

Information Avoidance in the Archival Context

Scotty Beland

University of Maryland, College Park

SAA Research Forum 2024 | July 17

Research Questions

- What do archivists understand about information avoidance (IA) and how do they contextualize it within their profession?
- How do archivists experience IA in their own practices, in peer-to-peer interactions, and in their interactions with researchers who use archives?
 - What approaches do archivists recommend to educate archivists and researchers about IA?

Background

What is IA?

“Any behavior designed to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (Sweeny, *et al.*, 2010, p. 341).

- Information can be known or unknown
 - Known information indicates that receiver knows something about the content which drives their motivation to prevent or delay its acquisition.
 - Unknown information indicates that the receiver is ignorant or uncertain about something which drives their motivation to prevent or delay its acquisition.
- IA can be active or passive
 - Active IA requires action (a verbal or physical denial).
 - Passive IA indicates inaction (failure to exert effort).
 - Instances of IA may live on a spectrum between the two.

Research Method - Phenomenology

1) Focus on a single <i>phenomenon</i> to explore	Information avoidance
2) Collect data from <i>individuals who have experienced the phenomenon</i>	Archivists with varying backgrounds from across the United States
3) Explore the <i>context</i> in which the individuals experience the phenomenon	Semi-structured interviews designed to inquire about IA in their own context as archivists
4) Frame the study within a broad <i>philosophy</i>	Hermeneutics: How archivists interpret the idea of IA and how they experience it <i>through</i> this concept to create meaning of the experience
5) <i>Bracket</i> out personal experiences	Removal of one's own experiences with IA from the analysis process (offer a positionality statement since this is impossible to do completely)
6) Report on the <i>essence</i> of the experience	Thematically analyze transcripts, develop aggregate meanings, and develop a description of what the individuals have experienced so that they can understand it.

Research Method - Qualitative

Sample

12 adult, MLIS-bearing archivists with varying backgrounds from all over the U.S.

Data Collection

Semi-structured individual interviews

- About 1 hour long
- Via Zoom and in-person
- AV recorded and AI transcribed
- All participants provided with IA definition during interview at least twice before main interview

Analysis

Thematic coding

- Hand-coded, broken down into RQs and main ideas
- Importing transcripts in to Nvivo QDA software to tag and organize for more in-depth thesis coding

Results Overview (so far)

- 292 pages of data and 6 themes

Results & Findings - RQ1

RQ1: What do archivists understand about information avoidance (IA) and how do they contextualize it within their profession?

Once provided a definition for IA, archivists can contextualize it into ideas that impact their work behind the scenes, when working with researchers and why and when researchers may avoid archival information. Depending on the archivist and what kind of work they mainly do, the context may vary but some broad themes emerged:

Results & Findings - RQ1

Themes:

- IA occurs among archivists *and* researchers, but is uncommon and not necessarily “bad”
- IA in archives can present itself in 3 ways

Denial of Information: Refusal to access available information at all

Omission of Information: Purposefully omitting information after accessing it

Obscurity of Information: Misinterpreting, misunderstanding, or overcomplicating access to information

- Moderators of IA in archives include:

Worldview/bias; Self-preservation; Limited scope; Lack of time/resources; Type of archive; Experience level

Results & Findings - RQ2

RQ2: How do archivists experience IA in their own practices, in peer-to-peer interactions, and in their interactions with researchers who use archives?

What approaches do archivists recommend to educate archivists and researchers about IA?

Based on their ideas about IA, archivists were able to provide hypothetical and reflective anecdotal experiences within archival practice and the context of those experiences varied based on the archivist's main work tasks. Those who worked more directly with researchers also seemed to have more reflective anecdotes.

Results & Findings - RQ2

Themes:

- IA is underexposed in the archival context
 - 9 out of 12 archivists had not heard of IA, 2 were familiar outside of archives, and 1 was familiar with archives but only through their own individual research interests
- Several archival and general concepts influence, and are influenced by, IA
 - See next slide
- Archivists can use IA as a lens to educate themselves, peers & researchers about perceived negative IA outcomes, such as bias and skewed narratives, and about outcomes that are perceived to have more positive uses, such as time management and preservation of health.

Specifically, archivists mentioned familiarizing themselves with IA; introducing the concept of IA in long and short term curricula; increasing access, engagement and outreach to diverse communities; being knowledgeable, transparent and objective in practice

Archival Concepts

General Concepts

MLIS
Training **Digital Access** *Content Warnings*
Description
Arrangement **Visibility** *Metadata*
Collections *Reference Interviews*
Type of Archive *Physical Access* **Institutional Mission** **Outreach**

Moral Projection **Experience** *Resources*
Amount of Info
Evaluative Skill Level
Outside Influence

Questions? Chat?

sbeland@umd.edu

References

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell Báez, J. (2021). *30 essential skills for the qualitative researcher* (Second edition). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/PublicFullRecord.aspx?p=7106858>

Schamber, L. (2000). Time-line interviews and inductive content analysis: their effectiveness for exploring cognitive behaviors. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 51(8), 734–744. [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4571\(2000\)51:8<734::AID-ASI60>3.0.CO;2-3](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(2000)51:8<734::AID-ASI60>3.0.CO;2-3)

Stanford University, & Center for the Study of Language and Information (U.S.). (1997). *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/>

Sweeny, K., Melnyk, D., Miller, W., & Shepperd, J. (2010). “Information voidance: Who, what, when, and why”. *Review of General Psychology*, 14(4), 340-353. APA. DOI: 10.1037/a0021288