The Role of Information in the Lives of Senior Citizens

Gavin Nelson

March 26, 2019

LIS 662 – Information Services for Diverse Client Groups

Dr. Julie Hersberger

Introduction

With help from advanced medical technology, as well as advanced technology in general, people are living past the ages of 50 and 60 and into their elder years. According to a senior living website, there are at least 47 million seniors that live in the United States, which are a part of the 325,600,000 population is living in the country.[1] A good portion of the United States population is made up of our wise elders who have different and exciting stories to share with the newer generations. That population is expected to increase even further in the years to come. Going back to the senior living website, nearly 100 million Americans will be 65 or older by the time it is 2060.[2] Every day, the senior population increases. Sooner or later, libraries, as well as other organizations in general, are going to have to turn their attention to our elderly. They'll need to start to come up with strategies as to what they can do to help the senior community.

That is the goal that I have decided to take on myself when I was conducting research and collecting data for this project. The overall purpose of this paper is to make the library and information field aware of the need to provide information resources and services to the nation-wide senior community. This paper will bring this need to light by discussing my thought process for this project, how I went about collecting the data, and revealing the results that I have discovered from that data. Based on all of the information that I have gathered up to this point, I will make recommendations on what product should libraries develop to help meet the current needs and wants of the senior community.

Methodology

Thought Process

Before I dive deep into how I carried out the data gathering process, it would probably be best if I reveal what my initial thought process was before I embarked on this quest. As was mentioned before in the last paper, the research that I previously did suggested that some of the senior community is embracing and adapting to the latest in information technology. Some of them have now adopted digital sources, like Google and social media, as their main access to any information that they are looking for. Based on observation, another main appeal of digital sources that attracts seniors is that allows them, as well as everybody else, to stay in touch with friends and relatives.

Even so though, there are still other seniors who prefer to get their information through traditional means like the newspaper. According to an USA Today article, which uses a graph that was created by the Pew Research Center, 34% of U.S. adults who are

---

[1] Research and Statistics for Seniors, *Seniorliving.org,* https://www.seniorliving.org/research/
(Accessed March 26, 2019).
[2] Ibid.

over the age of 65 don't use the Internet.[3] Most likely, this is because its part of a tradition that they do not want to change, as well as the possibility that they could be a apprehensive about trying to use electronic sources. All of these have become a pat of their comfort zone, which can be difficult to step out of.

These were what made up the majority of my mindset, as I was getting ready to collect data. I was curious as to which side are today's seniors mostly leaning towards. I also was curious as to what specific quality or value that most seniors are looking for in information sources in general. These questions were part of the driving force behind the tools that I used in gathering the data that was necessary in creating those coveted answers.

Methods

For this project, my plan of attack was to make use of different forms of communication to gather a rich amount of data. I used telephone, social media, and face-to-face to reach out to the senior population. To prepare for this, I came up four general questions that pertain to information resources in general. In regards to the possibility that the interviewees didn't want to spend a long time playing twenty questions, I decided that it would be best if I kept the interviews short and sweet. I also didn't ask any senior-specific questions for a couple of reasons. I didn't want to be rude by bringing up their age, as it is one of the things that most people are sensitive to. Another reason is that I wanted to see if I could get the senior community's perspective on general topics that apply to everyone who makes use of information sources and services in general. By keeping these things in mind, I thought that it would make it easier for the people I interviewed to talk to me. These are the questions that I used for the interviews:

1. Do you mostly use digital or physical sources to get information?

2. Where do you mostly go to get information?

3. What is the most common issue you encounter when attempting to get information access?

4. To you, what is the most important thing that information sources and services should have?

In total, I was able to able to talk to six different seniors who are at least 70 years of age. These individuals are what made up my sample group. Through the use of both physical sources (phone calls and in-person conversation) and digital sources (Facebook), I interviewed these people using the four questions that I came up with. Overall, this was

---

[3] Leo Sun, "34% of U.S. Senior Citizens Don't Use the Internet, Pew Study Shows," *USA Today,* April 21, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2018/04/21/a-foolish-take-over-a-third-of-us-senior-citizens-dont-use-the-internet/33886195/ (Accessed March 29, 2019).

pretty much the method I used to go about gathering the necessary data that was needed to plot a course for the ship that is my project.

Findings

Interviews

These are the results that I have gathered from my interviews. Out of respect for the interviewees, as well as to protect their identities, I will not be revealing their names. These are the following answers to my interview questions:

Interviewee #1:

1. I mostly use the Internet.

2. I usually Google what I am looking for. If it is news, I use Fox and CNN to see if I can decide what real truth is since I think they both slant it in different directions.

3. The real truth and not someone's viewpoint.

4. I think real truth. Whether I am seeking news about the world, medicine, science, products or whatever. So many things are misrepresented.

Interviewee #2:

1. Both of them. I use the newspaper more often.

2. Newspaper.

3. Not really.

4. Honesty. Two different opinions.

Interviewee #3:

1. Digital sources. Sometimes physical sources

2. Google.

3. Trying to figure out what I need. Not familiar with computers.

4. More detailed information. Less vague.

Interviewee #4:

1. The first place I go to is digital sources.

2. I start with Google and YouTube.

3. Sometimes I have to waste time with sites that are more of an advertisement than the straight information. Often they want money for giving me what I know.

4. Get straight to the point! I don't want to waste a lot of time listening to music or jokes prior to getting the information. An example would be when you make a purchase. Things no longer come with instruction books. You have to go online to find them.

Interviewee #5:

1. Internet

2. Google

3. Too many sites given

4. Truthfulness

Interviewee #6:

1. Newspaper

2. Television

3. Not computer savvy

4. Honesty

Results Analysis

As it can be seen here, four out of the six seniors here rely mostly on digital sources for all of their information needs. Most of them use the Internet to procure the information that they need at the time. This seems to represent the point that there are some in the senior community that have fully embraced and adapted to modern digital technologies. These seniors here use sites like Facebook and CNN to stay informed about what is going on in the world, as well as in the lives of their friends and relatives. With that said, there are still a few who prefer to consult the newspaper and television for information. Those that do said that they are not familiar enough with computers to make full use of digital sources.

One thing that both sides of this coin have in common though is that they both are looking valid, sources that give you the truth without shoving waves of advertisements

down your throat. In today's digital age, fake news seems to been running rampant in the media realm. While fake news has practically been around since the first newspaper publications, the rise of digital sources has placed it firmly in the middle of the spotlight. According to an article that was written by Bertin Martens and company, "It is only recently however that it has surged back onto our radar screens, in the wake of the digital transformation of news from offline to online distribution and the rise of social media as a news distribution channel."[4] It would seem that the online world has made it much easier for fake news to not only get around, but it made also made it easier for fake news to grow as well. I would go as far to say that that is the main reason why some seniors prefer physical sources like the local newspaper.

Recommendations

If libraries want to play a bigger role in the lives of seniors, they need to first tackle two big issues, which are lack of honesty in sources and familiarity with twenty-first century technology. If these two things aren't tackled now, they could grow to be a major threat to libraries in the near future. In order for seniors, as well as everybody else that comes to a library, to be convinced to use a library's sources and services, the one crucial thing that the organization has got to have is their trust. Fake news, as well as other fake sources, destroys the credibility of honest sources that libraries have in their collections. If left unchecked, fake sources could cause irreparable damage to the reputation of libraries everywhere. Trust can be a difficult thing to acquire, and the rapid rise of fake news makes that task even more complicated.

Overall, that is pretty much what I have uncovered from my adventures with this project. Based on the cumulative research that I have gathered for both this assignment and the previous assignment, these are the following recommendations that I believe could best help libraries reach out to the senior community:

- Create a general program or workshop that is geared towards teaching seniors how to use the latest in information technology to the fullest. This is a good way to ease seniors into modern technology. It also allows the library the opportunity to eliminate any fear the seniors might have and begin to earn their trust.

- Introduce a service or product that specializes in screening sources to determine whether or not it is honest or fake. Create criteria that cover what an honest source should look like and compare it to the source in question.

---

[4] Bertin Martens, Luis Aguiar, Estrella Gomez-Herrera, and Frank Muller-Langer, "The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and Fake News," *JRC Technical Reports* (April 2018): 1-56, https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/sites/jrccties/files/dewp_201802_digital_transformation_of_news_media_and_the_rise_of_fake_news_final_180418.pdf (Accessed March 31, 2019).

- Create a program that promotes the CRAAP Test (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose), a tool that readers can use to determine whether or not a source is valid.

Conclusion

Doing this project was a bit of an interesting experience for me. While I realize that I did not do some of the things that I discussed in my previous assignment, I still felt that I was connecting with the senior community as a whole. The project gave me an opportunity to try to look at information services from their perspective. It gave me an opportunity to see some of the issues that they are facing in trying to get information access. Everything in this adventure has allowed me to walk away with new knowledge and a new perspective, which I intend to use to try to help these seniors, as well as the senior community as a whole, with the issues that are preventing them from having a healthy relationship with libraries and information services.

Works Cited Page

Martens, Bertin and Luis Aguiar, Estrella Gomez-Herrera and Frank Muller-Langer.
        "The Digital Transformation of News Media and the Rise of Disinformation and
        Fake News." *JRC Technical Reports* (April 2018): 1-56.
        https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/communities/sites/jrccties/files/dewp_201802_digital_tran
        sformation_of_news_media_and_the_rise_of_fake_news_final_180418.pdf
        (Accessed March 31, 2019).
Research and Statistics for Seniors. *Seniorliving.org.*
        https://www.seniorliving.org/research/
        (Accessed March 26, 2019).
Sun, Leo. "34% of U.S. Senior Citizens Don't Use the Internet, Pew Study Shows." *USA
        Today.* April 21, 2018. https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2018/04/21/a-
        foolish-take-over-a-third-of-us-senior-citizens-dont-use-the-internet/33886195/
        (Accessed March 29, 2019).