

Information Avoidance in the Archival Context

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Abstract

The cognitive phenomenon known as information avoidance (IA) has been researched by scholars and professionals in multiple disciplines, but often flies under the radar in the LAM professions which focus more on information seeking behavior. Sweeny et al. define IA as “any behavior intended to prevent or delay the acquisition of available but potentially unwanted information” (2010, p. 341). This developing research, as part of an MLIS thesis project, explores how archivists understand and conceptualize IA, and how they have experienced IA in their practice both behind the scenes and when working with researchers. 12 archivists across the United States were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to participate in hour long qualitative, semi-structured interviews to explore this topic. Participants were given the working definition by Sweeny et al. and then queried with a mix of questions regarding their background, how they conceptualize IA in general and within their field, and if and how they have experienced IA in their careers. Careful methodology and extensive coding of the resulting transcripts have resulted in an array of common themes across academic, government, community, museum archives and more, as well as interesting divergent perspectives across institutions. Is this a particular concern in the archival field? What can we learn from this data and what possible impacts could the data have on the field? This presentation seeks to introduce IA briefly, reveal findings so far, and generate conversation and questions for consideration in writing the final thesis and future research possibilities.

About the author:

Scotty Beland is approaching the final semester of his MLIS studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. Research interests include information seeking behavior, user studies and user instruction, and generally applies to experiences at work. Scotty holds a graduate assistantship in UMD’s Division of Research and a student position in UMD’s Special Collections and University Archives in the Instruction and Outreach department. Since starting his studies and beginning work at UMD, Scotty has researched a developed small and large scale exhibitions centered around social justice, developed an undergraduate internship program teaching primary source evaluation and literacy skills and exhibition preparation, and produced a series of videos centering archival research skills that coincide with a running blog series titled “Hornbake Unboxed.” This Fall, Scotty will open a large, student-led exhibition titled “Homegrown: An Introduction to the Environmental Justice Movement” with his colleague, and will write and defend his Master’s thesis on information avoidance in the archival context.