How do the Angels Share? A holistic approach to understanding information practices in scotch whisky production

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Abstract

Introduction. Scotch malt whisky is very important to Scotland's economy and also to ideas about its culture, heritage and identity. The whisky production process involves a highly complex intersection of industrial, cultural and embodied informational aspects. There is nonetheless a dearth of scholarship regarding the information practices associated with cultural products such as whisky and conducting research in such a complex space poses many challenges to researchers.

Approach. In this poster, we ask how the information practices around such cultural products should be investigated. Using Polkinghorne and Given's framework for holistic research, we outline a proposed approach to the research design of such an investigation by first identifying the research problem then articulating research questions and suggesting methods and methodology.

Conclusion. We invite poster session attendees to engage with us in a dialogue regarding what might be needed to conduct a holistic investigation of information practices in this space and, further, to consider how and which other cultural products and related practices should be studied.

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Significance and relevance of the topic

Food and drink, as essential parts of people's lives, has been under-studied in information science. There is a growing body of scholarship on food information practices, such as gourmet cooking (Hartel, 2010), food shopping (Ocepek, 2018), and everyday interactions with food (Polkinghorne, 2021). However, research on information practices related to drinks is much more limited. Given et al.'s (2017) study with wine producers is a rare example. While there has been much scholarship on workplace information practices, the focus has often been on knowledge workers in office environments, rather than on the diverse information environments where food and drink are commercially produced. Still less scholarship has investigated complex information situations - such as whisky production - where technical, workplace, embodied, economic, and cultural aspects intersect to inform practices.

Problem statement and research question

In this poster we will address the research problem of the dearth of literature on information practices in the space of such complex production and begin to explore the question: How can the information practices around complex cultural products, such as whisky, be investigated?

Content

The poster will introduce the topic and describe our proposed approach to research in this area. Given the complexity, a holistic approach is appropriate and here we take our lead from Polkinghorne and Given (2021)'s model of holistic information research. The framework encourages "paradigmatically holistic research, which will provide for richer analyses of critical phenomena in the discipline" (p. 1), making it well formulated for use in this context. Below we use the first three stages of the framework, concerning research design, to present our approach.

Identifying the Research Problem (Framework Stage 1): In this stage, the framework requires a "[f]ocus on whole people" and "acknowledgment that structures and systems exist and have qualities beyond those of individuals" (Polkinghorne & Given, 2021, p. 7). Food and drink are central to many cultures' beliefs regarding their heritage and identity and many foodstuffs are particularly identified with specific regions or peoples. For Scotland, and many Scots, scotch whisky, or simply "scotch", plays that role, with a significance that goes beyond its economic importance. A recent study by Reid al. (2024) explored storytelling in the glens of Scotland and found that all the important narratives they discovered were interconnected with the "malt whisky story" (p. 508). This highlights the importance of scotch to cultural heritage knowledge and points to the importance of oral traditions to its production. Very little is known about the information practices of those involved in whisky production. Given the complexity involved and the spirit's importance to the culture and economy, understanding these practices is crucial.

Articulating the Research Questions (Framework Stage 2): In this stage, there needs to be "[f]ocus on articulating experience (i.e., an expansive approach), rather than measuring (i.e., a reductive approach)" (Polkinghorne & Given, p. 7). Taking a holistic perspective on the information work of producing whisky includes understanding the cultural context in which it exists, information practices related to the workplace environment of production, and information practices related to its physical production. Research questions related to cultural heritage include: How do those involved in scotch whisky production gain knowledge about how to create whisky? How do they view their work in relation to the tradition of whisky production?

Much workplace information practice research centres on offices and knowledge workers, rather than those working with their hands. There are, of course, workplace information practice studies that do not focus on knowledge workers, such as on firefighters (Lloyd, 2007), or knowledge workers whose jobs have a physical component, such as ambulance officers (Lloyd, 2009) and

archaeologists (Olsson 2016). However, little is known about the complex practices involved in the production of something like scotch, which includes cultural practices, scientific information, physical production, and many of the elements of working in a traditional workplace environment (e.g., marketing and shipping). Research questions related to workplace information include: What are the information practices involved in the cycle of producing whisky? How is information shared between colleagues?

There has been recognition that information behaviour and practices research has not sufficiently acknowledged the role of the body in information work (e.g., Lueg, 2015). Embodiment has been an increasing focus, with the study of food (e.g., Ocepek, 2018; Polkinghorne, 2021) and serious leisure (e.g., Cox et al., 2017; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). Much descriptive language around whisky is sensory. For example, the term "nose" is used to describe not only the smell of the product but also describes a whisky expert such as a distiller. While much sensory description is associated with the finished product, such interactions also inform production; predictably, taste and smell, though other senses are involved in often unexpected ways. A worker might use the quality of the "growling" of an iron rake on malt to provide information about how effectively it is being turned. Research questions related to embodied information practices include: Which information practices of whisky production are informed by sensory information? How is this embodied information acquired and passed on to others?

Selecting Methodology and Methods (Framework Stage 3): In this stage, researchers must "[c]hoose methodology and methods that enable connections between individual experience and larger context" (Polkinghorne & Given, p. 7). An important aspect of this research is to capture the living history and traditions of producing scotch, as well as to learn the 'information story' behind the work. To understand this complexity, ethnographic methods - including observation, interviews, and collection of artefacts/documents will be used to capture the context in which this information work occurs, along with workplace information practices, information sharing, and embodied information practices.

Conclusion

Food and drink are more than sustenance. Not only do humans put in an incredible amount of information work into producing that which keeps them alive, the food and drink produced can be of incredible cultural importance. To capture the living history and traditions of scotch whisky, as well as the workplace, cultural and embodied information practices involved in producing it, a holistic approach must be taken. We want begin discussions with CoLIS 12 attendees by asking: What do you think would be needed in a holistic approach for studying the production of culturally important goods? What else should be taken into consideration? And, to further the conversation, what other culturally important goods' production should be studied?

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