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The Shape(s) of Information Practice: using Radial Mapping Qualitatively

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ABSTRACT

Information practices comprise both seeking and avoidance. Although information practices scholars use qualitative and visual methods to understand seeking practices, they rarely do so to understand avoidance. This paper proposes a new visual method that supports revealing and explaining the complex interplay of seeking and avoidance in rich qualitative data. We introduce seven dimensions of information seeking and avoidance practice (intensity, granularity, engagement, control, relevance, quality, and timeliness). We conceptualize these visually as axes radiating outward from a central origin. We use Excel radar charts to depict these dimensions, allowing us to identify and characterize the shapes of information seeking and avoidance in everyday information practices. We apply our approach to two cases from published literature to show how mapping reveals the interplay between seeking and avoidance at one point in time and over time. We propose potential data collection and analysis applications of this method for information practices research.

KEYWORDS

Information practices; Qualitative methods; Visual methods; Information avoidance; Information seeking

INTRODUCTION

Information practices include those that limit, exclude, restrict, or reduce information seeking, evaluation, and use as well as those that facilitate, support, or enhance it. However, our discipline's emphasis on information seeking tends to treat seeking and avoidance as binary opposites (Case et al, 2005). As a result, the tendency in LIS research is either to overlook information avoidance altogether or to treat it as a simple failure to seek or use information. We argue elsewhere (Hicks et al, under review) that it is more fruitful to consider avoidance and seeking not as static opposites but as complex, dynamic, interacting, complementary sets of practices.

Because practices related to information avoidance may be hard to put into words or invisible to LIS scholars, – and possibly to the people affected by them – they require methodological strategies that reveal their complexity, interplay, and dynamism. This short paper proposes a visual mapping method that information practices scholars could use to reveal and explain the complex interplay of seeking and avoidance in rich qualitative data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whereas information practices scholars use a variety of qualitative methods, research on information avoidance predominantly uses quantitative methods such as psychological scales, surveys, and experiments (Klaus, 2021), which fail to capture the contextual shapes of seeking and avoidant interactions with information over time.

Visual methods have been identified as a strategy for revealing the hidden and the complex in information studies (McKenzie & Dalmer, 2020) and a growing number are in use (e.g., Hartel & Thomson, 2011; Thomson, 2018; for an overview, see Pollak, 2017). We propose a qualitative application of radial mapping to reveal the interplay of information seeking and avoidance practices in real-life situations and over time.

A common use of radial mapping in LIS is LibQUAL+®. This assessment approach uses radar charts to map users' perceptions of the level of library service against their minimal and desired levels of service. This mapping affords a quantitative analysis of the gaps between service levels on a number of dimensions (LibQUAL+®, 2022). We apply radial mapping to a qualitative analysis of the dimensions of information seeking and avoidance practices, taking inspiration from qualitative visual approaches such as mapping information horizons (Sonnenwald, 1999) or information worlds (Greyson, O'Brien, and Shoveller, 2017; Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019).

MAPPING INFORMATION PRACTICES HOLISTICALLY

Through the development of an extensive literature review (Hicks et al., under review) we identified seven core mutually exclusive dimensions across which information seeking and avoidance practices may intertwine:

- **Intensity:** the amount, pace, or force of information.
- **Granularity:** three levels: engagement with potential information sources; selection and evaluation of information from sources; engagement with information within sources.
- **Engagement:** how invested or involved a person is with information from active/deliberate seeking or avoidance through passive/receptive to uninvolved except for engaging with information by proxy.
- **Control:** the extent to which the person has or believes they have command over information.
- **Relevance:** the significance or importance that information has to a person
- **Quality:** the authority or credibility that information has to a person.
- **Timeliness:** the temporal suitability or appropriateness of information to a person

To map our seven dimensions, we conceptualize them as axes radiating outward from a central origin.

Characteristic	Origin (Low)	Midpoint (Moderate)	Outside (High)
intensity	Lower amount, pace, or force of information	Moderate amount, pace, or force of information	Higher amount, pace, or force of information
granularity	Lower granularity: relates to information sources	Moderate granularity: relates to selecting and evaluating information from sources	Higher granularity: relates to information from sources
engagement	More passive engagement, e.g., seeking or avoiding by proxy	Moderate engagement, e.g., scanning/browsing without actively seeking/avoiding	More active engagement, e.g., actively seeking/avoiding
control	Less control over information	Moderate control over information	More control over information
relevance	Lower relevance of source/information	Moderate relevance of source/information	More relevance of source/information
quality	Lower quality of source/information	Moderate quality of source/information	Higher quality of source/information
timeliness	Lower temporal suitability	Moderate temporal suitability	Higher temporal suitability

Table 1. Dimensional Axes

We contend that radially mapping rich accounts of ways people fulfilled these seven dimensions allows us to see avoidance and seeking as interrelated, complementary, dynamic sets of information practices. In other words, we see analytic potential in the relative **shapes**, not the size of the radar charts. Therefore, rather than using validated scales, which place emphasis on quantitative measurement, we assessed data excerpts for low, moderate, and high engagement with the seven axes and assigned nominal values in Excel to create radar charts of the shapes.

To demonstrate the potential of our developing methodological strategy, we have chosen to re-analyze two cases from our own publications. Although one was initially analyzed as a case of information avoidance and the other as a case of information seeking, mapping shows that both include practices of both seeking and avoidance and allows us to demonstrate how engagement with these practices might change over time.

Case 1: Avoidance strategies (Lloyd & Hicks, 2022)

Lloyd and Hicks (2022) identified several examples of information avoidance in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic:

“I became overwhelmed... what I decided to do was focus on the information that I need to know, I just started to compartmentalise stuff and only look at stuff that was particularly relevant to me, which was how to keep safe” (P16).

“I don’t listen to long conversations that are going on... just tell me what the facts are” (P28)

Others commented on how they started to focus more on local rather than national news (P28), with a participant in the south of England talking about how he only tuned into the information that would directly impact him rather than “Northwest” updates (P29).

For example, participants noted purposefully avoiding looking up information related to the distance they were allowed to drive for exercise when they suspected that this knowledge would force them to give up something that was benefiting their mental health (P18). Another participant admitted that they had avoided government advice to download the NHS Test and Trace app because they feared it would curtail their ability to maintain their independence (P27).

We used our developing method to map these examples this way:

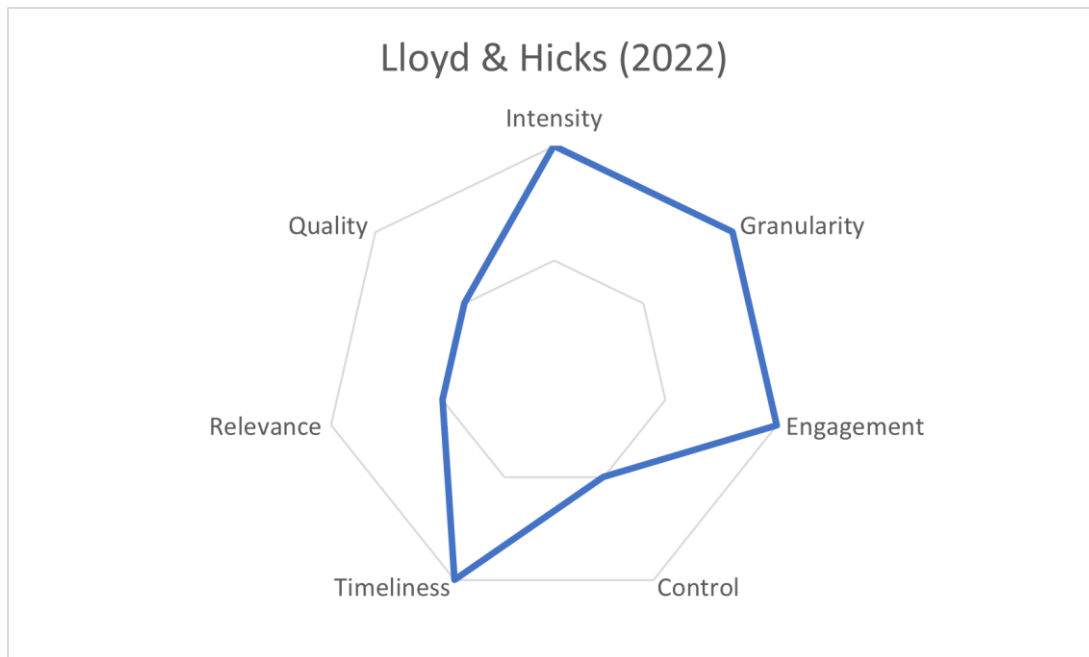


Figure 1. Avoidance strategies

In Case 1, intensity is high with COVID information coming quickly and in great quantity. Granularity is high as the case relates to content rather than sources. Engagement is high as participants are very active and take a strict approach to avoiding this information. Control is moderate as even though they are trying to avoid information, they may encounter unwanted information elsewhere (e.g., from a friend). Timeliness is high because the information relates to the ongoing infection situation. Relevance is moderate: for these participants, the information could be relevant but they decide they can live without it. Authority is also moderate – and in flux – as they lose trust in the government and start to avoid information because they think they are being played.

Case 2: Active information seeking and management (Dalmer & McKenzie, 2019)

“...RV cared for her mother who was living with mixed dementia and, like a majority of dementia care providers interviewed, had difficulty dealing with any sort of information about long-term care placement. RV’s quote below captures a number of caregivers’ experiences, in that the lines of work that comprise her everyday, which include affective work, the work of organizing and managing, and strategic avoidance work, do not occur sequentially or in an orderly fashion, but instead happen simultaneously:

I learned right then that it scares the heck out of me to look too far ahead and I can’t manage it. I can’t manage stuff that isn’t relevant. So a lot of the information that I got at the course, both courses, it was too far ahead. Like, I couldn’t use it then. Like long-term care? I’m only now, 3 years later, ready to go back and look at that ... I’d file under L, but I wouldn’t even look at it, you know?”

In this case, we have used our approach to map the current scenario and to imagine a future scenario when the participant’s mother is in immediate need of long-term care.

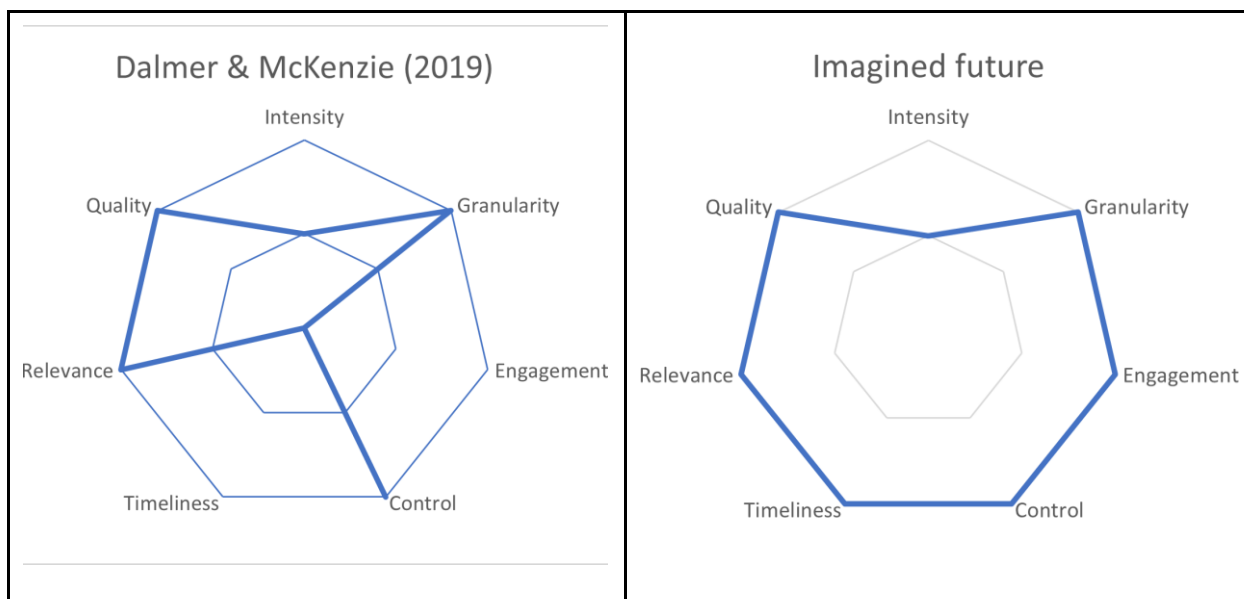


Figure 2. Active information work

In this case, intensity is neutral at both time points: the information is coming at a manageable pace. The high granularity indicates that this case focuses on content rather than source: the participant has already actively sought out sources and extracted information from them but is avoiding engaging with and using it. Control is very high at both time points because the interviewee has created and is managing her own collection for future use. Relevance and quality are both high: these are sources she trusts related to a salient problem.

At present, timeliness is very low because the information is not useful to her yet, although she knows it will be. In this case, she is avoiding the information until it is needed, not for all time. For this reason, engagement is likewise low at present: it was very active earlier in her process when she attended two courses and sought, collected, and classified information but is now at a passive stage as she holds it for future use. We imagine that the need to move her mother to long-term care will re-activate her information seeking and increase the timeliness of the information.

CONCLUSION

We chose these two cases because initial data analysis characterized one as avoidance and the other as active information work. However, our maps do not depict the cases as either/or, full seeking/full avoidance. Rather, using radial mapping qualitatively allows us to see the nuanced and dynamic interplay between seeking and avoidance practices in these everyday information encounters.

This paper represents the first application of this methodological strategy. We envision several ways that radial mapping might be used qualitatively to advance understanding of information practices in new ways.

First, information practices scholars might use this technique to explore whether multiple instances of information seeking and avoidance coalesce into similar shapes. For example, the “chevron” shape of Case 1 might be characteristic of responses to information overload. The “clover” shape of Case 2 might be associated with other instances in which people gather information but do not use it because it is not **yet** useful, for example digital hoarding. We are developing a secondary analysis of data from published research to answer this question.

Second, these maps are snapshots at a single time point. Mapping the interplay of seeking and avoidance practices at different time points, as we imagined doing in Case 2, might reveal interdependent relationships between or among dimensions; is increasing timeliness generally associated with decreasing intensity and vice versa? A longitudinal approach invites the possibility of creating animations that reveal the forces nudging the shape larger in some dimensions and smaller in others over time.

Third, because information avoidance research was the source of the dimensions (Hicks et al, under review), we acknowledge that our maps likely do not represent all dimensions of interest to information practices scholars. The advantage of a radial mapping approach is that it is extensible; future research could identify additional dimensions and develop agreed-on scales.

Finally, a fully-developed qualitative radial mapping strategy could be applied as a participatory data collection method where participants are asked to map their own practices and make visible the aspects that are significant to them (e.g., Hicks, 2018; Hicks & Lloyd, 2018).

GENERATIVE AI USE

We confirm that we did not use generative AI tools/services to author this submission.

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