drawing on both his work with theory and earlier work on online communities, his talk will focus on the information world's concepts of social norms and information value, examining the roles they play in informal information networks. Together, social norms (the shared sense of rightness and wrongness in observable behaviors within a world) and information value (shared perceptions about what kinds of information are of value and about the appropriate ways of evaluating and understanding information) influence what kinds of information are typically exchanged throughout a world, how that information is structured and represented, and the patterns and practices by means of which the information moves through a world. Information networks are specific to specific information worlds, in which norms, values, information, and social interaction are inextricably intertwined, giving a world much of its character and characteristic “feel.”

### 3.4 | Nicole Ellison

Nicole Ellison is the Karl E Weick Collegiate Professor in the University of Michigan's School of Information. Prof. Ellison is internationally recognized as an expert in social media and social network sites, and has published extensively on how people use social media as a source of information. Her research has investigated how new digital platforms shape personal communication, and the ways in which they are adopted and exploited by users to maintain their social relationships. Prof. Ellison's research is strongly influenced by her training in communication theory and research, with a focus on communication technologies. In this panel, Nicole will discuss the transmission of information in online social networks, and what we know of the strengths and limitations of in-person and virtual communication. She will address the degree to which social network sites reflect established behavior in communities, and how current technologies

shape, and are shaped by, the social structures that underpin them.

### 3.5 | Dr. Sanda Erdelez

Dr. Sanda Erdelez is a Professor and Director at Simmons University School of Library and Information Science. She received her LL.B. and LL.M degrees from the University of Osijek Law School (Croatia) and Ph.D. in information transfer from Syracuse University. Her research interests include human information behavior, human-computer interaction and usability evaluation in online environments. A major theme of her research is information encountering, and how people discover information at times when they have not been purposively seeking it. Prof. Erdelez has also examined opportunistic discovery, when new knowledge is encountered when seeking something else. Sanda continues to examine what influences encountering and opportunistic discovery, including the factors played by personal networks. In this panel, Sanda will underline the prerequisites for information encountering and opportunistic discovery, and the role that person-to-person relationships play in maximizing an information seeker's ability to discover useful ideas. In contrast to intentional mechanisms, there is great value in accidental and unintended acquisition of information, and social contexts serve to help those opportunities in multiple ways.

### 3.6 | Michael Twidale

Michael Twidale is a Professor in the School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and was the founding director of the Master of Science in Information Management. His research interests are at the intersection of computer supported cooperative work, computer supported collaborative learning, human computer interaction, and sociotechnical systems design. Current projects include studies of informal social learning of technology, technological appropriation, collaborative approaches to managing data quality, collaborative information retrieval, ubiquitous learning and problem solving activities at the intersection of search, learning and creativity. He is interested in how people informally learn new technologies and new features of existing technologies; how they succeed, fail, struggle, tinker, help their friends and try to search for tech solutions online. Mike will contribute to the panel by discussing the collaborative nature of the construction of knowledge. He will highlight the degree to which supposedly new behaviors found online are in fact already established offline,

and the impact that groups have always on the ways that ideas are formed, refined and communicated. Prof. Twidale will also touch on the ways in which technology often performs poorly as a means for learning, by impeding group interaction, and overlooking needs that previous research has already drawn attention to.

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