

Cogs, Costumes, and Camaraderie: The Steampunk Information Community

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INFO. 200-13 – Information Communities

May 7, 2017

### **Abstract**

Steampunk has grown from a sub-genre of science fiction literature; to an aesthetic that has influenced all aspects of popular culture; to an international information community that centers around dressing in DIY, Victorian-era inspired costumes and attending regular meet ups and conventions. This paper will discuss the centrality of the Internet to this information community, which depends on the vast amount of community-based resources available for the purpose of sharing and exchanging information with the ultimate goal of offline interaction. There is a paucity of research-based sources specifically about the steampunk community, but a discussion of the information science literature on online communities and participatory culture will shed light on the information behavior of steampunks, as well as reveal the need for future research on the concept of information grounds as it applies to all online communities that engage in offline interactions. The paper will conclude with a discussion of how information professionals can meet the information needs of the steampunk information community.

### *Keywords:*

Steampunk, Web 2.0, online communities, participatory culture, conventions

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### **Introduction**

My chosen research community is steampunk enthusiasts. What is steampunk? A member of this community describes it as

elegance with functionality. Aesthetic practicality. Victorian science-fiction trimmed with cogs, rivets, brass, and leather. It is a literary genre, a sense of style, a community, and a frame of mind...For some steampunk may mean fashion and style, for others it is a literary world which awakens intrigue and endless possibilities, while to others still it is all about an art form they can put their heart and hands into. (What is Steampunk, 2014, para. 1)

What do steampunks do? “Most steampunks have a jolly old time handcrafting jewelry, trying on corsets and cravats, building robots, turning squirt guns into ray guns, writing retro-futuristic fiction, having great big meet-ups, taking pictures of each other, and doing all sorts of other marvelously playful, resourceful things” (Priest, 2009, para. 15). Above all else, steampunks value camaraderie and community.

Fisher and Durrance (2003) describe five characteristics that define an information community. The first characteristic is exploiting the information sharing qualities of the Internet. Steampunk as a community and even as a movement, relies heavily on the Internet to communicate information to and among its members. The second characteristic is collaboration among diverse groups. The steampunk community brings together fans of steampunk fashion, art/craft-making, literature, music, history, and virtual reality/gaming. The third characteristic is formation around user needs. There are many steampunk forums, blogs, and websites that post announcements of steampunk news and events all over the world, including conventions and

how to form local groups of steampunk enthusiasts. When the culture began gaining momentum, many people were hard-pressed to find fellow enthusiasts and events in their local areas, but the Internet helped bring people together online and in person by disseminating information about steampunk.

The fourth characteristic is overcoming trust barriers. Some enthusiasts enjoy dressing in outlandish costumes and even taking on fictitious personas. While this behavior may be frowned upon in everyday society, it is celebrated in steampunk culture. Those wishing to join in the fun, or merely explore out of curiosity, are welcome. Online communities offer anonymity if one desires it, but from what I have observed, even the most shrinking wallflower is welcome online and in local groups/meet-ups. This aspect of the community dovetails into the final characteristic, which is fostering social connectedness. As mentioned above, the steampunk information community not only connects members online, but also enables people to connect in person with people they might never have met otherwise. Many members of this community also use steampunk as an avenue for activism, diversity/inclusivity, education, and philanthropy.

The steampunk information community can be studied from a number of different angles; as literature, music, modding, fashion, or art. This paper focuses on the information needs and behaviors of fans of the aesthetic who dress in period attire/costumes and attend conventions and local meet ups. The steampunk community relies heavily on community-based resources. There is a noticeable lack of research-based sources by comparison, but this may be due to the newness of the culture. Although steampunk as a literary sub-genre of science fiction has been in existence for thirty years and there are abundant peer-reviewed articles on the literature, steampunk as a mainstream, cultural phenomenon did not begin until about 2008 (VanderMeer and Chambers, 2011, pp. 8, 9). In addition to community-based resources, *Everyday Life*

Information Seeking (ELIS) theories will also be used as an umbrella to examine research on online communities and participatory culture (both online and offline). Conclusions can then be extrapolated that explain the information seeking behavior of the steampunk information community. The implications of this for information professionals will also be discussed.

### **Literature Review**

The shift in information science literature from quantitative to qualitative research methods, beginning in the 1980s (Wilson, 2000), coincides roughly with the rise of the Internet as we know it today (1970 to the present). This is significant because examining the information seeking behavior of individuals and the cognitive and affective factors that affect their information search process (Bates, 1989; Dervin as cited by Savolainen, 2010; Kuhlthau, 1991; Wilson, 2000) informs their identification as members of a community (both online and offline) and their information behavior within that community. You cannot analyze the latter without the former.

### **Theorizing Information Seeking Behavior**

The emphasis of the user's emotions and thoughts as she navigates the search process emerged in the LIS literature beginning in the 1980s. This new focus on the user necessitated a change in research methods, namely from quantitative to qualitative. The major proponents of this new paradigm and their approaches include: Dervin (1983) and her "sense-making" approach; Bates (1989) and her "berry-picking" model; Kuhlthau's (1991) Information Search Process (ISP); and Wilson's (2000) modified model that incorporates aspects of Dervin's and Kuhlthau's models. The newcomer to the steampunk information community will initially feel uncertain and overwhelmed (as discussed by the aforementioned authors) with the wealth of information available online, often experiencing a form of Erdeletz's (1998) information

encountering. In her initial search process, the new fan moves through the last three of the four modes of McKenzie's model of context-bound information practices: active scanning (seeking out information online), nondirected monitoring (encountering hyperlinks), and obtaining information by proxy (taking a blogger's advice to join a local club) (Savolainen, 2010). In short, "the multidisciplinary theoretical approaches in IB research acknowledge the centrality of the user's values, feelings, and perceptions in the information reception and use process" (Nahl, 2010, p. 5509).

### **Online Communities and Participatory Culture**

The emphasis on the cognitive and affective factors in play as a member of an online community also inform the theorization of online communities and participatory culture. As the new fan becomes acquainted and assimilated into steampunk culture through her local meet up, online community, and at conventions, she will discover that this subculture genuinely values community-building and participation. The steampunk information community exemplifies ELIS theories of information seeking in context because it is composed of a special interest group which seeks information for learning, sharing, and exchanging for the purposes of socializing and connecting with people in person (Savolainen, 2010 & Wilson, 2000). Online resources are used mainly as a vehicle to accomplish this, although there is social interaction on the Internet as well. Indeed, the steampunk subculture's cohesion as a community hinges on the use of the Internet. "The Internet has become an essential tool for people interested in Steampunk to learn about and participate in the subculture, no matter where they live" (VanderMeer & Chambers, 2011, p. 206). Before discussing the literature on online communities, it is necessary to define participatory culture. Jenkins, Puroshotma, Clinton, Weigel, and Robinson (2006) define participatory culture as one:

1. With relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. With strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others
3. With some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Where members believe that their contributions matter
5. Where members feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least they care what other people think about what they have created). (p. 7)

Nahl (2010) explains that one form of participatory culture includes membership in online communities, both general (Facebook, Twitter) and specialized (LinkedIn). Steampunks heavily utilize an online forum known as The Steampunk Forum at Brass Goggles (<http://brassgoggles.co.uk/forum/index.php>) to find and share information on a variety of topics related to the steampunk culture. Savolainen (2010) also attests to the participatory value of online discussions, but in the context of work-related situations. With the advent of Web 2.0, Nahl argues that “the meaning of technology has shifted from ‘computation’ and ‘connection,’ to collaboration, co-construction, community, continuity, and co-presence in real time and in virtual senses” (p. 5511).

Like Nahl and Savolainen, Burnett (2000) describes how the Internet contributed to the rise of online communities and participatory culture. Although Burnett's typology pre-dates Web 2.0, his assertions still apply. He established a typology to study information exchange in online communities, which he calls virtual communities (not to be confused with virtual reality). Burnett's typology is based on “theoretical and empirical work that emphasizes an environmental model of human information behavior,” which is in the same vein as other information science theorists who base their writings on qualitative, contextual research (Introduction section, para.

5). Indeed, Burnett examines the work of theorists like Bates (1989), Belkin (1978), Erdeletz (1999), and Kuhlthau (1991), among others, in order to lay the foundation for his typology.

Burnett (2000) explains that, “over time, participants in virtual communities act as both active information providers and passive information consumers, and are engaged in both aspects of information exchange” (Announcements section, para. 2). Nahl (2010) presents the same idea in her discussion of user-generated content. In addition to seeking information, “the users have become the creators, producers, and disseminators of content” (Nahl, 2010, p. 5509). This is especially true of the steampunk community’s use of online forums as mentioned above. Thus, members of online communities are both users and generators of information.

It is not enough to study what transpires (exchange of information) in an online community, but what sustains the community. Burnett (2000), Hersberger, Murray, and Rioux (2007), and Nahl (2010) argue that the emotional rewards of participating in online communities determine its longevity. “Virtual communities function as social spaces supporting textual ‘conversations’ through which participants can find both socio-emotional support and an active exchange of information” (Burnett, 2000, Introduction section, para. 2). Likewise, Hersberger et al.’s (2007) conceptual framework is based on McMillan’s (1996) model of community, which “addresses emotion-related dimensions of community cohesion” (p. 143). Nahl cements the importance of the affective when she states that “technological affordances are synergistically linked to sensory organs and motor output, mediated by cognitive and affective procedures that validate belonging-ness and self-confidence” (p. 5514).

### **Weaknesses and Gaps in the Literature**

The primary weakness in the available information science literature is a lack of specific research on the steampunk information community. Despite this, the existing literature on online

communities can be applied to the information behavior of steampunk enthusiasts as there are commonalities among all special interest groups. Still, even within the existing literature on online communities there are gaps. While the abovementioned authors in this literature review all employ an ELIS theoretical approach grounded in qualitative research, there is not much discussion (some indirect references) about online communities as spaces in and of themselves. Burnett (2000) does liken online communities to “information neighborhoods,” which are a combination of “the information environment [and the] collectivities of users who see themselves as participants in a community” (An environmental model of human behavior section, para. 5). Fisher, Landry, and Naumer’s (2007) conceptualization of information grounds also comes to mind (as cited in Savolainen, 2009).

Savolainen explains that “information grounds are a social construct rooted in an individual’s combined perceptions of place, people, and information” (Savolainen citing Fisher et al., p. 43). The “place” in this concept is associated with physical spaces, like hair salons, bars, clubs, bookstores, and libraries (Savolainen citing Fisher et al., 2010), but I would argue (and Savolainen mentions it too without any elaboration), that online communities are information grounds too and should be studied as such. Lastly, steampunk enthusiasts use the Internet as a vehicle to meet in person at local meet ups and conventions. In the literature reviewed there are a couple of indirect references to the Internet facilitating both online and offline communication (Nahl, 2010; Savolainen, 2010; Wilson, 2000), but no in-depth theorizing or empirical research on this phenomenon. Further research is needed both in examining online communities through the lens of information grounds and as avenues to offline interactions as well.

### **Methodology**

The cultural phenomenon that is steampunk is relatively new. As a subgenre of science fiction literature, it dates back about 30 years, but a 2008 New York Times article is usually credited with exposing the steampunk aesthetic to mainstream culture (VanderMeer & Chambers, 2011, p. 8). Since I was not familiar with this information community before starting this research project I turned to Google for some preliminary background information (despite algorithm-driven page rankings and filter bubbles). The Internet has proven to be the most accessible way to find and share information about steampunk so I focused my research on Web 2.0 tools, social networking, and online communities. The first three databases I consulted were the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, Encyclopedia of Cyber Behavior, and Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition. These sources provided citations by some of the most published and cited figures in library and information science research. In addition to using these citations and their references as leads, I also explored other LIS databases and Google Scholar, where there was often overlap.

Consulting both LIS and non-LIS databases, I found that much has been written in the social sciences about steampunk fiction, but there is a comparable lack of scholarly research in the information sciences literature on the information needs and information seeking behavior of the steampunk subculture. This forced me to take a broader approach at examining the information seeking behavior of steampunk enthusiasts. By employing ELIS theories on online communities and participatory culture as a general framework in examining both non-LIS research-based and community-based sources, insights into the information needs and behaviors of the steampunk information community were revealed.

## Discussion

Steampunk enthusiasts primarily use community-based resources found on the Internet. There are published works in print, such as *The Steampunk Bible*, that although not peer-reviewed, offer a critical assessment of aspects of the subculture (literature, music, art, fashion, history, and activism). Steampunks want to interact in person and the abundance of community-based resources available on the Internet allows them to do so. Ultimately, the Internet enables the growth and longevity of both online and offline communities.

### The Use of Community-Based Resources

There are numerous steampunk social media sites, each with their own discussion lists (Facebook, Instagram, Flickr, Pinterest, Meet Ups, YouTube). There are also a fair number of blogs; some are written by “authorities”/celebrities of the subculture, usually authors of steampunk fiction. There are differences of opinion among bloggers and other members of the information community of what steampunk is and should be, although there are some basic tenets/guidelines that most will agree to. One of the preeminent and most prolific of these social media sites is The Steampunk Forum at Brass Goggles (<http://brassgoggles.co.uk/forum/index.php>).

The Steampunk Forum is an invaluable resource for connecting various individuals separated geographically to other steampunk fans interested in cogs, costumes, and camaraderie, among many other subjects pertinent to the subculture. It not only provides a sense of community, but offers free advice on numerous do-it-yourself steampunk projects (sewing costumes, making props, and modding). This extremely in-depth, information-rich forum provides a centralized location with exhaustive coverage of all things steampunk. The topics are easily searchable through well-organized categories and subcategories, as well as at-a-glance

statistics ranking the most popular threads and posters. As of this writing, there are 814,367 posts in 37,825 topics by 30,740 members.

The scope of topics covered by the various categories is broad and deep. There are eight steampunk-related categories and three un-related. The steampunk categories include (descriptions are verbatim): Metaphysical (Miscellaneous steampunk discussions. All other Victorian and steampunk posts); Tactile (Prop-making, crafts, arts, engineering, electronics, etc. Specifically, the act of making things); Aural-ocular (Music, film, television, computer games, etc.); Textual (Reading, writing and roleplaying); Anatomical (Apparel, food and drinks, vivisection/medical, personal grooming, costuming and sewing, etc.); Trading (Buyer beware: this is a space provided for the exchange of goods/services/money between forum posters); Geographical (Events, locations and meets – North America, United Kingdom, Europe, Oceania); and Historical (Period-appropriate historical information, discussion and research). All the categories have a moderator that appears to be somewhat of an expert in their particular category and a notable in the steampunk community.

Moderators are not paid, but volunteer their time to moderate and answer posts. The posts range from the philosophical to the practical and everything in between. The posts can be made by experts (literature, history, visual arts, costuming, etc.) and everyday fans with questions such as, how to create a mad scientist outfit (CrazyLee, 2016), or if anyone has experience with gluing to polypropylene (Cossoft, 2016). This source allows members of the steampunk information community to find, share, and discuss numerous steampunk-related topics. It reflects Burnett's (2000) and Nahl's (2010) idea of information seekers being both users and generators of content in online communities that promote participatory culture. The forum also provides information on local meet-ups and conventions, as well as Internet communities like Second Life.

## Community

Although The Steampunk Forum provides information on local meet ups and conventions, there are websites dedicated solely to this purpose. Some, like The Airship Ambassador (<http://www.airshipambassador.com/AA-events.html>), index all the local meet ups and conventions around the world with links to those events. Others are designed for specific conventions, like The Steampunk World's Fair (<http://steampunkworldsfair.com/>) and the International Steampunk Symposium (<http://thepandorasociety.com/>). By examining YouTube videos of steampunks attending these conventions, it is evident that meeting in person is essential to a feeling of belonging and community. S.J. Chambers, co-author of *The Steampunk Bible*, states in a documentary made at the Tampa Steampunk Convention that steampunk “promotes community in a way I’ve never seen before” (Arnold, 2012).

Many steampunks that attend conventions echo Chambers’ statement. In a YouTube video documenting The Weekend at the Asylum convention in England, numerous people from around the world (United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Bulgaria, Belarus, Holland and Scotland, among others) are asked why they like steampunk conventions. Some of their responses include, “I can’t imagine me being me without steampunk because it’s introduced me to...so many good friends that I’m going to be friends with for life;” “It’s just one big, massive bubble of friendship;” “I like it because everyone’s friendly, everybody’s polite. I came to the Lincoln Asylum in 2014 and didn’t know nobody and within an hour of being here I already made...friends...you feel safe and welcoming;” “You will meet people from every part of the world;” “For a lot of people it’s a way of life. You can add a large amount of friendships to it;” “It changed my life...it changed my whole plan for my life;” and “I love steampunk because it makes me feel like part of a family” (Lavender Studios, 2016).

Those who attend weekly, local meet ups share the same sentiments. One steampunk explains how he rarely left the house before joining a local meet up. Now that he has, he is “creating stuff and chatting with people and having drinks on Wednesdays. It’s just helped me get out of the house a lot more” (Kendall, 2014). Another steampunk from the same meet up states that, “Steampunk gives me friends, somewhere to go to, and fun...and I get a chance to dress up” (Kendall, 2014). Clearly, the steampunk information community values face-to-face social interaction. As mentioned above, they use the Internet to learn about local meet ups and conventions, but they also use it as a source for maintaining social ties via forums and blogs, as well as share how to make costumes and props. As Burnett (2000), Hersberger et al. (2007), and Nahl (2010) argue, online communities are sustained by the emotional ties among its members and this is clearly evident among steampunks. Likewise, Jenkins et al.’s definition of participatory culture applies to the steampunk community because, whether novices or experts in the subculture, members feel welcome and that their contributions are valued.

### **The Role of Information Professionals**

As stated in the literature review, there is a lack of scholarly research on the information needs and information seeking behaviors of the steampunk community. Drawing on the ethnographic, qualitative studies first begun in the 1980s, information professionals can study steampunk information grounds, both online and offline, to shed light on this particular community, as well as determine how to better serve their information needs. Despite this lack of research, information professionals, especially public librarians, can aid the information needs of steampunks right now. Many are already equipped with Web 2.0 tools, or as Stephens (2006) advocates, Librarian 2.0, to reach out to this community, which relies so heavily on the Internet for information.

Many libraries have meeting spaces and maker spaces they can offer steampunk workshops or activities in. They can reach out to their local steampunk meet up to coordinate activities and if there is an annual convention in the area, the library can have a booth there to share information about their resources, including maker spaces, but also books on YA steampunk fiction, history of the Industrial Age, DIY topics, and many more that the steampunk community can draw upon. If public libraries follow the Dokk1 model (Stephens, 2016), they and steampunk would be an ideal match because creative, community spaces would be most welcome by a community of creatives that value in person interaction.

### **Conclusion**

Steampunk enthusiasts exemplify Fisher and Durrance's (2003) five characteristics that define an information community: in their reliance on the Internet to share and exchange information about all things steampunk, encouraging collaboration from people the world over, meeting user needs for everything from DIY projects to the next convention to attend, encouraging inclusivity and providing a welcoming environment to overcome trust barriers, which fosters social connectedness within the information community. Despite the existence of ample theorizing and constructivist conceptual models of how online communities create and generate information, thereby creating emotional ties and social cohesion among its members, future research remains to be undertaken in the areas of online communities as information grounds and how they encourage offline interaction. Studying specific information communities like steampunks can aid in this endeavor. In the meantime, public librarians can utilize their existing social media platforms and maker spaces to reach out to their local steampunk clubs to collaborate on mutually beneficial partnerships to educate the larger community about literature,

history, and the maker movement all within the convivial atmosphere of the steampunk information community.

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