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Knowledge Gap, Information-Seeking and the Poor

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SUMMARY. The purpose of this chapter is to address the issues of information seeking behavior within a context of an information poor life style. Several factors can be attributed to an information poor world. For example, it is one in which the mass media are not viewed as providers of useful information. Moreover, this is a world in which there is a parsimony of helpful interpersonal channels. Thus, both formal and personal sources are devoid of everyday practical information of the kind that is needed by poor people.

In addressing reasons to explain this phenomenon, knowledge gap theory is examined. The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that, although the mass media are perceived as sources of information for some (the "media rich"), they do not respond to the needs of the poor. Unfortunately, the role that interpersonal sources might play in this process, have not been adequately addressed by knowledge gap researchers.

INTRODUCTION

An item of discussion for researchers interested in information-seeking behaviors and poverty pertains to the issue of "knowledge

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The basis for this argument is that, sources of information are available to both poor and non-poor. However, there appears to be an enormous difference in the ways in which the information rich and the information poor search for, use, and share information.

In our opinion, this observation leads to a number of interesting questions. For example, what exactly is an impoverished lifestyle? And, more importantly, are there characteristics about this lifestyle that might be generalizable to other populations?

To begin to respond to these questions, it might be worthwhile to explore these issues within a needs/wants categorization. Wilson, Derr, and others have engaged in a long-standing debate regarding factors that constitute "needs" and "wants." Although it is not our intent to engage in further discourse regarding these notions, a word about the difference between them does appear to be in order.

A consensus that seems reasonable is that "a need" is somehow linked to a state of dependency. In other words, if the information is absent, our current state-of-affairs is in jeopardy. It is more than advantageous to have it; not to possess the information is to make our circumstances worse.

On the other hand, "want" conveys some degree of enhancement. That is, we would not be worse off if we didn't have the information, but it would be an added benefit if we possessed it. It seems to us, therefore, that what constitutes an impoverished lifestyle is the inability of poor people to resolve their need for critical information.

So, in response to our first question: what constitutes an impoverished lifestyle? It seems that a primary contributor is a dysfunctional life-world. We want to make clear that our use of this term, dysfunctional, occurs because members of this social milieu are themselves aware that items of information within their worlds do not lend themselves to solving problematic situations. A plausible explanation is three-fold. For one, because they perceive that sources of information are unusable in a timely manner. Secondly, because, when sources are both available and useful, they are insufficient to respond to their needs. Finally, the channels of information, both mass and interpersonal, are viewed with suspicion and skepticism.
MEDIA AS SOURCES OF EVERYDAY INFORMATION

Repeated findings from the communication research literature link media exposure to information awareness and use. Regarding the use of the media by poor people, studies revealed that television is the medium of choice. Related to this finding, is that television is an important source that could be used by the poor in their everyday lives. Sorts of things documented include crime, health and safety concerns, and programs that reflect true-life situations, primarily of a disruptive nature.\(^2\)

However, there is some debate about the utility of television (and, for that matter, the media, generally) to enrich the knowledge stock of poor people.\(^3\) In fact, the research suggests that, in particular, television, is mainly viewed as a source of escape and diversion.\(^4\)

The second medium typically associated with poor people is newspapers. An observation noted is that newspapers have more utility than television.\(^5\) Items of interest include the following: crime and violence, news dealing with location-interests, and events that were of minority interests.\(^6\) For example, Bogart’s work with blue-collar workers reported that the disadvantaged’s use of the mass media was restricted, depended upon concrete details, and required a heightened degree of timeliness.\(^7\) Later, Chatman would extend Bogart’s description to include a first-order knowledge world.\(^8\) Essentially, this world requires information to respond to localized concerns. These concerns demand immediate attention, and acceptance depends upon the ability to be tested against lived experiences of potential receivers.

To sum up our discussion thus far, mass media are not used by poor people to assist them in coping with problems. Whatever roles are being played in their information environment are those that generally reflect their places in non-poor environments. Namely, mass media are sources of recreation, to give them a general sense of local and national affairs, and (with sensational news events) as topics of pastime conversations. Thus, if mass media are not sources of relevant information, do poor people make greater use of the interpersonal communication process?
INTERPERSONAL SOURCES
AND INFORMATION-SEEKING

By now, it should come as no surprise that the interpersonal picture researchers have of poor people is one of familiarity. In a sense, research contends a more restricted world view might enhance their knowledge of, and reliance on, information contacts from people very much like themselves. For example, Garfinkle defines this as shaping a world in which most issues are resolved through a taken-for-granted attitude. Wilson, on the other hand, argues that it is one in which “understanding is... on... local and personal matters.” However, no hard evidence exists to support the notion that the poor rely on each other for information of an important or critical nature.

If this is the case, what sorts of information exchanges occur on a social network comprised of family and neighbors? And, is this information sufficient to address problems and concerns? Research which addresses the information exchanges among poor people discovered these exchanges contributed little to one’s information stock. The finding that channels of information, capable of instrumental resolution to problems are rare in low-income environments is supported by Dervin and Greenberg who acknowledge that:

... interpersonal mistrust is high. The idealized image of a tight-knit lower-class community may have applied to a community of several decades ago.

In describing the interpersonal channels as providers of information, researchers acknowledge that they are not perceived as very helpful or desirable. For example, findings from research conducted by Cohen and Hodges, and Black revealed that the social exchanges among poor people are ones astonishing devoid of support or mutual caring.

Despite a few exceptions, the overwhelming evidence is that poor people have a minimal association with neighbors. Moreover, when family members are asked for advice, it is with the understanding that their difficulties remain within the family unit. Significantly, the impression provided by this information world is that it is one in which people live alienated from each other, where there
are few, if any, interpersonal contacts, and one in which neighbors and friends are seen through hostile and protective eyes. As a consequence, Ireland and Besner's convincing argument is that the disadvantaged are the most socially isolated from each other. We can reasonably assume then, that if this is indeed the case, the interpersonal channels that might serve as providers of needed information are also mutually exclusive.

In weighing the implications for purposes of our examination, we conclude that there is precariously little margin for information exchanges. Our observation is supported by research conducted by Chatman in which the information world of low-skilled workers was studied. One of the things she learned was that the poor live in an environment in which they are alienated from each other and have few, if any, social supports. Thus, poor people can be characterized as living in an impoverished information world. It is one in which mass media exposure does not yield new information to assist them and one in which interpersonal channels are closed. The findings from that research were considered so significant that the study led to a formulation of alienation theory in order to explain the destitution of this information world.

Before we proceed to a discussion of the broader issue of knowledge gap and its implications to the information-seeking patterns of poor people, we want to readdress our initial question, namely, factors that constitute an impoverished information environment. Our examination thus far contributes the following. The mass media do not hold a magical well-spring of new knowledge. Poor people view these sources primarily to be entertained or to pass time. When a medium, e.g., a newspaper, was specifically scanned for particular items, research shows that those items were extremely localized and responded to immediate lived experiences. However, because interpersonal channels were parsimonious, verification of facts (such as crime), which contained mutual interest and curiosity, was also closed. With this solemn picture of an information world in mind, we turn to an examination of supporting evidence that researchers have used to describe the "information poor."
LIBRARY USERS AND REFERENCE SERVICES

THE KNOWLEDGE GAP AS AN EXPLANATION

Since the late 1940's, researchers tried to identify and describe reasons why portions of the population acquire public information at differing rates. Knowledge gap, communication effects gap, and information gap are synonymous terms used by different researchers to describe the phenomenon. Inequitable access, psychological or educational barriers, and social systems explanations were advanced as to why gaps occurred in the acquisition of new information.

A seminal work addressing this issue was introduced in 1970 by Tichenor, Donohue and Olien. What the authors found was that people with greater economic means also had better informational sources than people of lesser means. Despite a few exceptions, also noted as contributing factors supporting the stratification argument are communication skills; prior exposure to a topic of interest or concern; social contacts; and attitudes of the individual regarding the relevance of the information in light of his needs.

In contrast to a description of differences between the haves and the have-nots, other researchers, attempted to identify conditions which narrowed gaps. For instance, Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien found that a crisis in an homogeneous community reduced gaps in knowledge about the local issue. Interpersonal communication increases when conflict is intense, and any knowledge gap declines as public interest wanes.

Another cause for the narrowing of knowledge gaps, is the evidence of ceiling effects. Ettema and Kline argue that there are two critical imposed ceilings: the “naturally occurring,” i.e., the sources contain a limited amount of information; and an “audience imposed” ceiling effect, one created by the members themselves. In other words, the ceiling is subjectively self-imposed. We suspect the phenomenon happens because persons, particularly poor people, will retreat from acceptance of sources that seem irrelevant to their situations.

THE SITUATIONAL MODEL

The introduction of situational factors into this discussion is the result of several researchers who noted a curious situation. Namely,
that the context in which information acquisition and use were occurring, was being ignored. For example, in their literature review, Ettema and Kline summarized the two major causes of knowledge gap. As we indicated in the preceding paragraphs, these were ceiling effects and audience related factors. A significant contribution these authors made was a useful description to explain idiosyncratic traits; for example, communication skills, predisposition for a particular medium, and motivation to acquire information. In particular, Ettema and Kline concluded that a knowledge gap will always widen when only socioeconomic traits are considered. Whereas, an examination of situation specific differences is a better predictor of knowledge gaps. Why? Because this approach considers the interest or motivation level of a person, and because it addresses whether or not the information is functional in the member’s life world.21

Other researchers also support the notion of linking motivation and functional information as predictors of knowledge gaps.22 For example, Genova and Greenberg differentiates interest by its functional utility. In this view, “self-interest” pertains to daily coping needs. “Social interest” is information that is perceived to have utility for one’s social networks. The authors acknowledge that these interests may be shaped by social norms and by the mass media. “Thus, changes in the individual’s spheres of activity and/or social milieu should result in changing perceptions of informational utility, and perhaps the formation of new interest areas.”23

A reasonably accurate view provided thus far, suggests several findings pertinent to our discussion. In the first place, it indicates that the mass media do indeed play less significant roles in the lives of poor people. Why? Because their interest is generally viewed as being irrelevant in responding to everyday concerns. In this case, we note that it is probably due to an inability or lack of interest in addressing the contextual use of information. The absence of context or situational use of information as a concern is hardly limited to the poor. But because they have so few information contacts, this omission is significant.

To recapitulate the major points addressed in this section. The findings reveal that some members of any social milieu (including an impoverished one) might be motivated enough to find means by
which to narrow knowledge gaps. In this light, Dervin's typology to predict information use is a helpful extension to the situational model. In her model, she proposes specific conditions in which individuals might seek information: decision situations; worry situations; barrier situations; and in problematic situations. Dervin’s model is particularly appreciated because it indicates the urgency in which people approach information sources. Moreover, she does not hesitate to suggest barriers to the information-seeking process.

Dervin’s contribution to our discussion boils down to this. In focusing on a particular segment of the information environment, we have concentrated on the factors that make for an impoverished life-world. In our assessment of that world, we note minimal attention by researchers to reasons why some people live in a knowledge gap milieu. We conclude that, among factors already addressed, is a mistrust by poor people of sources that originate outside their information environment. We suspect this is due to their inattention to the context in which the information is being directed. Dervin, on the other hand, places the context or situation that brought about the information-seeking behavior as paramount to the total process. Although her work is not specifically directed at studies for the poor, we believe that she makes a significant contribution to studies of information and poverty.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, most of the knowledge gap research has applied several conceptual models to explain how people acquire and use information. However, there is no consensus as to what are the defining characteristics of the knowledge gap. A factor for this is minimal attention to the situational use of information, particularly within communities comprised of poor individuals. We contend that issues dealing specifically with the poor and discussions of knowledge gap or gain, has yet to be fully explored.

What then, do our findings suggest to members of our profession? We suggest a preliminary picture which might provide usefulness for practice and research. Having studied poor populations, and being engaged in critical analysis of pertinent literature, we conclude the following.
If disadvantaged members of a social environment experience gaps, perhaps it is gaps in second-level knowledge, or knowledge about which they do not know; nor does anyone else know. In trying to examine what information poverty is, an approach providing some credibility is to conceptualize information poverty in terms of first and second-level knowledge. We concur that first-level knowledge is knowledge of things. That is, things are known to us and to those whom we share lived experiences. These things are readily accessible and sources have immediate verifiability. We simply check it out for ourselves or ask others until the collective assessment of the situation satisfies us.

However, as noted above, information poverty pertains to second-level knowledge. This is knowledge that originates outside our lived experiences. Because it addresses things we have not previously experienced, its relevance to our specific circumstances is questionable. Verification of its truthfulness is also problematic. So, even if the poor are exposed to a wide variety of information, they might not accept these sources as ways in which to better their situations.

One way in which we might begin to bridge the gap between ourselves and the poor would be to introduce both ourselves and the items we provide as trustworthy, reliable, and useful to their situation. It is not sufficient to just respond to inquiries. We suggest a more active role in which we engage in some basic research that would identify all members of our information community. This might necessitate a linkage with the community's social service providers. Whatever choices we make, in today's world with its heightened emphasis on information acquisition and use, we need to find ways which better serve those members of our society who are the information poor.

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