

Collaborative Information Seeking and Sharing: The 9th Symposium of SIG/USE

by Nadia Caidi, Soo Young Rieh and Guillermo Oyarce

Special Section

Since 2000 the SIG/USE Symposium has been a staple of the ASIS&T Annual Meetings. In the nine years since its inception the symposium has provided a space for dialogue among the information science community – both specialists and lay professional public – about key issues and topics facing information, its users, its uses and its technologies. And like all such endeavors, it has required hard work, creativity, perseverance and passion.

At this year's Annual Meeting, in beautiful Vancouver, the aims of the 9th SIG/USE Symposium were to provide an opportunity for all ASIS&T members (and information professionals at-large) to reflect and brainstorm together on essential questions around information behavior research and practice in a collaborative context: What are the fundamental questions that we should be looking at in this line of research? How are we to move towards making greater impacts on organizations and designers? What follows is an overview of the symposium process and outcomes, an examination of the issues raised by contributors during the symposium and an outline of future research prospects.

Background and Format

Examining the transformative relationship between people and people, as well as people and information, is at the heart of information behavior research. Taking a people-centered focus to our inquiries, we have amassed

Nadia Caidi is an associate professor at the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto. She can be reached by email at nadia.caidi@utoronto.ca

Soo Young Rieh is an associate professor in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. She can be reached by email at rieh@umich.edu

Guillermo Oyarce is an associate professor in the Department of Library and Information Science, University of North Texas. He can be reached by email at oyga@unt.edu

understandings about the way people work with information, information systems and the people with whom they interact in the process of information seeking and sharing.

For this edition of the SIG/USE Symposium (and as part of the celebration of SIG/USE's 10th anniversary), we focused on collaborative information seeking and sharing. The origin of the idea was the growing interest on the part of members of the SIG/USE community to take stock of our increasingly social and collaborative information environments and work together toward assessing the models, theories and findings we are collecting in our field and how they can and should inform the design and delivery of collaborative information products and services. The symposium offered an opportunity for SIG/USE and others to reflect on essential questions around information behavior research and practice in a collaborative context. Four research questions were posed to the symposium participants:

1. How does our research address the transformative relationship between people and information?
2. What are the fundamental questions that we should be looking at in our research?
3. How are we to move towards making a greater impact on organizations and designers?
4. How can or should collaborative information behavior research be presented to translate effectively into the language of other information research communities?

Thirty-three position papers were submitted covering a broad array of issues and topics. The papers are posted on the SIG/USE Symposium wiki, available at www.asis.org/wiki/AM09/index.php/Siguse.

The symposium was held on Saturday, November 7, 2009, from 1:30-6:00 p.m. The audience consisted of 64 attendees from a variety of

backgrounds and interests, both graduate students and faculty members, academics and members of the profession. The program for the day consisted of two keynote speeches by Diane Sonnenwald and David MacDonald, as well as breakout sessions to enable participants to talk to each other and contribute their thoughts on the four research questions. SIG/USE Awards were presented, and Ya-Ling Lu, last year's winner of the Elfreda A. Chatman Research Proposal Award, reported the findings of her study, "Children's Information Behaviors in Coping with Daily Life."

The two keynote speakers approached the topic in different ways, which provided much food for thoughts for the attendees. Diane, head of school and professor at the School of Information and Library Studies at UCD, Dublin, Ireland, and adjunct professor of computer science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, started the event with a reflection on the meanings and challenges of collaboration. Drawing on over a decade of her personal experiences in collaborations with computer scientists, chemists and researchers in other disciplines, Diane shared her insights on conducting research on collaboration, as well as on the design and evaluation of collaboration practices and technology from our field with others, and along the way, creating new insights for our field.

David, an associate professor at the Information School at the University of Washington, and program director of the Human Centered Computing program at the National Science Foundation, talked about the issue of scale or how to move toward a paradigm for mass participation computing. As David pointed out, when online communities grow, ensuring congenial interactions among all of the members is nearly impossible. In particular, differences in perspectives, beliefs and attitudes ensure that the multivalent character of social relations emerges. Systems and infrastructure rarely account for mechanisms that allow for the effective management of conflict. Handling challenges that result from scale requires rethinking the way we frame research questions about online participation – a potentially new paradigm.

Issues Raised

Following each keynote speech, breakout sessions took place where the attendees were assigned to one of six groups to brainstorm (Figure 1). Each

FIGURE 1. Brainstorming groups at the SIG/USE Symposium, November 7, 2009.



group then reported on their discussion and general themes were outlined. As expected, recurrent themes were around collaboration and information sharing. Several groups referred to the expansion of our involvement in efforts that cross disciplinary boundaries recommending risk taking and strengthening the theoretical base of information science on scope, terminology and concepts.

The other important message that came out of the symposium was the perceived need to contextualize collaboration and information seeking and sharing, looking less at technology and more towards individuals. Theories and models from information science are needed that take stock of changing information seeking behaviors, as well as changing using and sharing environments (notably around team dynamics). Further points are summarized below:

1. The role of research in providing frameworks and models to better understand collaborative patterns. There is ample theory to lead research in our area, but it was suggested that these ideas should be integrated into curriculum development and delivery, including courses on research methods. Information-sharing behavior was advanced by symposium attendees as an area of potential research.

2. The need for initiatives to foster and strengthen potential and current interdisciplinary collaboration and communication. Both keynote speakers emphasized this point, and it was repeatedly mentioned during the small group sessions. The key idea is that we need to reflect on and learn from the collaboration and partnerships our field has already established with other disciplines. We must understand disciplinary differences to find common ground and language, as well as a clear idea as to what we bring to the table. (It is particularly important to articulate this latter point for funders). Some attendees advanced collaboration sciences as an area of study that looks at connections and relationships as important to understand, articulate and measure the value of content and relationships.
3. The need to disseminate our research among practitioners and information system designers. These two large groups were identified as potential targets of strategic efforts of dissemination. At one level, our research should help develop systems that address user-centered services. At another level, for dissemination purposes, our research needs to synthesize theoretical models in appropriate language to strategically communicate our findings.

4. The use of new social networking technology to enhance collaboration. Attendees believe that there is a strong need to use current technologies, explore these and understand better how users interact with them. The world is changing and the ways to deliver information are multiplying. We, as researchers on human-information behavior, must adapt by informing ourselves, taking risks and telling others how to make the best use of the technologies and for their information as well as work practices.

The call to “take risks, trust and communicate” reverberated across attendees at the conclusion of the 2009 SIG/USE Symposium.

Sponsors and Acknowledgments

The organizers wish to thank symposium participants and the keynote speakers, as well as the following sponsoring organizations: OCLC, Emerald and Information Today, Inc. The organizers would also like to thank Crystal Fulton from University College Dublin and Karen Fisher from University of Washington for their leadership and support; Margaret Lam from University of Toronto for setting up the workshop wiki site and working diligently; and Maria Souden from University of Michigan for taking notes. ■