Information Activities within Information Horizons: A Case for College Students' Personal Archiving

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Abstract: The Information Source Horizon theory was introduced by Sonnenwald in 1990s to explain information behaviors within a context. An information horizon includes information sources perceived by an individual in response to his/her information need. This theory has provided a research framework for many studies to observe information behaviors based on situations/contexts, personal perceptions, and social networks. However, this theory does not differentiate specific information behaviors as for different actions (seek, collect, store, delete, etc.).

In this study, the Information Source Horizon theory was employed to investigate college students' information behaviors for personal archiving contexts. An online survey was used to observe information horizons within three specific contexts (a final exam in academic context; visiting a new doctor in health context; and getting a new smart phone in personal history context). These are hypothetical but common situations in which college students would easily imagine themselves (or many of them might have already been). In addition to the empirical testing of the theory, this study further includes another dimension in the information horizon: information behavior types (three specific behaviors of collect, organize, and use). This is to investigate if different information behaviors play a role within an information horizon.

This empirical data shed interesting lights on the Information Horizon theory. The data on college students' personal archiving practices echo the findings of previous studies that information situations/contexts determine information behaviors in general. However, specific behavior types show different patterns by types of information sources and/or by situations (e.g. clear different behavior pattern on insurance information in health context while no clear differences in behavior patterns for health-related education materials). Interestingly, certain information behaviors are observed in similar patterns regardless of situations (e.g. people generally use more than organize information). The data suggest that the Information Horizon theory could be expanded to include information behavior types as an important factor to better explain information behaviors within an information horizon.

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Dr. Donghee Sinn is an associate professor in Information Science, University at Albany. Her current research interests include personal digital archiving, information behaviors in personal archiving context, information literacy and management for personal records, digital presence of archival materials for historical events, and archival documentation and appraisal in government context. Previously, she worked in the National Archives of Korea. Her recent research on No Gun Ri Digital Archive was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea.

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