Ethnographic Study

How do people from different cultures, working backgrounds, and education levels seek out information differently? Well there are certainly many ways in which they do differ, however in this paper I will be discussing how artists participate in information seeking. For this ethnographic study I interviewed two people: a poet named Kirby, and a musician/painter named Eliya. Since all of these are creative outlets and are art forms in which these participants have created work in I have decided to group them more broadly with artists.

Artists typically have four main information seeking uses: inspiration, specific visual elements, knowledge of materials and techniques, and marketing and career guidance (Hemmig, 2009). To test out this hypothesis to see what kind of information Kirby and Eliya were looking for I posed the question "When seeking out information what is typically the type of information you are looking for?" to which Kirby responded "A lot of the times if I look something up I'm trying to find the answer to a random question that pop into my head, like yesterday I was eating pistachios and I was like oh do they come from a tree or a plant? So I looked it up. Also I look up whatever the current discourse is about online or current events especially if I see a lot of other people in my circle talking about them". This doesn't fall into any of the four main information seeking uses artists usually have, perhaps there is something more to the way that artists participate in information seeking (Hemmig, 2009).

When I asked Eliya the same question she responded with "Because I teach music and I'm doing a lot of musicing [sic] with people who play piano and at every lesson I have to look up chords to a song, I look up how to play certain types of music much more than I go online shopping or scrolling on my phone". This would fall into the knowledge of materials and techniques category that artists are known for information seeking for (Hemmig, 2009). There is

a clear difference between these two answers, Kirby's seems a bit more sporadic meanwhile Eliya's is much more focused on gathering specific information. It's possible that because they are from two different forms of art they have different styles of gathering information.

It is said that artists' main information seeking preference is browsing as opposed to active seeking of information (Hemmig, 2009). To test this theory I asked the interviewees "Is your information seeking usually more passive or more active?" passive here being a stand in for browsing. Kirby claimed that "I would say mostly passive, but a lot of my passive consumption turns into active consumption, like I'll be scrolling on my phone and stumble across something I didn't know I was looking for and then look more into that thing". Kirby's words here clearly show that she much prefers browsing, just like other artists she much prefers to look around before she does any kind of active searching (Hemmig, 2009).

When I asked Eliya, she replied "I think it also depends on the kind of information, if we are talking art information, active, if we are talking in general, passive. Like I have tried to get better about actively looking up stuff". Eliya essentially states that her searching in the art world is typically more active, which refutes the claim that artists usually prefer to browse (Hemmig, 2009). However, she does give the caveat that her general experience with information seeking is passive so there's some dissonance there.

Artists are also known to frequently use public libraries as sources, especially visual artists, so I wanted to see if that applied to other types of artists as well (Hemmig, 2009). I asked "When is the last time that you went to a library?". Kirby, while not a visual artist stated "the last time I went to a library was in December, I usually don't go very often". This seems to rebuke the idea that artists use libraries as a main source of information (Hemmig, 2009). Eliya on the other hand stated "I went to a library physically 6 months ago but I do have libby on my phone

that I use pretty frequently like I download one or two books a week". With Eliya being a visual artist herself this seems to rebuke the studies claim even more since she hasn't been to the library in a longer time period than Kirby (Hemmig, 2009). However, if you count libby as a library resource which I would argue it is, then Eliya's response here doesn't entirely rebuke the idea that artists frequently use the library. Especially if she is downloading multiple books every week, there is a clear use of some of what the library has to offer.

I would say that this presents a challenge for getting artists information. If artists are not willing to or can't go to the library then they are certainly limited as to the information that they can find. Even with modern search engines, if you do not know how to use them properly then you will not be able to find the information that you are looking for. Librarians can help artists find the information that they are looking for, so perhaps there should be some sort of incentive for them to come to the library. Maybe libraries could start doing art galleries and poetry readings to convince more artist to come seek information. Artists are known for using their social networks for information as well as using libraries as a meeting place for those social interactions and information gathering, libraries could possibly hold more social events to try to attract more artists (Lo & Chu, 2015).

In a survey conducted by this article there were several artists who claimed that books and writers were large sources of information and inspiration (Mason & Robinson, 2011). Since Kirby herself is in the literary field I figured that I'd ask her "When you need inspiration for an artistic endeavor what resources do you use to find that inspiration?". Kirby stated "A lot of it would just be from my life, things I see out in the world or something you overhear out in the world, and I don't think it's ever active looking for inspiration but it's like sometimes you just stumble across it. Sometimes I'll look at literary journals and read contemporary poems or read a

book I really like to get inspired". Kirby gets inspiration from literary journals, contemporary poems, and books, all of which fall under the category of books and writer's works (Mason & Robinson, 2011).

I asked Eliya what inspired her, and she claimed "Usually like life based stuff so if I'm like as an artist I create or I teach or I reproduce stuff that's already been done in the context of performance, if I'm looking for inspiration on how to create though I would go about it by looking at my surroundings and journaling, and if I'm looking for teaching inspiration I might go to a youtube music teacher for instance, I had a hard time creating warm ups in my early lessons so I went to tiktok and youtube to find good warm ups". Eliya has many hats that she wears and therefore seeks out information in different ways for each of those different aspects of her life. However, there was no mention of literary inspiration therefore there is perhaps a gap within the concept of how artists participate in information seeking (Mason & Robinson, 2011).

Both answers point to the fact that artists don't necessarily always find inspiration from other works. While Kirby mentioned that sometimes she consumes other literature it seems like she is much more likely to get inspiration from the natural world. Eliya also states that she finds inspiration from the world around her. Both answers support the claim that artists usually use things from the world around them and things from their personal lives as sources of inspiration (Hemmig, 2009). Also this survey claims that when asked where artists find inspiration, several said they "wander aimlessly on the streets" which is similar to what Kirby and Eliya answered (Lo & Chu, 2015). The challenge here is figuring out ways to get artists to consume more works to try and expand their horizon and synthesize new information into their artwork.

Electronic sources are seen as highly valuable to many artists (Hemmig, 2009). To test this theory I asked "When you seek out information what resource(s) do you use?". Kirby said

"When seeking out information I use Google". This seems to verify the perception that artists see electronic resources as highly valuable as the only resource she listed was an online search engine (Hemmig, 2009). Eliya replied "It depends on the information if I was looking up something artsy I guess so if I wanted to know I don't know what hand position a cord needs I would just go to google if its something pretty simple I usually go to google, if it's something more advanced I would probably ask someone more experienced, if it was a technique I would go to a book or a YouTube video, I think it just depends on the information". Eliya uses several different types of information, however the majority of them are online resources which validates the perception that artists highly value electronic resources (Hemmig, 2009).

Since I was getting mainly answers involving online searching I decided to ask outright about physical media to try and see if it was something they used at all. Artists have been known to use physical media quite a bit for things like inspiration (Lo & Chu, 2015). I asked "How often would you say you use print resources to find information?". I thought that surely this would open up a discussion about the usefulness of physical media. Kirby responded "Almost never for a purposeful search, for entertainment or personal enrichment I would say on a weekly basis". I was somewhat surprised to hear a poet say that she didn't prefer physical information over electronic information. This also goes against the idea that artists go out of their way to use physical resources to get inspiration (Lo & Chu, 2015).

Eliya said "I would say probably like it depends on what context, cause I use music books a lot to teach the lessons that I teach but that's just stuff I keep coming back to and that's a physical print thing but actively I'd say 2-3 times a week, I read a non-fiction book at least once or twice a month to find out information usually". I found this response particularly interesting because she was talking about reading non-fiction books to find out information. I assumed that

she would've most likely used the internet exclusively to find out information than actual physical books given how other artists typically participate in information seeking behavior (Hemmig, 2009).

Artists typically rely on their social networks in some way for information. In fact in this survey only 2 participants made the claim that they never used their social network for information (Mason & Robinson, 2011). So I asked "How likely are you to use your personal social network to get information?". Kirby replied by saying "I ask people in my social network for information daily". This reinforces the idea that artists rely heavily on their social network for information that they are seeking (Mason & Robinson, 2011). When I followed up by asking "can you give me an example?" Kirby said "sometimes I'll see something on a social media app or maybe hear something at work and I'll ask my partner or maybe one of my friends hey did you see or hear about this? What did you think of it?".

Eliya claimed "Very likely, I probably do it like everyday like if I hear the smallest thing I'm like hey (to my partner) did you hear this thing, hey coworker have you heard about this, especially because at the bar I interact with people pretty regularly. I feel like every customer comes up with some new piece of information every time that I'm working, and they'll come up to me and talk to me about it". Eliya also supports the idea that artists rely heavily on their social network in order to find information (Mason & Robinson, 2011).

I also asked both of the interviewees about media credibility to see ways in which they participate in fact checking and trying to verify sources. I asked "If you find what you believe to be an uncredible source of information do you fact check it? If yes, where do you go to fact check the information?". Kirby responded "What I usually do is I try to see where they are getting their information from, is it like a direct source, is it a certain person they're talking

about, if it's like a study then see where the study is from and evaluate that and then I feel like a lot of it just common sense". I thought that this was a good sign of being able to gauge credibility of sources, finding where a source comes from can certainly be difficult, however it is usually worth it when finding out whether the source was credible or not.

Eliya replied "It depends, if it feels sketchy I might consult another source, fact checking is kind of difficult for me I usually just look at another source and see if the information is consistent". I thought this answer was also good, and I think it's a good sign for artists' ability to verify sources properly. It seems that both Kirby and Eliya take a cautious approach when it comes to verifying sources which is great for consuming information, especially with how much misinformation is out on the internet today.

In conclusion, artists are a very diverse group of information seekers. Kirby and Eliya, while they had some similarities, also had quite a few differences in the ways in which they participate within information seeking. Both seem to much prefer electronic resources such as online search engines, both also seem to gather inspiration in a similar way, both use some physical media, but not as often as other artists do, and both don't use the library all that much as a resource. I think that given these facts to serve this community better there needs to be a change in how libraries try to attract artists to come to their facilities. I think libraries should try to host events that cater to artists like the aforementioned poetry readings and art galleries. I also think maybe libraries could host more music software on their computers to help musicians learn instruments and try to figure out new techniques to use. There is a lot of work to be done to cover the information gaps experienced by artists, and libraries need to try to do something different if they want to attract them to their establishment.

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