Children's Book Illustrators

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Abstract

Children's books would be nowhere and nothing without illustrators. The artwork of these books brings the stories to life and aids in understanding and enjoyment for old and young alike. These illustrators are visual artists who choose to use their talents within this media and in so doing form a unique information community all their own. This paper is a review of the scholarly literature on visual artists along with community-based sources and social media platforms in order to ascertain illustrators' information needs and the behaviors and sources they utilize to meet those needs. Additionally, this paper will look at ways in which information professionals might adjust their thinking and practice in working to meet the unique needs of the illustrator information community.

Introduction

Book Illustrators are one particular subset of visual artists; visual artists who focus their work on illustrating children's and young adult books of all varieties. Therefore, most of the scholarly research on information needs and information seeking behavior has been conducted and written on visual artists as a whole.

In accordance with Fisher & Durrance's definition (2003), this information community is united by a common artistic interest, is formed around their informational needs and uses, and "can emerge and function without geographical boundaries" (para. 1). Art is often solitary and isolating work as the main creating of artwork is done independently and in isolation. As a group, however, this community has a variety of informational needs. Hemmig (2008) references the 1996 study by Susie Cobbledick in which "she defined five classes of information that appear to comprise the information needs of artists: (1) inspirational information; (2) specific visual information; (3) technical information; (4) information about trends and events in the art world; and (5) business information" (p. 349). Over the years, several additional studies have been conducted around the world to attempt to verify, confirm, or expand upon these findings. Each study references the others and frequently finds similar results despite differences in subject focus, methodology, or sample size.

This paper will examine the information needs and behaviors of visual artists through a review of the scholarly literature. It will then assess some of the information sources available to the community of children's book illustrators. Finally, it will explore ways in which LIS

professionals can better meet the needs of these artists as well as future research that might be needed.

Literature Review

Studies Conducted

Several studies have been conducted on varied subject groups within the field of visual artists in order to determine their information needs and behaviors. These studies have varied in sampling size and have utilized a wide variance of methodology.

Rose (2002) focused her study on the information-seeking behaviors of fifteen art historians. Van Zijl and Gericke (1998 and 2001), conducted two separate surveys of art lecturers in South Africa. Gregory (2007) distributed an online survey to art faculty from four-year universities in the Southwestern United States seeking insight into the faculty members' preferences in library type, search method, and resources sought. Larkin (2010) utilized a self-administered questionnaire to survey 32 of the 65 full-time art faculty from three institutions in the New York/New Jersey area about their use of information resources and approaches to locating information.

In an effort to learn about student artists' information needs, behaviors, and feelings about library use, Frank (1999) conducted a study through focus group interviews of 181 student artists. Littrell (2001) interviewed 27 art students along with 10 art faculty members in order to better understand their impressions of the library.

In 1996, Cobbledick conducted open ended, exploratory interviews with four professional artists working in varied media. Her findings are referenced in every subsequent article studied for this review. Cowan (2004) conducted an individual in depth interview seeking to learn more about artists' information needs and sources. S.M. Robinson (2014) questioned eight Cairo-based artists about their information needs along with their library and internet use. Hemmig (2009) surveyed practicing artists in the Pennsylvania/New Jersey area of the United States. Mason and L. Robinson (2011) sought to better understand the information needs and behaviors of emerging artists by surveying 78 "new practitioners".

Information Needs of Visual Artists

Artists have unique informational needs. Cobbledick (1996) highlights their main needs as "sources of specific visual information", "sources of technical information", and "sources of information about current developments in the visual arts" (p. 351-356). Frank (1999) states art students' need "artwork and other imagery" and "narrative resources" (p. 448). Littrell (2001) breaks the artists' information needs down based on a simple model of the artistic process including "finding the inspiration" and "finding the individual voice" (p. 293). All agree that artists' information needs include both visual and print resources. They need inspiration and information regarding style, subjects, and technique. They need access to both history and current trends of their field. Additionally, it was made clear that there is also an interest in non-art related materials.

Information-Seeking Behavior Preferences of Visual Artists

The findings from many early studies clearly indicated artists' propensity for browsing as a search strategy. Cobbledick (1996), Frank (1999), and Littrell (2001) all found that artists locate most of their materials in the library by browsing. According to Wilson (2000), Ellis characterizes browsing as "semi-directed or semi structured searching" (p. 52). This directly aligns with the findings regarding artists' information seeking behavior. Many of the artists shared that they would identify a starting point or return to a section of the library they knew from previous searches and browse for resources that met their current creative needs (Cobbledick, 1996, p.362 and Frank, 1999, p. 450).

Van Zijl and Gericke (2001) and Mason and L. Robinson (2011) contradict the findings of browsing being the preferred seeking method, but did not completely discount browsing as an important search method. Mason and L. Robinson (2011) concur with Hemmig (2009) in considering "browsing in a more abstract way; not actively searching for inspiration in the world around them but being inspired all the same by odd occurrences, daily life or things they find lying around" (Mason & L. Robinson, 2011, p. 178). As they indicate, this is in line with the idea of information encountering by Erdelez (1999), a "memorable experience of unexpected discovery of useful or interesting information" which can occur while looking for other information or while carrying on routine activities (p. 25). Artists have indicated that to some extent they are always browsing and encountering information that becomes a source of inspiration.

Methodology

As an avid reader of children's books and an aspiring school librarian, I follow a good number of authors and illustrators on social media. Over the years I've always been intrigued to see what they shared and discussed. When choosing an information community to study for this course, these authors and illustrators seemed like a natural choice.

After reaching out to our library liaison, I narrowed my chosen community to Children's Book Illustrators focusing much of my scholarly research on the information needs and behaviors of visual artists. I searched both the LIS databases through the King Library website and Google Scholar to locate my initial research of peer-reviewed articles. After reading those initial articles, I used Google Scholar and the LIS databases to search for additional research cited through the reference section of those articles. I found that most of the studies I read referenced each other.

Through the authors, illustrators, librarians, and teachers I follow on Twitter I learned about organizations like Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (https://www.scbwi.org/) and Nerdy Book Club (www.nerdybookclub.org). I've been fascinated to read social media posts by illustrators sharing pictures and videos of their work in progress or their process through a book project. I explored blogs and websites mentioned through Twitter posts and other websites where successful, published illustrators and authors share insight and resources readily available to others seeking the information. Through these sources, I also discovered the yearly published *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*.

Discussion

Print Sources of Information

"There is a large volume of research findings and discussion which points to the fact that visual artists rely heavily on print media to meet their information needs" (vanZijl & Gericke, 1998). Books of all varieties are mentioned in most every study. Their browsing includes art books and periodicals on varied mediums, artists, or other topics along with oversized books and folios, children's books, how-to books, and more. Frank (1999) found that art students' information needs include "artwork and other imagery" and "narrative resources" (p. 448). Periodicals were referenced with varied levels of importance. Hemmig (2009) writes that "they find them most useful for marketing and sales information" (p. 697). Mason and L. Robinson (2011) found that while they also read art journals or magazines to find out about jobs, internships, and exhibitions, more of their respondents used them for a wider range of information including keeping up with news of the art world, finding inspiration, and to read about the lives and work of artists (p. 166).

One important print resource for the book illustrator community is *Children's Writer's & Illustrator's Market*. It is a reference book published by Writer's Digest. Additionally, the purchase of *CWIM* includes access to an exclusive webinar and a one-year subscription to their online database and children's publishing content at writersmarket.com. Writer's Digest publishes an annual edition of this guidebook which allows for updated information to be included. The 31st annual edition was recently published for 2019. Each year different articles and interviews can be included in order to keep current with trends and needs of upcoming authors and illustrators. More than half of each edition is filled with indexes and listings of children's book markets, publishers, agents, magazines, and contests as a guide for those looking to write or illustrate for kids and young adults. The remainder of the book has tips, advice, and

information from those who have had success in the field. The purpose of this book is to provide

a reference for writers and illustrators who have a goal of getting published. The articles and

interviews included in each edition address the artists' information needs of sources of technical

information and information about current developments. (Cobbledick, 1996, p. 352-354) Frank

(1999) also found that artists' information needs included "publications that either helped them

market or further their work" which *CWIM* clearly does (p. 449).

Online Sources of Information

Use of the internet is not referenced as a common source for information-seeking in any

of the earlier research; however this is likely due to the timing of the studies. Most of these

studies were conducted in the mid to late 1990's when the internet was still relatively new in

most libraries. (Frank, 1999, p. 450) "However, several of the more recent studies show online/

internet resources to be 'essential'" (Van Zijl & Gericke, 1998; Mason & L. Robinson, 2011, p.

163). Simor (2003) indicates that "there has been a dramatic expansion of online visual

materials" and "they are finding their way into the creation, study, and teaching of art and art

history" (p. 33). S.M. Robinson (2014) found that "for all five areas of information needs,

Google is the first, and often last, source" (p. 115).

Inkygirl.com is one website that is accessible to the information community of book

illustrators to provide resources and information related to the craft and business of writing and

illustrating. This site is focused on the reading, writing and illustrating of children's books. Blog

posts are regularly added and include interviews with authors and illustrators, reviews of current

releases, and advice for writers and illustrators. There are also links to several other pages

including FAQs, an archives index, how to guides, templates, and a Twitter guide for authors and illustrators. The author of this website, Debbie Ridpath Ohi, is an accomplished author and illustrator. This website provides an archive of posts and information from 2010 through the present. It is updated at a variable frequency- sometimes new posts are a few weeks apart while other times there are several posts in one week. In addition to the information provided on the site, it also has contact information for illustrators to connect through twitter, instagram, and additional websites and blogs. This website is a wonderful resource for aspiring illustrators. It provides comprehensive and explicit information like picture book templates and a twitter guide. It also has a lot of creative information and inspiration in both visual and text stimulus.

Several other authors, illustrators, librarians, and book lovers also have blogs (http://mrschureads.blogspot.com/, https://sharpread.wordpress.com/), websites (https://www.deborahfreedman.net/writers-illustrators/ , https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/), podcasts (http://blogs.slj.com/theyarn/, http://www.matthewcwinner.com/podcast), and other online platforms that seek to explore and share published books, craft, technique, and inspiration.

Professional Learning

Four additional important information sources are shared in Cobbledick's study: conferences, exhibition catalogs, artist lectures, and a network of artist colleagues (1996, p. 355-356). The organization **Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators** is one place you can see these information sources come together for book illustrators. A quick look at their website shows how they are creating a space illustrators can go to connect as a community. They provide information and resources for those entering or already in the field and host events for

members to come together face to face in addition to the virtual space that transcends geographic

boundaries. They are collecting information based on users needs and removing barriers to make

it accessible no matter where artists are geographically or within their career path. They provide

an illustrators' gallery to showcase the work of members, and they facilitate a Speakers Bureau

to connect illustrators with the greater community to connect with their readers and viewers.

Their upcoming winter conference to be held in New York this February includes many sessions

to provide illustrators with inspiration, information, and guidance in developing their craft and

furthering their career. Session topics include things like "Illustrating for Middle Grade, Chapter

Books, & Early Readers: What You Need to Know" and "Develop Your Inner Art Director:

Analyzing Your Portfolio to Advance Your Career".

Social Networking

Hemmig (2009) expresses that "social information gathering is important, particularly for

knowledge of materials and techniques, and for marketing and career guidance" (p. 696). He

"indicates that face-to-face social networking within the community of practice is the most

useful form of social information gathering for these artists" (Hemmig, 2009, p. 696). The artists

surveyed by S. M. Robinson (2014) also "rely on personal connections with other artists and

curators" (p. 118). They indicate these interactions are important for sources of technical

information, promotion and exhibition, and keeping current with the art world. While many of

these conversations usually happen in person, they "are moving into the digital realm" with

artists mentioning use of Facebook, Skype, and Twitter (S. M. Robinson, 2014, p. 114-115).

While years ago illustrators were elusive artists off on their own creating, now this community "exploits the information sharing qualities of technology" both to collaborate among their own diverse groups as well as to connect with the larger community. A cursory look around Twitter allows anyone to hear from illustrators about their work, see their process in action, hear about upcoming projects, etc. This morning, Lauren Castillo posted two photos of her artwork in progress with the caption, "Trying some combined ink and colored pencil drawing with foam printing. Committing to one final art style is HARD". Over the past few months as Jarrett Krosoczka prepared for his young adult graphic memoir, *Hey, Kiddo!*, to be released, he posted a series on Twitter sharing his thinking and artistic process in ensuring the art style reflected differently than that of his picture books and early reader graphic novels. Sharing of this nature is interesting to readers, fascinating to book lovers, and instructional and inspirational for other artists. In this way, social media platforms provide illustrators opportunities for the social information gathering and social networking the research shows they require.

Conclusion

Visual Artists are a widely diverse group. The literature shows that while there are some differences within this group, there is great similarity in the needs and seeking methods found. Most all artists are looking for inspiration and specific visual information, technical information, and information to keep current in the art world. Depending on where they are within their careers and practice they may also be seeking career and business information. The literature is

clear that much of this information can be found through books and periodicals, through personal interaction with other artists, and, increasingly, through the internet. Browsing clearly remains a key information-seeking behavior for artists whether it is their main search method or not. Over time it appears artists have become more comfortable with conducting searches within the library catalog and Google or other online search engines. This may be in part due to the technological advances in these catalog/search systems in conjunction with more explicit instruction through their coursework and education. Continued research needs to be done into artists' use of social media technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as they become more readily accessible as a platform for artists to network with each other, exhibit and share their work, and seek out the information they need.

Suggestions and recommendations for changes LIS professionals might consider in order to better meet artists' needs include adding additional resources as well as focusing on the user experience and Zipf's Principle of Least Effort. The students in Frank's (1999) study indicated policies, services, and design elements that could better serve their needs. They struggled with the inability to check out reference books and periodicals as well as the inability to make color copies in their library. Suggestions were made to bring collections of materials they frequently use together for ease of browsing. Better signage to label subject collections and clearer detailed library maps were requested. In regards to their library's OPAC, they recommended less complicated systems, having all university libraries on one system, and more terminals dispersed throughout the building for easier access (Frank, 1999, p. 453-454). The best way for librarians to better meet the needs of artists is to listen to them. Understanding what we have learned about their needs and behaviors will allow for more understanding on the part of librarians. Artists need

time and space to browse and sketch, opportunities to network and share, and a wide array of

print and visual resources. One key additional way librarians can uniquely support the needs of

illustrators is to highlight their work and connect them with their audience.

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